



## The Delineation of the *Homme Fatale* in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

### *Angela Carter'in Kanlı Oda adlı Kısa Öyküsünde Homme Fatale Erkeğin Portresi*

Harith Turki<sup>1\*</sup>

Tavgah Saeed<sup>2</sup>

\* Sorumlu yazar

Corresponding author

<sup>1</sup>Doç. Dr., Karabük Üniversitesi, Türkiye  
Assoc. Prof. Dr., Karabuk University, Turkey  
[harith.turki@karabuk.edu.tr](mailto:harith.turki@karabuk.edu.tr)  
ORCID ID 0000-0001-9682-2583

<sup>2</sup>Karabük Üniversitesi, Türkiye  
Assoc. Prof. Dr., Karabuk University, Turkey  
[tavgah.saeed@karabuk.edu.tr](mailto:tavgah.saeed@karabuk.edu.tr)  
ORCID ID 0000-0003-3984-3569

Makale geliş tarihi / First received : 14.02.2021

Makale kabul tarihi / Accepted : 26.03.2021

### **Bilgilendirme / Acknowledgement:**

Yazarlar aşağıdaki bilgilendirmeleri yapmaktadırlar:

- 1- Araştırmacıların katkı oranı beyanı eşittir.
- 2- Makalenin yazarları arasında çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
- 3- Makalemizde etik kurulu izni ve/veya yasal/özel izin alınmasını gerektiren bir durum yoktur. Döküman incelemesi yapılmıştır.
- 4- Bu makalede araştırma ve yayın etiğine uyulmuştur.

This article was checked by *Turnitin*. Similarity Index 25%

### **Atıf bilgisi / Citation:**

Turki, H. & Saeed, T. (2021). The delineation of the *homme fatale* in Angel Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (10), 322-330.

## ÖZ

Angela Carter'ın "Kanlı Oda" adlı kısa öyküsü diğer kısa öykülerine kıyasla daha çok basılan ve bilinen öyküsüdür. Bu hikâye, hem yazarının kısa öykü yazımındaki yeteneklerini sergilemesi, hem de postmodern bir yazarın ilgileneceği ilginç konuları içermesi bakımından önemli bir yere sahiptir. Bu kısa öykünün en ilginç konularından biri *homme fatale* erkeğin rolüdür. *Homme fatale* kelimesi Fransızcadan türemiştir ve mahvedici ve yıkıcı erkek anlamına gelir. *Homme fatale* erkek kurban olarak seçtiği kişiyi önce baştan çıkarır ve sonra onu vahşice öldürmekten zevk alır. Carter'ın öyküsü Marki'nin eşlerine eziyet etmesi ve onları öldürmesi üzerine kurulmuştur. Bu makalenin amacı "Kanlı Oda" öyküsünde yer alan kötü karakter Marki'nin rolü ve portresi üzerinde durarak onun eşlerini baştan çıkarıp, onlara vahşice eziyet etmesini ve kurbanlarını sadistçe öldürmesini incelemektir. Eşlerinden hayatta kalabilen tek kişi olan anlatıcı Marki'nin gerçek yüzünü gösterebilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Homme Fatale*, Gotik, Angela Carter, Kanlı Oda.

## ABSTRACT

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is her most anthologized short story among all her other short stories. The importance of this story stems from the fact that it shows the writer's most talented art of short story writing and also the most interesting themes a postmodern writer would ever deal with. One of the most interesting themes of this short story is the role of the *homme fatale*. This word *homme fatale* is derived from French, which means the fatal or destructive man. This man first tempts his victims and then enjoys killing them. Carter's entire story is concerned with the Marquis' acts of torturing and killing his wives. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the role and the portrayal of the main villain of the short story, the Marquis, and his monstrous acts of torturing and killing his wives very sadistically. As an *homme fatale*, the Marquis first seduces his wives and entraps them in order to marry him, then after enjoying them sexually he tortures and kills them. The only survivor of his wives is in fact the narrator of this story, who shows aptly the real features of the Marquis.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Homme fatale*, Gothic, Carter, The Bloody Chamber.

## INTRODUCTION

"Homme Fatale" is a term, derived from French, which means "Fatal Man". This kind of character exists in Gothic literature, which is a perfect milieu for such characters. M. H. Abrams et al (1987) in their *Norton Anthology to English Literature* provide a brief yet precise description of this kind of character as "mysterious, solitary... torturing others because himself tortured by unspeakable guilt, who, though a villain, usurps the place of the hero in the reader's interest." (1309) Moreover, this kind of character comprises "the elements of diabolism, sensuality, and sadistic perversion." (Ibid.) It can also be the opposite of what is known in literature as the *femme fatale* or the fatal woman. If the *femme fatale* is seductive, alluring, charming, using her feminine wiles to tempt and destroy men, the *homme fatale*, can also be handsome, tempting and also using his charm to entangle his victims. Moreover, this character of the *homme fatale* seems to be a descendent of a long literary lineage of similar stereotypes. To mention some, the legend of Don Juan, the Byronic Hero and Dracula, all these characters seem to prey on women and victimize them for different purposes. These characters are known for their ruthless and unyielding passion to control their female victims. They cajole their victims, entrap them with their wiles, and ultimately perform the final rituals of taking their souls.

Thereupon, one can deduce that this character uses the game of love and death in his treatment of his feminine victims. He first tempts them, using whatever possible, to hunt them, and then destroy them. He shows his love and kindness to his victims just to entrap them to their deaths. As will be shown later in the story under study, the Marquis of the story uses several means to tame his ladies and to ensnare them so easily to their deaths, believing in his love and kindness. He in fact hides his true diabolic and sadistic character under the mask of benevolence and gentleness.

British novelist, Angela Carter (1940-1992) is interested in reexamining familiar stories of magic, Gothicism, fairytales, myths and legends. Maroula Joannou writes of Carter "As a writer, Carter is usually associated with fantasy, the Gothic, the bizarre, the fairy tale, the burlesque, the mythical, magical and metaphorical, all of which transport us away from historical actuality into a primarily symbolic literary space" (Joannou, 2007, p.111-2). Carter's purpose is to sculpt these stories in a postmodern perspective. "The Bloody Chamber" is among Carter's Short stories she published in 1979 in a collection entitled *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. Carter explores in these stories some Gothic elements and traditional themes that are frequent in the English and the World Literature. "The Bloody Chamber" is built on the French Gothic tale, known in English as "Bluebeard", which is about a man who is obsessed with killing his wives. The subject matter of the tale called Carter's attention, who found in the story what suited her purpose of writing about the monstrous nature of man. Carter followed the same storyline of the French story, making the Marques the Bluebeard of the tale, who is obsessed with killing his wives and hiding their bodies in a hideous room, which is known as the bloody room. He also cajoles his wives to explore the mansion looking for that room, and any wife who finds it will be buried there. Thus, the story delineates appropriately the image of the *homme fatale* as is going to be explicated in the present paper.

### The *Homme Fatale* in "The Bloody Chamber"

In "The Bloody Chamber", Carter explores the depth of the human malevolence. Like most of her other stories, this story is a story of physical torture, mutilation, and suffering. Carter uncovers the abyss of the human unconscious. "The Bloody Chamber" is told in retrospect. The pianist heroine narrates what she encountered when she was a seventeen-year-old lady. Interestingly, Carter uses Gothic elements in her story to enshrine her *homme fatale* with a sense of fear and terror. In this way, the creepy nature of her male character and his thirst for blood are unraveled. M. E. Snodgrass in *The Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature* (2005) labels Carter as a "neo-Gothic" and a "Female Gothic" writer. (34). The Female Gothic literature is defined 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" (Snodgrass, 2005, p.49). This is clearly seen in the story of the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber". Moreover, the Marquis of the story is seen as a sadist who uses his masculine magic and his charismatic character to tempt his victims. They cannot resist his charm and his tempting nature. The heroine tells us:

*He loved to surprise me in my abstracted solitude at the piano. He would love to tell them not to announce him, then soundlessly open the door and softly creep up behind me with his bouquet of hot-house flowers or his box of marrons glacés, lay his offering upon the keys and clasp his hands over my eyes as I was lost in a Debussy prelude. (Carter, 1993, p.2-3)*

The heroine accepts to marry him, despite her mother's "reluctance". Seeing that he is rich and alluring at the same time, the heroine does not hesitate to accept him, because she thinks that he can save her and offer her both love and protection at the same time. She thinks that she might have a way to inherit his huge castle, "one day, I might bear an heir. Our destination, my destiny." (Carter, 1993, p.2) Thus, when she is asked by her mother whether she does surely "love him", she answers: "I am sure I want to marry him" (Carter, 1993, p.1). In the *homme fatale* of the story, both awe and charm are blended, making a very strange composure, which is described as "deathly composure" (Carter, 1993, p.14). That is why his victims love and yet fear him. The heroine describes him in the following words: "He was older than I. He was much older than I; there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane. But his strange, heavy, almost waxen face was not lined by experience" (Carter, 1993, p.3). He is big, strong, and catlike, but he also shows elements of gentleness and compassion. The heroine recounts the way he used to "softly creep up behind me with his bouquet of hot-house flowers or his box of marrons glacés, lay his offering upon the keys and clasp his hands over my eyes as I was lost in a Debussy prelude." (Carter, 1993, p.3) However, his eyes seem to have "absolute absence of light." (Ibid.) She likens him to lilies because he appears almost calm and unaffected. (Ibid.) Even when he proposes to her, he does not show any emotional reaction, "Even when he asked me to marry him, and I said: 'Yes,' still he did not lose that heavy, fleshy composure of his." (Ibid.) For these reasons the heroine fears the Marquis, and she hopes that once they are at the castle, he will show his real nature to her.

Furthermore, the Marquis uses other means to fully bewitch and beguile his victims, it is through his lavish and expensive gifts. He offers his victims precious gifts, such as rings, "crimson jewels," and "rubies". These are part of the rituals he practices to perform his murders. His seductive manner lies in the way he offers his victims his gifts. Also, the way he dresses and the perfume he uses are all means to achieve his enticement. With all these, his

victims are rendered helpless in front of his alluring and foxy art. The heroine demonstrates how she is seduced by the Marquis:

*This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth, this scent of Russian leather—all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world of tar-tines and maman that now receded from as if drawn away on a string. (Carter, 1993, p.6)*

This way, which he follows to tempt his victims, shows another characteristic of the *homme fatale*, that his reception as a hero in the esteem of the heroine or the reader, despite being a villain, which has already been mentioned. These conducts demonstrate, though superficially, that the Marquis is the hero of the story. This is also apparent from the heroine's attitudes towards him, when she shows on more than one occasion that she is completely bewitched and that she falls in love with him. In making him the hero of her story, Carter aims at empowering him and granting him a position that both terrifies and causes his women to respect him.

However, no matter how he tries to show his tempting and seductive nature, there is something that almost divulges his diaphanous monstrosity. The heroine, though mesmerized, declares that she feels something strange about him: "I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, the Marquis is presented on more than one occasion as an image of death. He is shown to be a heartless person, who takes pleasure in taking the lives of his victims, in this case his wives, whose bodies are only discovered at the end of the story. Sceats (2001) compares the Marquis' interest in murder and blood to the child's relation with the breast of his mother: "His vampiric behavior characterizes a kind of psychic nostalgia, evoking the insatiable and destructive desire that a Kleinian infant experiences towards the breast." (110) His vampiric nature is further shown in the blood-like red necklace, which he offers to his wives, and in the bloody chamber, which is his altar, where he practices his death rituals, and also in his red lips, which stand for his continuous practice of blood sucking. Besides, the vampiric nature is also shown in the way he follows to kill his wives and stores their bodies. The heroine talks about one of his dead wives:

*She was pierced, not by one but by a hundred spikes, this child of the land of the vampires who seemed so newly dead, so full of blood... oh God! How recently had he become a widower? How long had he kept her in this cell? Had it been all the time he had courted me, in the clear light of Paris? (Carter, 1993, p.28)*

In this very aspect, the *homme fatale* seems to draw on the character of Dracula, which seduces the female victims and destroys them. Snodgrass describes the universal horror that this character causes:

*The monstrosity of Dracula's degeneracy is the seduction of English womanhood, embodied in literary opposites, Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray Harker. For his prime victim, Stoker chose not only to threaten the sweet-natured Mina, but also to sacrifice Lucy, the anti-Victorian female rebel, whom the vampire's lethal bite alters into a female ghoul. Thus, the Gothic menace*

*perverts normal human procreation by reproducing itself asexually from a mateless male progenitor. The result—a STALKING nightmare—destroys innocence.* (p.103-104)

Like Dracula, the Marquis stalks his victims and entices them to his den to inflict pain, torture and finally death on them. What displays the Marquis' Dracula-like nature is the sadistic way he follows in enjoying his wives and killing them. He deals with them as an object of fun both sexually and monstrously. As an example of the *homme fatale* paradigm, explained earlier, the Marquis' motive is not known. There is no apparent reason why he behaves like this towards ladies. So, one can suggest that there must be a hidden reason or sin that stimulates the Marquis to have this sadistic attitude towards ladies. Like the Byronic hero, who is also tormented by a hidden sin, the *homme fatale's* hidden sin is most probably the reason behind his brutal demeanors towards ladies. Snodgrass sees the Byronic hero as "a man cursed with regret and a yearning for expiation of sins." (p. 44) Ironically, the Marquis finds it a kind of amusement to torture and kill his victims. He hunts them as his quarries and enjoys them and then kills them. Jean Yves, the blind piano-tuner in the story, says that he once heard a story from his grandfather about a Marquis who

*used to hunt young girls on the mainland; he hunted them with dogs, as though they were foxes. My father had it from his grandfather, how the Marquis pulled a head out of his saddle bag and showed it to the blacksmith, while the man was shoeing his horse. And it was the head of the blacksmith's wife.* (Carter, 1993, p.33)

Interestingly, this blend that Carter makes between beauty and ugliness, between the power of life and the incentive of killing fortifies the image of the *homme fatale*. As an heir of the Byronic hero, the Marquis synthesizes love and hate to produce a marring power of passion, "As a lover, the Byronic hero intertwines love and hate to shape a destructive, all-consuming passion." (Snodgrass. 2005, p. 62). Moreover, "The Bloody Chamber" does also remind one of the recurrent themes in literature, which is the beauty and the beast. The dead wives along with the heroine of the story stand for beauty, and the Marquis, the *homme fatale* of the story, stands for the beast. March-Russel (2009) points out that "The Bloody Chamber" incorporates themes from different fairytales: "'The Bloody Chamber' refers primarily to Charles Perrault's 'Bluebeard', but it also alludes to 'Beauty and the Beast', 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Sleeping Beauty.'" (225) With drawing on these known fairytales, Carter familiarizes her readers with her story, and shows the scary nature of the *homme fatale*.

It is so important to notice that the writer deals with the beast in a contemporary manner. Her beast is no longer ugly or Frankenstein's monster-like figure of the traditional literature. He is handsome, alluring, and has a charismatic character. Yet, the monstrous aspect of this character lies deep in him. It is inside not outside. Accordingly, what derives the *homme fatale*, besides his hidden sin, is his monstrous side, which urges him to torture and kill his wives in a brutal way. That is why the heroine tells us that she thinks that sometimes the Marquis wears a mask to hide his real identity. (Carter, 1993, p. 28) He in fact hides his monstrous side under this alluring and appealing mask. The heroine also stands for the instinct of life, opposite to the urge of death epitomized by the Marquis, who, as mentioned earlier, incarnates the image of death, as he inflicted death on his former wives. With her victory, the heroine shows that the power of life triumphs finally and after long strife over the power of death.

Part of the terror associated with the practices of the *homme fatale* is presented in the place he practices his atrocious and vehement acts, which is his castle. As mentioned earlier, the story draws so much on the Gothic, that is why the writer delineates the Marquis' castle as a Gothic, deserted and haunting place, which is shown as a "mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago" (Carter, 1993, p.8). Carter relies heavily on the Gothic elements to enshrine this castle. Her aim is to add a sense of dread and terror to this den of the *homme fatale*. This dark and the gloomy castle is the last abode of the victims of the Marquis, where their lives are taken, and their bodies are mutilated.

Furthermore, the heroine's decision to roam the castle and discover what it hides leads her to the room which she believes it has the key to the true identity of her husband. Exploring the room, the heroine finds instruments of torture, such as a rack, a wheel, an Iron Maiden and "instruments of mutilations" (Carter, 1993, p.26). These tools are used by the Marquis to perform his rites of tormenting and then killing his wives. She also finds the corpses of his murdered wives. The most terrifying image is when the narrator finds the way the skulls and the bodies are put and arranged. They really show how ruthless and heartless the *homme fatale* is. The first corpus belongs to the Marquis' last wife, the "Roman Countess" whose body bears brutal and sadistic signs of torture:

*Oh, horrors! – made out a skull; yes, a skull, so utterly denuded, now, of flesh, that it scarcely seems possible that stark bone had once been richly upholstered with life. And this skull was strung up by a system unseen cords.... The final image of his bride... . I recognized her the moment I saw her... . Oh my poor girl, next in the fated sisterhood of his wives; one false step and into the abyss of the dark you stumbled... . With trembling fingers, I prised open the front of the upright coffin, with its sculpted face caught in the rectus of pain.... She was pierced, not by one but by a hundred spikes. (Carter, 1993, p.27-28)*

This scene reveals to the heroine the true identity of her husband. This also proves to her that she is the next on his list of death. Thus, the Marquis' hidden secrets are now uncovered. With this discovery, the heroine becomes totally helpless and distraught. She comes to the conclusion that "any bride brought to this castle should come ready dressed in mourning, should bring a priest and a coffin with her" (Carter, 1993, p.32). The heroine realizes that all the kind treatment and love that the Marquis showed were as bait to hunt her. She feels a kind of connection with the dead wives because all of them share the same fate. They are all members in "the fated sisterhood of his wives" (Carter, 1993, p.33), a league the Marquis creates out of his ruthless and appalling nature. What further exhibits his heartless and inclement character is the gallery he makes out of the bodies of his dead wives, which were put "as if they were items of statuary" (Carter, 1993, p. 27). This indicates that he does not only enjoy killing them, but he also finds pleasure in the way he preserves their bodies in that bloody room, which bears the title of the story. Moreover, the heroine realizes that this monster feeds on the fears of his wives. His room is the bottomless abyss where his satanic rites are being performed. For this reason, the heroine feels both pity and fear from this *homme fatale*, "I felt a terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in this in such a strange, secret places.... The atrocious loneliness of that monster." (Carter, 1993, p. 35)

At any rate, after discovering that the heroine enters the room and finds out his hidden infernal world, the Marquis decides to murder his new bride. He in fact informs her that she will be decapitated and also orders her to have a bath and to dress well. With this heroine, the writer shows us how he practices his murders. For the Marquis killing is not only taking the life of somebody. He does this with delight and pleasure. He seems that he considers this as "a game of love and death" (Carter, 1993, p.37), as the heroine puts it. That is why his murders are done with some rites. He first asks the heroine to dress in the same dress she wore in their first opera party. Then he asks her to put on the ruby choker, which he describes as "the necklace that prefigures your end" (Carter, 1993, p.38). What is more, the Marquis seems to do his practice in a tranquil and private atmosphere, because he tells the heroine that he sends all the servants off to the mainland so that Marquis will "have absolute privacy for our last rites" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, while the Marquis is about to perform his "last rites", where the heroine is kneeling down at her slayer's feet, her mother arrives at the nick of time putting a bullet in the *homme fatale's* head and freeing her daughter. Thus, with the death of the Marquis, "the rigid dichotomy of his eroticized power-games is shattered" (154), as Gamble (1997) puts it. With his death, the threat which he poses to women ceases to exist, and his castle, which was seen as a slaughterhouse, is now free from this monster. As a redeeming act to all the crimes he committed, the heroine decides to give all his fortune to charity. Consequently, the death of the *homme fatale* represents the triumph of the elements of life, represented by the heroine, over those of death. It also shows the end of tyranny, sadism, cannibalism, and monstrosity which wear the mask of love and kindness.

## CONCLUSION

Carter's Gothic tale delineates undoubtedly the image of the *homme fatale*. In this character, she shows the power of evil that lurks beneath the mask of the superficial human love and kindness. The Marquis' true character is hidden under the garment of a gentle person who loves and cares for his wives. He in fact enslaves them in his phony and hypocritical love, just to be able to kill them. His love, care and kindness are only used as baits to entangle his victims, to be able to torture and kill them. Thus, this character also incarnates two important themes in literature: appearance and reality, and duality of human nature. The apparently gentle and handsome character of the Marquis hides his cruel and ruthless true nature that enjoys torturing his wives and killing them ultimately. Besides, this *homme fatale* also reveals the dual nature of human being. What is more, Carter draws on famous literary stereotypes like Bluebeard, Byronic hero, and Dracula to shape her character and give him an element of universality. The *homme fatale* seems to inherit these characters' charismatic yet destructive character and passion to rule, subjugate, torture, and finally kill his victims. He tempts and amuses his victims only to kill them.

## REFERENCES

Abrams, M. H. et al Eds. (1987) *The norton anthology of English Literature. II*. New York: W.W. Norton& Company.



- Carter, A. (1993). *The Bloody Chamber and other stories*. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc.
- Gamble, S. (1997). *Angela Carter: Writing from the front line*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Joannou, M. (2007). Rereading Angela Carter. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 18(1), 110-2.
- March-Russel, P. (2009). *The short story: An introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Sceats, S. (2001). Oral sex: Vampiric transgression and the writing of Angela Carter. *Tulsa Studies of Woman Literature, Spring*, 107-121.
- Snodgrass, E. A. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Gothic literature*. New York: Facts on File, Inc.