CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER -THREE

THOUSAND AND ONE THRESHOLDS OF ARDOR

“To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case--- that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman.”

(Carter 76-77)

Carter pondered over the above moral that nearly all traditional tales appear to be punctuated with, in her polemic treatise on the notorious Marquis de Sade - The Sadeian Woman (1979). This problematic and highly controversial explication of Sade’s heroines is often read with her collection of ‘subversive’ fairy tales The Bloody Chamber (1979); providing a theoretical framework for her characterization in these tales. The female characters of Carter’s tales are depicted as being plagued with the dilemma that- what they desire, a.) Do they want to be seduced into their subservient position, or b.) Do they want to break free of the limitations and embrace autonomy and further, rise to the position of ‘subject’? The women in Carter’s world under the weight of patriarchal tyranny are depicted as nothing more than a conglomeration of metonymic substitutes. She roots her stories in a landscape “…dark country where desire is objectified and lives” (Lady Purple 36). Male - authored literary and cultural aesthetics have been criticized for their fetishization and entrapment of women by Carter. Carter’s stories ardently question the embedded and advocated patriarchal ideology and structures of the canonical tales. In anticipating a utopian framework where sexuality is free from the fretters of social, cultural and historical imperatives, these tales suggest transcending the entrapment of these institutions. Attacking the patriarchal politics which entrap and murder women within the trajectories of marriage, within the walls of gothic castles, Carter’s stories points towards restructuring and renovating these dilapidated structures.

Carter’s renditions of the canonical literature attempts to redefine and readjust our vision of femininity. Her views on ‘femininity’ as well as ‘masculinity’ are not eschewed by monolithic outlook; she presents these two conventions in all their intricacies, entangled in nexus of socio-cultural fiction. If we see the debunking of the
‘Father’ figure as the epitome of power and authority; there is also blatant rejection of the ‘Mother Goddess’:

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of the hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). (Sadeian Woman 5)

Assimilating and incorporating the tenets of postmodernism the writers of folk and fairy tale literature aim at reinvigorating the tales by fusing the elements of folklore with contemporaneity. They incorporate modern sensibility in the timeless world of tales. Critic Duplessis has very tactfully summarized the nature of revision that women writers undertook, she ascertains:

A writer expresses dissent from an ideological formation by attacking elements of narrative that repeat, sustain or embody the values and attitudes in question. So after breaking the sentence, a rupture with the internalization of the authorities and voices of dominance, the woman writer will create that further rupture…breaking the sequence-the expected order. (34)

This is exactly what Angela Carter and other revisionists of the traditional canon like- Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Jane Yolen, Tanith Lee, Olga Broumas, Suniti Namjoshi, Emma Donoghue, A.S. Byatt, etc. have tried to accomplish in their disparate and varied ways. An early critic of Carter’s works Linden Peach, reading Carter’s The Magic Toyshop highlighted the role of Carter as a fairy tale revisionist:

…fairy tale has been marginalized as a literary form, relegated to the non-serious world of children’s fiction….Carter rediscovers its imaginative potential, especially for the feminist writer….adapted the form to criticize the inscribed ideology and to incorporate new assumptions….emphasizing what the misogynistic fairy stories suppressed. (Peach 73-4, 75)
In her complex delineation of female characters Carter portrays them as enchanted or captivated victims who are enthralled by the socio-cultural enchantment of their subservience. Unapologetically, Carter presents women as colluding in their own objectification and exploitation. This idea finds its parallel in the view expressed by radical feminist Mary Daly who says that devoid of a sense of individualism, women “become carriers and perpetrators of patriarchal myth.” (109).

Aware of the ubiquitous nature of women’s exploitation Carter moves to demystify this myth. She puts on an exotic display all the social, historical, cultural rubrics and edifices which have acted as ‘patriarchal talismans’ to confine and fetter and consequently, define femininity. There is no inhibition and shying away from acknowledging women’s role in their subordination. This double-edged weapon of Carter makes her readers and critics alike, wary and suspicious of her feminist agenda.

The tales in this collection The Bloody Chamber (1979) are replete with gothic, supernatural and psychological elements. With a frank and an almost appalling intensity Carter investigate the sadomasochistic, macabre side of heterosexual relations. She strives for a renegotiation with the obsolete past that has hampered the growth of an active female sexuality, to give voice to what has been marginalized, suppressed and dispossessed. Like the heroines of her earlier fiction- Marianne (Heroes and Villains), Melanie (The Magic Toyshop) and Annabel (Love), these fairy tale heroines are shown to be deluded and overdosed on the myth of a male supremacist culture and ‘ordained’ female masochism. Images of sexual violence and potential dangers that lurk in the background to pounce at any moment, percolate the textual fabric of these tales; staining them with macabre horror as a consequence. Commenting on the deliberate and intentional deployment of sexual images that embroiders these age old narratives Carter contends in an interview to Helen Cagney Watts that:

The tales in my volume The Bloody Chamber are part of the oral history of Europe, but what has happened in that these stories have gone into the bourgeois nursery and therefore lost their origins. It’s important to remember that many folk tales were never written down, but passed from generation to
generation by people who were mostly illiterate. These tales, especially many of the French fairy tales, actually recorded instances of everyday peasant life in the seventeenth century. Many people are horrified by the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers, because of the hideous events which occur in some of these stories. But in ‘Hop o’ my thumb’, for example, the mother sends her children out into the forest to starve, not because she is intrinsically evil, but because she does not want to watch them die of hunger in front of her eyes. These sorts of things did happen! So I suppose that what interests me is the way in which these fairy tales and folklore are methods of making sense of events and certain occurrences in a particular imaginative way. (qtd. in Gamble 112)

Carter’s translation of Charles Perrault’s *Histories ou Contes du Temps Passe avec des Moralites* (1697) in 1977 anticipated her later revision of classical tales in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). She possesses a keen awareness of the ideological nature of these tales; encoded and drenched in gender and sexual roles. Being a deconstructionist Carter takes up the task of revising the canonical and sanctioned ‘female’ image; rendering it as a historical construct. Everything universal and essential comes under Carter’s scrutiny, opening ways for revision and modification. She defiles and desecrates the much lauded purity and chastity of the virtuous fairy tale maiden and imagines her as a voracious, active, brave sexual subject. Carter’s excessively sexual, provocative and visceral tales do not endorse the inherent gender policy of the canonical tales; they depart from that biased system and usher into a utopian landscape where women are not forced to be asexual and hence, virtuous.

In Carter’s bewitching, surreal and often nightmarish literary landscape women are not blank pages, willing to go under the pen of male authorities to be ‘scripted’. They violently refuse all the mythic, social and cultural feminine positions, according to which they just ‘fritter’. Here, they are an active agency - logical, visceral, voluptuous and brave, all the standard ‘masculine’ attributes. They refuse to act as seedbed for the growth of a damaging male aesthetics. In revising/rewriting the
canon punctuated with feminist concerns and aesthetics, Carter offers positions which are empowering/liberating alternatives to the passive, dependent fairy tale ‘princess’. Carter’s subversive versions of the popular tales are in fact a sort of ‘writing back’ a ‘postmodern feminist rejoinder’ to the master narratives of Euro-American andocentric fairy tale culture. The tales under Carter’s revisionary pen, staying true to the traditional narrative fairy tale motifs, prefigure the ‘rite of passage’ or initiation ceremony of the female characters; hinting at the social, sexual and psychological development of women.

Carter’s tales through their projection of willing and somewhat complicit female characters unmask the historicity and constructed nature of ‘sexuality’; which has been shown historically contingent and hence, mutable. The sexual reality in Carter’s works is never shown to be uniform and unitary. Carter definitely seems to draw on Michel Foucault’s view of sexuality when he says: “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.” (Foucault 103). She puts her heroines through ordeals and brings them face to face with the reality that permeates their existence. Her sadomasochistic strokes in the portrayal of characters lend chiaroscurotic fervor to her characterization. Her characters are enceinte with the knowledge of the cultural and psychic mechanisms that promote and perpetuate sexual inequality. Carter’s disturbing mingling of recognition and rejection of detrimental patriarchal ideology anticipates the possibility of an alternative realm where women can explore, exercise and embrace desires otherwise suppressed in the patriarchal setup. She rejects and subverts the outworn and antiquated sexual and gender terminology and bring them into the domain of change. Concocting her luxurious and expansive prose Carter discloses unpalatable reality of sexual nature and experience. Carter’s distinctive and unsettling deployment of feminist strategies in the course of her literary career jolted the feminists of her own generation from their comfortable positions. Her feminism is not directed against men solely, it includes the female lot as well, as critic Rosalind Coward points out in Our Treacherous Hearts:
Feminism is almost invariably seen as a struggle or head on collision with men. But the truth is that the deep struggle of feminism was with the previous generation of women. Feminism could be called the daughter’s revolt, so central has been the issue of defining themselves against the previous generation and distancing themselves from their mothers (91-92).

Carter’s rampant and unabashed use of masculine tools of writing acts as a critique of phallocentricism, turn the table upon its head, sending all this ingrained fiction back to its source. Her women characters have been depicted as entrapped and imprisoned in the socio-cultural and psychological fiction of male fetishization of women. This ‘constructed/manipulated’ historical framework acts like a hypnotist’s trance numbing and captivating the minds of female population to such depth that they readily surrender to their servile, marginal fate. They are shown only as ‘signifiers’ in the phallocentric signifying process. Keeping in tune with her disdain for all sorts of fixities and conformities, her characterization oscillates between embracing and exposing the reductionist patriarchal sexual politics. Her unsettling and polemic stance on the issue of gender and sexuality (both male and female) demonstrates that it is not easy to dispose of masculine, phallocentric entrapment when language and literature itself seems to be complicit in its perpetuation. In order to break this imprisonment first the awareness and acknowledgment of the bars is required. As she believed that consciousness of the fences put by the patriarchal rule would precede their disposal.

The postmodern, feminist backlash of the reformulated canon aims to dismantle and deconstruct the sexual and gender stereotypes often upheld by the traditional tales. Interspersing the timeless tales with colloquial politics around gender and sexuality and women’s liberation, the revisionists of the tales historicize the patriarchal institutions that foster the rigid binary oppositions. Such biased norms/values are washed off their universal and mythic coloring. Carter’s stories do not provide a clear-cut solution rather they expose the fatalistic nature of such institutionalization. Her tales carry an intense consciousness of the fact that it is impossible to survive ‘outside’ history and culture. There is an honest recognition of
the limitations set up by patriarchal rule. Under Carter’s fierce, relentless scrutiny all ‘universals’ are cut down and slashed open to find their ‘historicity’. Carter discards all false assumptions and essentials and deconstructs the dichotomized culture as the only available option. She exposes the patriarchal culture’s attempts at abjection and objectification of women in order to stabilize men’s position in the symbolic order. In her revised versions of the classical canon Carter vehemently opens up a fierce attack on the essentialist thinking that became a trademark and staple of second-wave feminism. Applauding Carter’s deconstruction of all universals Carter’s friend and critic Sarah Gamble comments that she “mounts an openly polemic attack on socially sanctioned fictions of all kinds, from mythic matriarchs to cinematic femme fatales.” (Gamble 145)

“Most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode.” (Carter 69). Carter’s idiosyncratic and intricate involvement in and flair for ‘rewriting’ is echoed in her above proclamation. She envisioned everything as having potential for revision; as she discarded all determinism to revel in probabilities and possibilities. This revisioning/rewriting of the fairy tale canon was a conscious attempt to expose and bring forth the blind spots and repressions, so that they could be restructured and modified in accordance with the zeitgeist. For this purpose Carter employed parody, pastiche and intertextuality in the tales. Revitalizing the latent and dormant content of the traditional tales, she centralized female sexuality, shedding all the mythical and cultural dimensions of it. In her overtly sexual, pellucid and fantastical framework she exposed the seduction and entrapment of the female milieu through the medium of patriarchal culture and art. Breaking the dogma of passive female sexuality Carter highlights how socio-cultural and economical factors have in allegiance with patriarchal hegemony, inscribed and laid down the nature and trajectory of female desire and sexuality. Substituting the third-person, omniscient narration of the traditional canon with the first-person ‘female’ voice Carter displaces the patriarchal authority of the age-old tales. In this manner Carter’s heroines or ‘fairies’ we may call them, revel in their ‘Otherness’; forever ‘outside’ but always ‘inside’ the patriarchal discourse. As also pointed out by Vanrigh in relation to Carter’s fluid characterization:
She is not one for the comfortable truths and middle-of-the-road notions, however. She goes for the margins—some might say for the throat. She splits open closed texts and revels in what she finds there, blood, scars, perversion. She puts her dialectic of repetition and difference at the service of a revaluation of the marginal that is the feminine, sabotaging—as she would—patriarchal structures and phallogocentricism, indulging in the fantasy of an undecidable being, the wolf-girl, both animal and woman, Carter’s most mysterious representative of feminine Otherness. (142)

By delineating her characters especially, women as both ‘object’ and ‘subject’ in turn Carter underlines a certain ambivalent collusiveness on the part of women; culminating in their ‘de-centered’ and culturally subordinated status. This double-edged purview of the female experience invited fierce bantering by the feminist of the times; who started from the premise of establishing women as the ‘victims of patriarchy’. Carter denaturalizes the primacy of male sexuality as the norm. Instead of providing a rigid, unitary model of sexual behavior Carter exhibited and celebrated the fluidity and polymorphousness of sexual desires. There are no ideological certainties in Carter’s works. There is conflagration of denial and acceptance, presence and absence of reality. Defending Carter’s subversive appropriation and revision of the fairy tale corpus critic Cristina Bacchilega presumes that her “double-voiced confessional mode” (126) as oscillating between “the religiously sanctioned subject position of ‘virtuous victim’,” which not only “fosters her passivity…but also lets the narrator justify that passivity” (125), and “a painful recognition from within of masochism’s presence in sexual and economic exploitation” (123).

Fond of amalgamating and intermingling incongruous and disparate notions Carter in her revised tales blends love and death, innocence and perversion, marriage and violence, in an almost surreal, decadent and nightmarish setting. Carter very cogently explicates this ‘master narrative’ of an authoritarian husband. Carter’s revision juxtapose outrageousness, blasphemy with sacred and poignancy. She annoys and unsettles many feminists with her insistence on and preoccupation with female
sexuality. Her portrayal of eroticism and sadomasochism, for instance, aggravates and infuriates some critics. Carter by projecting ambiguities and uncertainties of the heroines underlines the fact how sexual identity and perception of man-woman relation is shaped by all pervasive patriarchal ideology. These sexually awakened, active female characters of Carter’s tales do not conform to the patriarchally constructed and sanctioned gender roles; they evade all attempts of male figures that are bent upon annihilating and exterminating their identity and sexuality. Carter attacks the patriarchal structures and codes of society which imprison, entrap and murder women. Carter envisions and articulates a separate sphere where an unhinged, active female desire can be realized; a realm full of sexual potentials and possibilities. Her women characters are not mere recipients of male desires, instead they are subjects as well as objects who embody as well as receive desires, respectively. This complexity and uncertainty in the delineation of female characters renders her heroines both entrapped and autonomous at the same time As Makinen puts,

…Carter’s work has consistently dealt with representations of the physical abuse of women in phallocentric cultures, of women alienated from themselves within the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their own sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even powered by their own violence (3).

Moving ahead of her times, Carter with a firm insight on the nature of man-woman relations in the heterosexual cultural and social setup unveils the exploitation and conditioning of not only the female milieu but also the male population. This anachronistic tendency aligns her with the post-feminists of the present times. Her open-ended narration figuratively as well literally evades closure and conformity of any kind. This feature of her narrative frameworks runs in parallel with the mutable and fluid nature of options available to her characters that they can choose between. She refashions her male characters into people who are not afraid of forfeiting their privileges and are ready to step down or come at the equal platform as their female counterparts
Carter’s critics like Robert Clark, Patricia Dunker, etc. who have accused her of re-inscribing the patriarchal status quo of the age - old tales, of falling into the very trap that she wish to get free from, have often fallen off the mark. Carter’s portrayal of sexuality - both male and female is descriptive rather than being prescriptive. She laid bare the ingrained and inexorable psychic mechanisms that promote and perpetuate such stark sexual bifurcation. Her delineation of female sexuality being both autonomous yet controlled by the patriarchal institutions in itself become subversive and ironic. Her female characters are enthralled as well as repulsed and horrified at the naked exhibition of power relations; exposing how desire is channeled in a closed and stultifying social scenario. Celebrating the radical and polemic impulse Carter’s unsettling exposition of female sexuality aims to articulate the experiences and meanings that have been relegated and pushed at the edges of culture and society.

The eponymous story of the collection is a succinct, subversive almost surrealist counter discourse on the legend of Bluebeard; which reprimands female curiosity citing it as a moral transgression, inviting physical and sexual dangers. Fairy tale critic Maria Tatar has very aptly illuminated the difference and bias with regard to male and female curiosity, “…examples of female curiosity are repeatedly accompanied by moral glosses in fairy tales, while instances of male curiosity stand as gateways to the world of high adventure” (167-68). In the popular versions of the story (of Charles Perrault’s especially) a wealthy and several-times married merchant marries a neighborhood maiden but departs for business shortly after their marriage. Before this hasty departure he entrusts the keys of the mansion to this newly wedded wife. She is implored and even encouraged subtly to explore all the wealth and riches of the mansion except one tiny, forlorn chamber. Upon her husband’s departure the wife takes it upon herself to explore all the nooks and crannies of the mansion but soon gets bored with this activity. Soon the curiosity to find out what is hidden in the chamber gets the better of her and refuting the prohibition of her husband she unlocks the small chamber. There she stumbles upon the dead bodies of the former wives of her husband and she is taken aback by this macabre discovery. The key (a magical key in the traditional framework) gets stained with blood, symbolizing the staining of innocence. At this crucial junction the husband arrives and seeing his command betrayed, he asks her to get ready for death at his hands; linking her fate to the fate of his former wives. As she is about to die the wife’s brothers arrive and rescues her
from this cruel fate. The tale thus ends with a moral that curiosity in women is an undesirable passion. The urbane, enlightened tone of Perrault ends the tale on a light-hearted note asserting that: “Curiosity is a charming passion, but may only be satisfied at the price of a thousand regrets; one sees around one a thousand examples of this sad truth every day. Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive.” (Perrault 41) shifting the focus from husband’s murderous and cruel nature to wife’s disobedience.

Carter’s version unlike all other revisions (by Atwood, Eudora Welty and Anne Thackeray for that case) of the Bluebeard employs over-spilling eroticism, intertextuality, first - person confessional narration to parody and subvert the traditional story. Carter’s revision of the traditional canon is like putting on, to use her favorite literary prop of ‘wedding dresses of dead mothers’. The oral heritage in itself becomes the ‘wedding dress’, which gets ripped, torn and bloodied when Carter tries to put herself into it. The excessively sexual, ornate and embellished overtures of Carter’s tale, situating it in the fin de siècle France, analyze and explicate notions of violence, narcissism, female exploitation and sadomasochistic nature of man-woman relationship. The ‘Bluebeard’ motif has been employed and appropriated by various authors in the modern times. A narrative which showcase women enclosed and entrapped, reprimanded for exhibiting curiosity, makes the story viable for the female readership. Acting as a metaphor for the repressed desires, the ‘bloody chamber’ needs a re-visititation. This is what Carter portrays in her title story- putting her young protagonist through the ordeal. Though oppressed and stifled by the lethal discovery of Marquis’s real self and his macabre and gruesome actions, the young wife returns home wiser (with a better understanding of herself and the world around her). This deadly exploration and entering the forbidden chamber in this case, becomes an imperative responsibility; a rite of passage that the protagonist has to go through.

The title story of the collection opens with the narrator (fourth wife of Marquis) recollecting her journey to the “unguessable country of marriage” (111). This opening in itself rewrites the traditional tale framework which ends at marriage with “happily ever after” motif. Carter’s rich, mellifluous and ornate prose dense and further enriches the narrative provided by its narrator. The tale can be read as an allegory (at multiple levels), where layers warp and intersect each other offering hybrid and multiple interpretations. The grim and deadly ‘Bluebeard’ motif is stressed
by the author right from the start: a secretive, enigmatic wealthy Merchant, whose material resources know no bound, who is a connoisseur of fine arts. On the other hand to complement or we should say to highlight the stark difference between him and his spouse, we have a hardly adult virginal maiden; who to escape her meager and poor lifestyle consciously trades herself to the Merchant. So, this seemingly unnatural alliance is not because of love rather is an act of bargain. This sort of revision is in fact an act of centralizing what was overlooked and marginalized by the popular versions of the tale. The material and social standing of both the characters were not paid heed while interpreting the tale. The monetary and economic imperatives that define as well as confine sexual relations in society at large are echoed by Baudrillard, he underlines:

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. Increasingly, all seduction, all manner of enticement- which is always a highly ritualized process- is effaced behind a naturalized sexual imperative, behind the immediate and imperative realization of desire. Our centre of gravity has been displaced towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire, a desire dedicated to drives, or to a machine-like functioning…. This pressure towards liquidity, flux and the accelerated articulation of the sexual, psychic and physical body is an exact replica of that which regulates exchange value: capital must circulate, there must no longer be any fixed point, investments must be ceaselessly renewed, value must radiate without respite- this is the form of value’s present realization, and sexuality, the sexual model, is simply its mode of appearance at the level of the body. (38)

The young bride of Marquis has married him out of a beseeching and imploring seduction, not being able to withstand “the imponderable weight of his desire” (113) that the authoritarian and seductive persona of Marquis seems to exert over her. There is acknowledgement of her own susceptibility to her entrapment. Imploring and explicating the nature of female sexuality as was Carter’s intention, she exhibits all the sexual fashions and mores of the times. The story can be read as a
psychoanalytical account of how a ‘fatherless’ woman (Marquis’s bride) allured by the wealth and ‘phallic’ authority of Marquis (who is old enough to be her father) ensures her entry into the symbolic by overstepping the “white, enclosed quietude” (111) that her mother provided. The emotional vacuum left by the ‘absent’ father of the protagonist seems to be filled by the entry of Marquis, “…it is the person of the Marquis himself that seems to provide the young wife with the most satisfying hope of approaching a lost context of origin: the Marquis as a potential emotional substitute for the wife’s deceased father.” (Roemer, the Contextualization 117). Her nostalgic reminiscences of her childhood memories of her father and again associating Marquis with those obsolete memories points towards Marquis as a potential replacement of the ‘absent father’.

Carter through employing pastiche, inter-textual references and allusions illuminate the penumbra that the uni-dimensional tale tradition espouses. The tale remarkably and overtly links itself to the French decadence. In these ‘post-Terror’ times sexual and moral degeneration is the norm of the day. The poetic reverberations of Baudelaire’s poems and the horrors and crimes of the Terror foreshadows what is about to come in the tale. Though Marquis has hidden his dirty (in this case ‘bloody’) linens in the viscera of his castle yet, we are made to inhale the rancid smell of decay and death; even when the rooms of his mansion are adorned with lilies. Marquis playing the part of an authoritarian and despot has planned and set the game in motion. Providing and then consolidating a monolithic ‘history’ of love as death, “there is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer” (130) he has subtly and slyly ‘manipulated’ his wife’s version of sexual communion and sexual desires. He in this case stands for the cultural and social authority controlling sexual identity and experience.

Marquis is a lecher, a pedophile monster who has sensed in the innocence of his young bride “a potentiality for corruption” (115). So, like a veteran and expert of these deathly maneuvers he spreads his cards and sets the horrific game of love-death in motion. His sadistic overtures are brought to the day light when the heroine designates his moves as “deliberately course and vulgar” (118). The heaviness and death-like ‘gravity’ of Marquis is menacing, annihilating and threatening to the autonomy and individuality of the wife. Carter’s depiction of Marquis in the story links him to none other than but Marquis de Sade himself; evoking related images of
sexual perversions and vilification. Marquis is monstrous, vociferous, predatory male sexuality incarnated. He exemplifies what critic Andrea Dworkin asserts in her essays on the nature on pornography:

Men love death. In everything they make, they hollow out a central place for death, let its rancid smell contaminate every dimension of whatever still survives. Men especially love murder. In art they celebrate it, and in life they commit it. They embrace murder as if life would be devoid of passion, meaning, and action, as if murder were solace, stilling their sobs as they mourn the emptiness and alienation of their lives. (Dworkin 148)

Discarding and re-modeling the binary system of demarcation according to which man evokes the concept of ‘action’ and woman is marginalized as ‘passive’ Carter projects them as malleable not immutable and rigid. Her characters corresponds to what Kristeva calls ‘subject-in-process’- not fixed, continuously in process, changing and transforming themselves. The heroine of her title story ‘The Bloody Chamber’ begins her journey as somebody who has been interpellated or enticed into her secondary position in the hierarchical order of things. The young wife is surrounded by art, culture and music that consolidates the ideology of love as a fatal or deadly passion; ‘thanatos’ entwined with and even superseding ‘eros’. Her husband about whom she doesn’t know much appears as a ‘father-substitute’ with the assurance of filling the gap that was created when her father died. He is everything that she could ever wish for, with his immense and unthinkable wealth to combat and dispel the ‘spectre of poverty’ (111) that often visited the poor maiden and her widowed mother. He could uplift this nameless anonymous music student in society by providing her a social status that being the wife of Marquis would ensure. And most importantly being a symbol and possessor of ‘phallic’ authority their communion would ensure the maiden’s entry into the Symbolic. All these enchantments however ‘beguiled’ allure the girl into a willing state of submission where she barters herself for possessing all this. This covert but not unconscious ‘faustian pact’ with Marquis proves to congeal and confirm her entry into the list of
Marquis’s former dead wives. Thus underpinning the social, cultural and even economic nature of women’s exploitation Carter disposes the myth of ‘conunnial bliss’ that lasts forever in traditional tales. The idea finds it’s parallel in *The Sadeian Woman* as well, where Carter contends:

> [R]elationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men. This fact is now very largely a fact of the past, even in the past, was only true for certain social groups and then only at certain periods. Today, most women work before, during and after marriage. Nevertheless, the economic dependence of women remains a believed fiction. (Sadeian Woman 6-7)

The protagonist self-fashions and tailors her expectations to fit into the role which patriarchal religion extols and reveres. Marquis manages to control and dominate his wife by hiding his real self from her. Marquis’s figure evoking the patriarchal father-figure in the story serves as a metaphor of phallocentric logic; according to which he, solely, holds domination and authority over his wives (even after their death). By preserving their corpses he maintains his illusion of absolute mastery. Assessing the story from psychoanalytical lenses we find Marquis’s “museum of perversities” (131) as his defense mechanism. As Mulvey asserts:

> Although, on the face of it, representations of female eroticized beauty…celebrate male pleasure in the female body as object of gaze and sexual enjoyment, in psychoanalytic terms the female body is also a source of anxiety, constantly threatening to return the subject to an original, traumatic, repressed memory of castration…. Furthermore, this sight may well be of the mother’s body, already the first locus of erotic feelings but also of disgust, the point where the subject first finds the need to draw lines of bodily separation and autonomy. Freud
argues that, if the trauma is too severe, the male psyche may react to the anxiety with an excessive response, erecting a complex defense mechanism in compensation. These processes of disavowal give rise to fetishism. (68)

Though, the chamber contains dangers and even coming death with its horrendous and grisly collection of torture instruments—blood, gore, catafalques and corpses; all concocting the putrid smell of death, it cannot be avoided and kept closed. Like Orpheus’s journey to the underworld, this descent to the nether bowls of Marquis’s castle is indispensable. Though in the epic Orpheus is unable to bring Eurydice along but in the case of the heroine she brings the awareness, the ghastly and deadly realization of her fatal condition. Everything in the story ranging from Marquis engagement ring to the wedding present the hereditary ‘Ruby choker’ “an extraordinary precious slit throat” (114) cements the foundations of this deadly contract with the devil himself; evoking associations of death and chilling horrors. As the heroine near the climax of the story recounts:

I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost. Lost at the charade of innocence and vice in which he had engaged me. Lost as the victim loses to the executioner (137).

Though the heroine feels “infinitely dishevelled by the loss” (121) of her virginity, she like a libertine eagerly anticipates another sexual communion with her husband and this threatens Marquis’s authority over her body and sexual self; which is conventionally repressed and relegated to the ‘object’ position in a hierarchically composed sexual relations. Carter positions her heroine in a framework (socio-cultural and economic) that condemns her and awakens her to the reality of her secondary position in hierarchically constructed binary oppositions; a position which is denigrated and not given credence by the primary position holders. Though Carter
repeatedly stresses her heroine’s innocence, but this innocence is nowhere confused with her naivety. Conflating the only available female models of virgin/whore Carter makes her child—bride a sexually desirous and demanding being, who with certain ambivalence enjoyed her own objectification at the hands of her husband. During their courtship she describes with a sense of terrible awe her own masochistic tendency:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I’d never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (115)

Modifying the structures of the age-old versions, Carter inserts in the framework an influential, power-yielding mother, who provides a history, a backdrop against which her daughter can shape herself, look back to for inspiration. The mother is an uncommon and formidable fairy tale mother, whom the protagonist remembers as, ‘eagle-featured, indomitable mother’ (111) who had ‘gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself for love’ (111). This rebellious and non-conformist matriarchal heritage that the young maiden has inherited cancels her passivity. As Cheryl Renfroe suggests “Earlier in her life, the mother married for love, and has, as an adult, shown more than the socially accepted level of daring and self-reliance. Presumably, the mother’s own past initiatory experiences have caused her to reject certain of society’s long-standing edicts for women.” (97-8) Replacing the brothers of
the Perrault’s version Carter gives us this idiosyncratic mother who in a single bullet kills the villainous Marquis. The reference to the leonine – visage of the mother indicates that this woman is not bound by conventions; she has led a life of her choice. Though poor, she has dignity and is not objectified by the biased norms of the society.

Another important aspect of the story is the introduction of Jean-Yves (the blind piano tuner) as a substitute for Marquis. His soft, compassionate presence acts as a foil to the predatory and animalistic sexuality of Marquis. In the popular accounts of Bluebeard story, the heroine is rescued by her brothers (a male authorial figure) but in Carter’s world, the substitute of Marquis’s annihilating masculinity is the friendly, compassionate persona of the blind piano-tuner. Jean-Yves’s disability has been interpreted by many critics as castrating the phallic authority symbolized by Marquis. The fact of his being blind evokes the loss of scopophilic and voyeuristic control exerted by Marquis over this young wife’s sexuality and individuality. As he cannot see her like Marquis so, he cannot objectify her as a sexual object. But, in a complicated manner the heroine not only inherits her dead husband’s wealth she is left with a stain on her forehead (a reminder of her sexual passions). Such unstable and contradictory depiction upsets the prevalent heteronormative cultural and social presumptions. The self-conscious allusion to the genesis myth links the heroine’s transgression to the disobedience of Eve. This bloody initiation is necessary as for Carter experience comes at a price.

Moving on to the next story in the collection, we encounter a seductively dangerous refashioning of the German legend of the Erl-King. In the popular version of the legend, Erl-King is a nature spirit, a wood deity (mixture of a goblin and trickster) who kidnaps young boys and murders them (in Goethe’s ballad). The legend evokes the allure and seduction involved in the idea of captivity. Carter in her revision, or we can say in her feminist version of the legend plays with the dangerous ideas of sadomasochism. Keeping true to her own popular image of a ‘defiler of sacred notions’, Carter makes her narrator-heroine a willing, sadomasochistic, sexual ‘subject’. Both the stories: ‘The Bloody Chamber’ and ‘The Erl – King’ can be analyzed as narratives surrounding the socio-sexual indoctrination and initiation of the female figure. Like the opening up of the ‘bloody’ chamber, this journey into the ‘woods’ has been presented by Carter as a crucial imperative. In the fashion of
Marquis’s collection of pornographic material, we have in this story a concoction of images of the ‘entrapped, silenced heroine of the Romantic poetry’. Almost dazzling succulence of quotations and references from nineteenth century literature acts as a tool of ‘interpellation’, prefiguring the choreographed destiny of the narrator – heroine. Similar to the ‘imponderable weight’ of Marquis’s desire in the title story we have here the ‘vertigo’ of Erl – King’s eyes that the heroine defines as:

The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face. It is a preservative, like a green liquid amber; it catches me. I am afraid I will be trapped in it for ever….

Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection. I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be drawn down into that black whirlpool and be consumed by you. (191)

Carter’s woods are in this story a surreal, nightmarish replica of the fairy tale forests - enchanting and dangerous at once. The woods in the story are ‘transparent’, where things are exactly the way they appear (somewhat like Sartrean Hell in No Exit). Devoid of all illusions and romanticism, Carter’s woods evoke a sensuous and sensual realm which contains potential dangers, a dangerous site to lose yourself into. The forest becomes a physical incarnation of the male - controlled pantheon which has encoded and encaged the female figure. Carter’s visceral women slip into the woods, slip from the closures of male history and alter their story.

The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspective of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveler walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me. It is easy to lose yourself in these woods. (186-87)
Carter delineates her narrator - protagonist as a susceptible, precariously ‘object’ moving towards the ‘subject’ position, ready to embark on this dangerous journey. The narrator – protagonist of ‘The Erl - King’ exhibits willingness and courage to surmount the boundaries of patriarchal woods. Like the child-bride of the title story, the unnamed narrator - protagonist of the story recognize and assert her active, voluptuous sexual agency, letting it flaunt and bloom outside the barren landscape of male - defined reference index. She is not afraid of ‘going into the woods’. Moving one step ahead of Marquis’s wife, the narrator of this story decides to murder her lover, whom she calls a ‘tender butcher’ (189). At the end of her narrative she hands down the blueprint of her murderous plan, “I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them”. (192)

Placing Carter’s postmodern retake of the Legend under psychoanalytical lenses, we find the story as an examination of the perennial topic of ‘thanatic’ desire, the idea of love as death-wish. Time and again the narrator acknowledges the ominous nature of this fascination with the persona of the Erl King.

When I realized what the Erl - King meant to do to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear and I did not know what to do for I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages although he looked after them very affectionately, gave them fresh water every day and fed them well. His embraces were his enticements and yet, oh yet! They were the branches of which the trap itself was woven. But in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me, although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl – King would do me grievous harm. (191-92)

The narrator of the story is well-versed in the romantic, patriarchal aesthetics of love and sexual desire (inter-textual allusions to Romantic literature bears proof of this fact). But this unreliable and disjointed narrative or more accurately counter –
narrative confirms the narrator’s refusal to be objectified and embalmed, of being ‘possessed’. The story in a disturbing, unsettling fashion voices the discontent and disagreement of the now-aware modern fairy-tale damsel with the widespread image of passive, inert, immobile princess.

Critic Harriet K. Linkin interprets the story as a tract (feminist, in this case) which aims to evade and violate the strictures and imprisonment of the ‘Romantic’ aesthetics and ideology. This vehement refusal to fulfill the destiny of an aesthetic ‘object’, as seedbed for the male imagination to grow and flourish, bears the proof of this deconstructive, subversive strategy. Further, Linkin applauds Carter’s role in reclaiming the ‘silenced’ voice of the Romantic ‘object’. Thus, this reclamation, this bold trespassing of the boundaries, this travail into the ‘woods’ links Carter’s work to the feminist spirit of the times. Appreciating Carter’s reclamation of the silenced voice of the romantic heroine Linkin contends that:

Rewriting the text of the nineteenth-century poetry by substituting female for male in the family romance to ensure her passage into maternal voice, the protagonist of “The Erl–King” imagines the fiercest of defenses against the devouring consummation the male canon inscribes (Linkin 309).

In the context of Romantic poetry of Blake, Keats, Wordsworth, etc. either the woman is turned into a muse or she is portrayed as defiled and persecuted at the hands of thwarting male-aesthetics. Carter’s frequent allusions to the archetypal heroine of Romantic poetry confirm the idea that this story is now a sort of ‘writing-back’, a feminist backlash at the damaging patriarchal tradition. The story which comes as a female-centered narrative, rescues the heroines from being turned into a prisoner of male-fantasy, from being turned into a ‘helpless muse’. The extolled and approved image of ‘domestically imprisoned’ woman that keeps popping its head in the story like milestones highlights the narrator’s knowledge of the fate that patriarchal religion has ordained for women. The following lines of Blake act as the blueprint of the upcoming events in the story; according to which the narrator–protagonist anticipate her own ‘caged’ fate.
How sweet I roam’s from field to field,
And tasted all the summer’s pride,
‘Till I the prince of love beheld,
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He shew’d me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow.

With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
And Phoebus fir’d my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net,
And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to hear me sit and sing,
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
Then stretches out my golden wing,
And mocks my loss of liberty.

(Blake 24)

The first part of the story is punctuated with male authors’s emendations, exposing the inscription of romantic aesthetics and values. As being pointed out by Critic Linkin in her article “Isn’t It Romantic?: Angela Carter’s Bloody Revision of the Romantic Aesthetic in “The Erl – King” (1994) the narrative transmits residues of male - defined aesthetics which imprison women and strangulate their freedom and autonomy.

While other stories in The Bloody Chamber suggest alternate solutions to the problematic nature of desire, even directing us to a place where
men and women might function as independent yet interdependent creators, none offers so self–conscious an analysis of the problematic of high Romantic aesthetic theory and nineteenth–century ideology for both men and women; in “The Erl–King,” Carter demonstrates the larger failure of a Romantic aesthetics whose master plot requires the subjugation of the other. (Linkin 322)

The story like all other stories in the collection ventures to restore ‘female’ voice to the fairy tale genre that has been defined and appropriated by male authors and collectors (Perrault, Basile, Grimms). The latter half of the story documents the female narrator’s resistance and denial to fulfill the expectations of the traditional narratives, her vehement, outrageous refusal to repeat the history. In her impetuous dismissal of the outworn, bifurcated, patriarchal rhetoric, in her dissemination of the romanticism of generic and narrative imprisonment, the narrator–protagonist of ‘The Erl–King’ assert her feminist spirit. She with a vengeful move declines the role of the ‘sacrificial lamb’. Like the heroine of Carter’s another story in the same collection: ‘The Company of Wolves’ she knows that she is ‘nobody’s meat’.

The next tale that we will analyze in this chapter is entitled – ‘The Lady of the House of Love’. The story is a gothic reworking of ‘Briar Rose’ or ‘Sleeping Beauty’. In the popular fairy tale register ‘Sleeping Beauty’ is resurrected from a hundred years sleep (a curse from a witch – fairy) with a prince’s kiss who happens to pass her castle; emphasizing the image of the ‘passive’ princess. The story has been criticized by feminist critics for its endorsement and perpetuation and moreover, exaltation of the passive female sexuality. Analyzing the image of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ Kai Mikkonen argues, “The Sleeping Beauty is a victim and a metaphor for an ultimate state of passivity; she depends on a man to rescue her, and her whole psycho–sexual identity is a mere reflection of his desires” (176).

Employing the archetypal image and motif of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ Carter paints the image in fresh colors; making the story entirely hew own. Carter does not buy this exalted ‘passivity’, borrowing the princesses of the traditional framework she re-conceptualize this princess as a vampire – queen. With her passion for macabre and
gore Carter adds a pinch of her trademark horror ingredients and turns the Beauty into a *nosferatu*. Carter’s ravenous appetite for wicked, voracious, devouring females does not get satisfied with this hence, she stretches the image of the vampire queen and as a consequence, makes her an abstraction, a debilitating and discomfiting one. Inverting the popular account of the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ where female beauty (sexuality) requires a kiss from the prince (an external impetus) to realize itself Carter ‘kills’ her Beauty with the kiss. Taking another detour from the canonical tale of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ Carter substitutes the figure of the ‘virginal maiden’ with that of a ‘virginal boy’ (the bicyclist). Though feminist critics have interpreted the image of vampire—women as the embodiment of an exacerbated, violent and voracious female sexuality but Carter does not provide even this much consolation. Undermining the prevalent understanding Carter describes her *nosferatu*—princess as “the beautiful somnambulist helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes” (195). The point that needs consideration here is the vampire—princesses’ ‘helpless’ condition.

With her predilection for demystification of all that seems essential and immutable Carter presents her vampire—queen as a puppet, an automaton hence rendering her ‘powerful’ position as an illusion, a hoax. Though at a superficial glance she would appear a sexually—fuelled and emancipated figure but leaving no stones unturned Carter conflates her power with her powerlessness. The figure of this deadly ‘Sleeping Beauty’ befits Kristeva’s ‘abject’—evoking both awe as well as horror/repulsion. She may be the mistress of this castle but her condition is not very different from the caged lark that she keeps with her. Like this caged bird she herself is imprisoned not only in her castle but also in her role as a vampire that she must enact even if she finds it horrible.

The story can be read as a sophisticated twin piece of Carter’s earlier story ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ (Fireworks 1974). In the previous story, a life—like marionette comes to life with a kiss from her creator. Lady Purple of the aforesaid story also lacks autonomy and freedom and is manipulated by her master. In the same yet different fashion this ‘Queen of Terror’ lives as an extended self of her dead forefathers. Carter has appropriated the image of the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in her earlier novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* also. The heroine of the novel Albertina is the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ embalmed and incarcerated in her father’s house, awaiting the arrival of Desiderio (the hero) to resurrect her.
Carter’s unsettling account of behind the curtain scenes provides the reader glimpse of the veneer behind the myth of monstrous female sexuality. The vampire’s actions are dictated by the codes and conventions set down the patriarchs “each of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence” (195). Carter depicts the vampire in the traditional masculinistic terms as a ‘blank’ that needs to be infiltrated and given meaning and existence by a patriarch, “…she is herself a cave full of echoes, she is a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit” (195). Such portrayal aligns her fate with that of the caged bird (an invocation to the caged birds of The Erl – King) who sings of its mutilated self. Carter emphasizes the fact that this vampire – queen can only helplessly, irrevocably repeat the age – old drama, having no license to do an improvisation. Time and again the narrative ponders over this possibility, “Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?” (195).

Carter’s appropriation of the image of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ as a puppet, almost unnatural and uncanny attest to its ironic and subversive overtones, “Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror – expect her horrible reluctance for the role” (197 my italics, emphasis added). This definition expose the contorted narrative of idealized female passivity; relegating women to the margins of the socio – cultural setup. She is stripped of all action and individuality. Playing with the ‘constructed’ nature of both myth and history Carter discards this myth. Her tensile and self – conscious prose brings to the fore the true nature of patriarchal domination – entrapping and murdering women in their rigid trajectories. The portraits of the dead ancestors act as the phallic authority, maneuvering her actions – defining and curtailing her freedom. She is the helpless victim who cannot revoke the process and break free of this imposition: “She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening….The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions” (205). This sort of revision undermines the totalitarian and overarching symbolism of patriarchal authority. The vampire’s description evokes Judith Butler’s notion of Gender as ‘performance’ hence rendering it a flexible, mutable socio – cultural category. This ‘mimicry’ of the visceral female figuure of the vampire – queen has been highlighted by Carter when the hero (the bicyclist) observes: “she is like a doll, he thought, a ventriloquist’s doll, or, more, like a great ingenious piece of clockwork… an
automaton, made of white velvet and black fur, that could not move of its own accord…” (204). Though, she desires to act otherwise, not playing herself at times but her ‘ordained’ fate circumcise her movements and she has to ‘imitate’ the pattern and kill men to fit into the mould of a carnivore. She does not have an option; she is ‘trapped’ in her mother’s wedding dress (another of Carter’s literary prop); the fate of her dead mother imprinted in her mind that she cannot help but subscribe to. She is attended by an aged woman who helps her fulfill her daily routine. They inveigle the wayward men and provide them shelter in their castle. Overcome by hunger and imprisoned in her role of a vampire she devours these men. There is only one reality in her world, leaving no gaps and permutations to transform the plot. Her vision of love is also marred by monolithic history which mingles love with death: “she only knows of one kind of consummation” (205). She in this case appears to be a female version of ‘Erl – King’; innocent of her murderous nature, trapped in their role.

The entry of the virginal youth in this grim, solemn narrative of the nosferatu is keeping in tune with the traditional tale framework but, here Carter shifts the paradigms of the popular narrative and gives us a ‘virginal boy’ instead of a ‘girl’. Thus, revising the framework Carter makes room for a confrontational alternative. The concept of ‘virginity’ that nearly all fairy tales espouses has also been mocked by Carter. Underlining the socio–cultural understanding of virginity Carter describes the hero as possessing “…the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states: ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potential, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance” (199). Thus placing ‘virginity’ on a pedestal Carter’s narrative endows the hero with special ‘redeeming’ power that can protect him from the annihilating beauty of the vampire – girl. This subversive strategy is a mockery of patriarchal myth of the ‘virginity’ that acts as a shield against all evils. As hero has not yet confronted the grim reality of the vampire – queen, he is not afraid of her. Carter’s postmodern story comes across as metafiction; comprising commentaries about the fairy tale genre and its own ‘constructed’ nature. The overt reference to the story of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in the course of the story is an example that how this revision is enceinte with the prevalent fairy tale motifs and structures.

Sticking to script when she invites the boy to her bedroom, she for the first time breaks her glasses and cuts herself from the shard; this is something that does not happen usually, “There is no room in her drama for improvisation; and this
unexpected, mundane noise of breaking glass breaks the wicked spell in the room, entirely” (207). The sight of her blood for the first time in her life transfixes her, as this is out of the book stuff for her. The hero unknowingly, in his innocence trying to help the beauty ‘sucks’ her finger and this action jolts the queen from her paralyzed condition. Something within the queen transforms and as there was no room for an alternative in her story, she could not withstand this change (the transformation into a human) so, she dies. Her death in the actual sense redeems the narrative of its patriarchal authority, modifying it as a consequence. Her transformation into a mortal releases her from the weight of immortality. With her death the stark, grisly interior of the castle is brought to the day light; pointing to the decayed and outworn nature of this myth. Before dying she entrusts the hero with a flower as a souvenir, that reminds us of the ‘fanged rose’ of the ‘Snow – Child’. Carter in the end introduces history into the ethereal, supernatural world of fairy tales and closes the tale as a prelude to the beginning of the ‘World War’. Hence, we see appropriation and then, the feminist revision of the tale in its most potent form.

Now we move towards the very precise and disturbing narrative entitled – ‘The Snow Child’, aligning it to the popular fairy tale of ‘Snow White’. This is the shortest story in the collection (only one page long). The frozen, arid landscape where the tale opens, accentuates the bareness of the prose – abstract yet pregnant with symbolic significations. The setting of the story can be viewed as an intentional strategy under which Carter deploys the snow-covered landscape as a ‘tabula rasa’ on which she writes the traditional tale anew. Carter borrows the ‘Snow White’ motif from Grimm’s version. In Grimm’s version the birth of ‘Snow White’ is a result of her father’s wishes hence, underscoring the control of phallic authority over the production and institutionalization of the image of woman. Snow White’s father is not only her creator he is also the progenitor and master of other characters in the story as well; maneuvering and dictating the plot and outcome of the story. This tale in particular, has been criticized by feminist critics for its promulgation of bifurcated image of women in a phallic society. ‘Snow White’ has been pitted against her ‘Step – Mother’, ‘Angel’ set against ‘Witch’. Gilbert and Gubar have emphatically analyzed this tale of ‘Snow White’ in their article ‘Madwoman in the Attic’ (1979) as a story which “dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel – woman and the monster – woman” (36). This problematic relation between the step –
mother and the child also uncovers the process of maturation that every female in a patriarchal set up is expected to go through. Whereas the child as white as ‘snow’ shows that the queen who has now matured has once been like the child ‘immaculate and pure’. For the child the persona of the queen shows the child her ‘ordained fate’, her future. Her worth and value is limited to the point she possess her ‘purity’; once it has been soiled she would become like her step – mother; fighting her young adversaries to maintain her power and status in the social framework.

The narrative opens, like many other stories in the collection, amidst a wintry season – evoking associated images of infertility and impotence. The opening description of the season ‘Midwinter – invincible, immaculate’ (193) sets the tone and mood of the story. There is a Count riding along with his Countess through this gelid landscape. The description of the Countess’s clothing establishes her character as a sexually – experienced woman with “high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs” (193). This description of the Countess associates her to Sade’s Juliette whose sexual proclivities are of a dangerous, sadistic nature (the pelts of the dead foxes that the Countess is wrapped in also illuminates this connection). Riding through this barren land the Count wishes for a girl child (as in the popular version) who is as white as snow, with lips as red as blood and raven – black hairs. As soon as the Count is finished with his description a girl appears befitting his idealized picture. This uncanny event adds to the gothic tone of Carter’s narrative who, always mesmerizes with manifestations of unconscious mind. The birth of this ‘unnatural’ Snow Child attests to the fact that how the production and perpetuation of the image of female and female sexuality is controlled and channelized by the dialectics of phallocentrism.

The next paragraph of the story describes the jealousy that the Countess experience with this child. This passionate jealousy can be interpreted as feminist dissonance and disagreement with the patriarchal image of idealized woman. Carter provides the reason for the Countess’s jealousy by stating that, “she was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her” (193). As the Countess is clad in ebony fox – furs, she is no longer ‘pure’ as the ‘Snow Child’. Count’s wish for a child ‘as white as snow’ can be understood as the patriarchal privileging of women’s ‘virginal’ status. The reference that the narrator gives of the Countess’ impassioned jealousy can also be interpreted as Carter’s subversion of the quintessential female rivalry – infected by
which women fight each other for the attention of the patriarch. At a closer and more objective scale, this rivalry can be viewed as the women’s fight for their survival in a man’s world. The Countess to get rid of this Child devises stratagems which would kill her. First she drops her glove and asks the child to get it back for her but, the plans fails as the Count assures her of buying new gloves. Moving on again, the Countess drops her diamond brooch but alas! This does not succeed as the Count forbids the child to go after it. Finally, overcome by jealousy the Countess demands a rose. This time the Count does not stop the child and she gets off from the mare and plucks the rose. In plucking the rose she pricks her finger and a drop of blood fells on the snow and in an entirely bizarre manner this child dies.

This perturbing narrative does not end with the death of the ‘Snow Child’. As the child ‘bleeds; screams; falls’ (193) the Count gets down from his saddle and penetrates the dead child with his erect member. This irksome depiction of the Count’s necrophiliac impulse jolts the readers in a state of utmost bafflement. The child after this rape dissolves into the snowy landscape leaving behind nothing except a bloodstain on the snow. Further, the Count picks the rose and offers it to the Countess. Here, Carter again gives her readers her trademark ‘horror’ and the Countess drops the flower proclaiming that, “It bites!” (194).

Another concern that the narrative engages itself with is how the clothes and accessories of the Countess (the material possessions/status) gets transferred to the Count’s child during this brief journey. This fact becomes indicative of how the patriarchal authority controls and manipulates the female lot. When the Countess in order to dispose of the girl drops her belongings they automatically get transferred onto the Snow Child thus destabilizing the position and status that her being the wife of the Count ensures. While the child is furred and booted in Countess’s clothing, she is left naked to freeze to her death. Thus, Carter in an existential manner unravels the stark truth of patriarchal domination which lays its rules arbitrarily. The Count acting as the phallic patriarch can own and disown any of these two women at his will. Both the Countess and the Snow Child are controlled by his desires. While some may read this tale as a document of female rivalry and jealousy others like Cristina Bacchilega have noticed the ironic and subversive overtures of Carter’s story. The fact that the rose ‘Bites,’ stresses the fact that the Countess has confronted and recognized the
‘biting’ reality of patriarchal authority. She no longer believes in the romantic myth of ‘ideal woman’.

Carter’s story in an almost pyrotechnic, murderous fashion ‘defiles’ the idealized image of woman in a patriarchal set up. This chilling re-conceptualization by Carter brings the incestual subtext of the original story to the forefront (father wishing for a ‘girl’ child). The apparently dazzling narrative of ‘Snow Child’ simmers with provocative elements of – violence, sexual jealousy, bloodshed, murder and lastly, necrophilia; things which we do not usually associate with the fairy tale genre. Interpreting Carter's unsettling narrative which opens and dissolves in a matter of time, as an artistic exercise in ‘mimesis’, Cristina contends:

In ‘The Snow Child,” Angela Carter’s strategy is to take the politics of disenchantment to its extreme in exposing the intertwined coercive cultural and narrative forms which the authority of the mirror has magically made us think of as natural therefore “true”…. “The Snow Child” proposes no inspiring symbolism, no romantic ideals, no magic transformation; rather, in looking always behind the mirror, it traces the roots of its power in a way that allows for no more nostalgia. (16)

Hence, we encounter another idiosyncratic example of Carter’s revisionary feminist poetics, redeeming the tale of its mythical nature. The tale with its ‘pricking the finger’ motif also allude to the tale of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ who also pricks her finger on her sixteenth birthday and as a result falls into death – like slumber. Many critics have analyzed this incident as an allusion to the ‘coming of age’ of the female figure, with the heroine’s puberty and menstruation. So, we see the breaking of the ‘magic mirror’ the hypnotic spell that has trapped the fairy tale princess for long. What Carter offers us in this stark narrative is the creepy and morbid reality behind the patriarchal mirror. The story contains a wry critique of the masculine fantasy of the ideal woman, dismembering it to the very core. Evading any formal closure or resolution of the conflict Carter’s version leaves us with the sinister reality of erotic desire; entangled in the heterosexual paradigm. Reading Carter’s ‘Snow Child’ critic Soman Chainani comments: ““Snow Child,” however, empowers neither the heroine
nor the villainess and instead simply depicts the power imbalance of the patriarchal
status quo‖ (219).

Now we move on to the last story that will be analyzed in this chapter- ‘Puss –
in – Boots’. The story provides the readers with a comic relief – it is full of lascivious,
illicit sexual escapades; mocking the so called sanctity of not only sex but also of
love. Margaret Atwood’s oft – cited article on Carter’s collection of fairy tales The
Bloody Chamber (1979) ―Running with the Tigers‖ (in Flesh and the Mirror) calls this
revision of ‘Puss – in – Boots’ a kind of ‘comic coda’ (138). Reading it as an exercise
in Bhaktinian notion of ‘carnivalesque’ and ‘grotesque,’ Atwood appreciates the story
as a light – hearted, casual take on the issue of ‘sex’. Atwood concludes:

‘Puss – in – Boots’…is a Rabelesian/Cartersque romp, a tribute to the
playful kitten aspect of the cat family. It is above all a hymn to here –
and – now common sensual pleasure, to ordinary human love, to slap –
and – tickle delight – not as an object to be won, achieved or stolen,
nor to be reserved by the rich and privileged for themselves, as in de
Sade, but available to all, tabby cats as well as young lads and lasses.
(142)

While all other stories in the collection treats the topic of sex with much
gravity and seriousness, this slap – stick, humorous tale takes off all seriousness
associated with sex, in general. The protagonist of the story is a cat named Figaro (an
allusion to The Marriage of Figaro). Thus, Carter in the anthropomorphic, fable – like
fashion makes her hero a Cat who is not only accustomed to but, also well – versed in
the ways of the world: “he’s a cat of the world, cosmopolitan, sophisticated” (170).
He along with his Master (the hero of the story) leads a sexually – adventurous lifestyle. Replicating the framework of the original story in which Puss is a witty and
crafty creature, devising ways and stratagems to gain fortune for his master here, also
Puss schemes and plots for his Master to seduce and win over his object of love (wife
of Panteleone). Presenting the story from the perspective of Puss Carter makes a jibe
at notions of sex, love and morals. This Puss is a proud one, boastful of his talents,
who can sing, dance and make merry:
All in windows in the square fly open when I break into impromptu
song….If the poor players in the square, the sullen rout of ragged trash
that haunts the province, are rewarded with a hail of pennies when they
set up their makeshift stage and start their raucous choruses; then how
much more liberally do the citizens deluge me with pails of the freshest
water, vegetables hardly spoils and, occasionally, slippers, shoes and
boots. (170)

The story is a humorous, belly – laughing narrative where a pair of Cats
(belonging to two different households) plays the role of Cupid, planning and plotting
to make their master and mistress fall in love with each other. The Master of Figaro
has been depicted in the opening of the narrative as a womanizer, a Casanova, a
dandy whose sexual proclivities are well – known in the social circles. He appoints
Puss as his valet and also a messenger to deliver his love letters to the ladies in the
town. He has laid almost every other woman in the town. Puss though in love with
him is also satirical of him, his playful tone reeks of mockery while he describes his
Master as – “…proud as the devil, touchy as tin-tacks, lecherous as liquorice and,
though I say it as loves him, as quick – witted a rascal as ever put on clean
linen”(172). Such a devilish, crafty man gets besotted with the young wife of
Panteleone and gets love – sick; a spoof of the sentimental love by Carter. Below is a
conversation between Puss and his Master who is infatuated with the wife of Signor
Panteleone, in which there we find a ribald sarcasm of the ideology of romantic love
(much in the manner of Shakespeare where Duke Orsino’s love – sickness is made
fun of):

‘How can I live without her?’

You did so for twenty-seven years, sir, and never missed her for a moment.

‘I’m burning with the fever of love!’

Then we’re spared the expense of fires.

‘I shall steal her away from her husband to live with me.’
'What do you propose to live on, sir?'

'Kisses,' he said distractedly, 'Embraces.'

'Well, you won’t grow fat on that, sir; though she will. And then, more mouths to feed.' (181)

Employing the fairy tale motif of a virginal maiden we have here is the married but, still a virgin wife of Sir Panteleone (who is not only aged but impotent also). He compensates for his impotence by keeping his wife locked in her room with an old housekeeper to keep an eye on her. Like many fairy tale princesses she is locked up in a tower (evoking the image of Rapunzel) “A princesses in a tower. Remote and shining as Aldebaran. Chained to a dolt and dragon – guarded” (172). Here, Carter disrupts the connection between virginity and purity. This young spouse is ‘pure’ not because she wills so, she is forced to fit into this role; curtailing her freedom to express and enjoy her sexuality. Given an opportunity this ‘virginal’ maiden enjoys sex as much as any other sexually – experienced woman. The lady’s husband is a corrupt man who extorts rent from already poor tenants and hoards his money and wife in the same manner. He treats her as if she is an object to be possessed; strangulating her within his household.

Figaro together with Tabby schemes to make his Master realize his dream of serenading the lady. On the first occasion Tabby spreads rats throughout the house and Figaro’s Master is summoned to the house, as he is posing as a rat- catcher. The lady and her lover make full use of this opportunity and unabashedly make love – Signor Furioso. To dull the sound of their mating the lady’s cat and Figaro keep purring so that the old, grumbling housekeeper could not find out what is going on in the lady’s chamber. The excuse that the lady gives to her housekeeper about the ‘stained’ bed sheet (a sign of her deflowering) – that Puss killed a really big rat is a tongue – in – cheek reply. The lady’s lack of inhibition and prudence in the presence of her lover remodels the ‘passive’ fairy tale princess as an equally active and participating party in the game of sex. Their first but brief meeting infuriates their passions. So, Puss and Tabby together with this young pair of lovers plans to get Sir Panteleone out of their way and kill him. Tabby trips Sir Panteleone off the balcony and Puss and his Master posing as a physician takes entry into the house. In a casual manner the physician declares Panteleone dead. This time lady and Master
shamelessly, without restraint indulge in sex on the floor while the bed is occupied by the dead body of Signor Panteleone. The young lovers are discovered by the old hag but her honesty is brought with money by the lady of the house. In this manner, this revision allows the female character a choice of her own – to chose who to make love to and who to marry. She like all other heroines in the collection takes hold of her life and becomes an active sexual subject; no more a recipient of masculine desire.

Another critic Maria Sofia has interpreted the story as a postmodern employment of Commedia dell’arte and reading it in parallel with the title story of the collection ‘The Bloody Chamber’. Both the wives – Marquis’s young wife in the title story and wife of Sir Panteleone are survived by their lovers and inherit the wealth of their husbands. Both the narratives necessitate the demise of the husband for the liberation of the female figure. This humorous, funny story features a murder but playful tone of the narrative takes away all the grimness of this predicated murder.

This brings us to the end of the chapter where we see how and in what manner these rewritten tales, staying within the parameters of fairy tale genre refashions these structures, much to the benefit of female character. They are portrayed as large as life, full of contradictions and complexities, hence real. Whereas the mother of the first story shoots the villain with a gun to rescue her daughter, the protagonist of Erl – King contemplates a murderous plan to escape from being devoured by his deadly charm. The vampire – queen transforms into a human with the ‘kiss’ and in her death gets liberated from the trap of immortality. The Snow Child’s dissolution and the Countess’s rejection of the ‘fanged’ rose affirm that she no longer believes the patriarchal myth of love and beauty. And the heroine of the last story goes to the extent of killing her husband to get with her lover. In a marked transition from the canonical tales, Carter restores speech to the silenced and suppressed female figure. This rebellious act of putting words into the mouths of ‘inarticulate’ fairy princesses renders them as ‘speaking subjects’; foregrounding what was repressed in the male authored versions. Her tales constantly engage in displacing/replacing the patriarchal voice of the traditional tales. They defy the socio-cultural expectations which ‘entrapped’ and ‘distressed’ the damsels in the framework of traditional genre. Carter’s revisionary poetics is ardently committed to bring forth the relegated, victimized, confined, silenced and the absent figure of the ‘female’; being obfuscated by the traditional narrative framework. Carter throughout her literary œuvre
acknowledges and exposes the very foundations of socio-cultural setup that have perpetrated and enforced the myth of male superiority and female subservience. She digs at the root of this structure to crumble down the theatre, letting it fall to dust and ashes. The fairy tale heroines of Carter’s tales carry recollections of their fictional, literary forerunners; the fates of their predecessors imprinted in their minds. Carter explores the myriad overtures of sexuality, replacing a homogenous and stereotyped representation of female and male sexuality with one that is far more contradictory, multi-faceted, diverse and most importantly, open to question and inquiry. All stories carry Carter’s iconoclastic feminist vision where women are as sexually voracious as men and are not ashamed to admit it and celebrate their sexuality. They are women who move from ‘object’ position to the ‘subject’ position. Critic Kathleen B. Manley’s summation of Carter’s child bride in the title story as ‘subject-in-process’ applies to all most of her female characters in the collection:

Her (Carter) protagonist in “The Bloody Chamber” is a young woman still trying to make sense of her role in the events about which she tells; and she oscillates between insecurity and growing certainty, both in the story itself and after she has told it…Carter’s use of mirrors, of the mother’s legacy, and of music supports her vision of the protagonist as impossible to classify as girl or woman, wife or career woman, guilty or innocent. At the end, it is clear that the protagonist though less concerned with others’ opinions than before, is still sufficiently concerned about them to be telling her story as a way of expiating shame. She is a woman in process, one still establishing subjectivity. (92)
WORKS CITED


