

The Lady Of The House Of Love

By Angela Carter
(from the *Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, 1979)

1. The author

Angela Carter was born in 1940. When she published her first novel, *Shadow Dance* in 1966, she was immediately recognized as one of Britain's most original writers. Angela Carter was, without question, a 20th century original. Her approach of literature included Magic Realism, Surrealism, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Gothic, Feminism, Post modernism (VanderMeer, 2001). All this dimensions cannot define her work each on their own. She created a literature that included a bit of all. Since she juggled with all kind of styles and wrote mainly novels, I think that we cannot consider her a full-time fairy tale writer. To me it seems that she wrote everything she could. From novels, to essays, journalism and radio plays and that only fairy tales weren't there. She completed the record with postmodern tales.

2. Text Elements

2A. Text title

The title of the tale is *The Lady Of The House Of Love*. I think the title is misleading but not in a very ironical way (not yet). I was expecting a love story fit for a fairy tale soap-opera. The Lady that lives in a house of love is in fact a bloody-thirsted vampire that lures the unknowing and innocent young men in her bedroom the feeds on their blood. I guess that for these "pure" men, she could be the lady from the house of love (even thou the house of love is a scary and fusty old castle that hides in its walls centuries of brutal crimes).

2B. Plotline

The tale depicts of a Countess that, because of her legacy, is forced to live in the castle of her hideous ancestors, to kill and to isolate herself in order to live. She is reluctant and finds her life, or better said, her death, to be less that enough to content her and she wants to be a human. A young English soldier has the special quality of virginity. He is traveling through Romania by bicycle and he finds himself in a deserted village. From there he is lead by a crone to a mansion inhabited by a vampiress who survives by luring young men into her bedroom and feeding on their blood. She also wants to feed on the young soldier but his purity and virginity has an interesting effect on her. When they

enter her bedroom she accidentally cuts herself and the soldier kisses it better. He wakes up to find her dead. He leaves to return to his battalion.

2C. Characters

The Countess is the "timeless Gothic eternity of the vampires, for whom all is as it has always been and will be, whose cards always fall in the same pattern, [...]the last bud of the poison tree that sprang from the loins of Vlad the Impaler." Being the last of her kind, the Countess does not display her legacy like we would expect. When we hear the word "vampire", we think at creatures that show off their abilities, that cut a dash and seem to be more than pleased with their condition. The Countess is nothing like that. She used to feed with animal blood, isn't in a very good physical condition, even anorexic, and is very strongly connected with the past and with what she inherited from her predecessors. In her state, she would shame her specie.

The young English soldier seems to resemble the men from the traditional stories. His purity is important, a hero, a loyal man (being a soldier) that falls in the trap of the traditional evil woman who opens forbidden doors or falls prey to her evil "anima". The soldier is a modern prince. Even thou he is condemned to die, he thinks at ways to help her since she is in such a terrible state. Finally, he assumes the role of the savior and rescues her from the deep darkness of her legacy by kissing her finger.

2D. Time

The time is not precisely given by the author. But since the Countess is the last of her kind and Vlad the Impaler (15th century) was her predecessor, we can assume that several hundreds of years passed from the kingship of Vlad. Then, if we are to take the presence of an English soldier in Romania as a reference point, we can speak about the two World Wars (the 20th century). As a conclusion, we can assume that the story is placed somewhere at the middle of the 20th century.

2E. Atmosphere

The atmosphere is obviously Gothic. We have the Gothic architecture, the Gothic theme and also the idea of vampires leads us to Gothic.

3. Genus Proximus

I think that the story is first of all, a Gothic one. Secondly, the story could also be interpreted as an ironical parody of the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Thirdly, I think that we are also dealing with a bit of mysticism since the Countess tries to find a solution to her vampirism. But the answer is beyond the rational, beyond the powers of a limited mind. Then we have the allegory of

a disappearance of the last realm of fantasy choked by the rational mind of the English soldier who refuses to see who the Countess really is.

4. The text as a fairy tale.

The text has certain congenial with the traditional fairy tale and the author plays with the traditional structure. The prince (in our case, soldier) saving the princess (the Countess) is, from my point of view, the most notable. We have a modern prince that doesn't come on a white horse but rather on a bicycle and a modern princess that doesn't need to be saved from someone but saved from self. Unlike the traditional fairy tale, the story has a lot of description and very little dialogue. We also have the crone that brings her the men and assumes the role of a provider and Charon (the mythological creature).

5. Classification

5A.

I think that we are dealing with a mixture of elements from fairy tales. First if all, we have a girl that, due to her condition, is forced to isolate herself in a "tower", having her own bodyguard that attends all her needs and decides what she will eat and when she will go out, like a sort of *Rapunzel* and the enchantress. Then, we have a *Sleeping Beauty* surrounded by the same wall of thorns, and waiting asleep for her savor. The fate on the cards awakens the Countess magically just as "a single kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." The same scene with the kiss repeats itself in the end, when the soldier kisses the finger and the princess is saved from death among the livings.

5B.

According to Aarne-Thompson index I think that the text is a Formula Tale: Chains Involving Death and Chains Involving Eating (since the Countess needs to eat)

5C.

If we are the make a clear distinction between the characters of the story then, the hero is the unnamed soldier, the villain is the condition of the Countess and also maybe the governess that maintains the idea of a vampire. The reward is given to the soldier: he is left alive.

6. Specific Differences

6A. Differences and departures

The main departures from the traditional fairy tales consist in a very multi-layered text that apparently speaks about reason that practically states that death is a definite condition, but she defies this law because she is a living dead.

She lives in the dark, because she has no chose. The light of the sun will kill her. The dark gives her an aura of mystery. The narrator calls her suite as "Juliet's tomb" to indicate that just as Juliet was alive but seen dead while death, the Countess is dead but denying the concept of life. I feel that the story is written more for adults rather than children because it approaches a difficult subject. The language is not simple and has a lot of adjectives, not very common in the traditional fairy tale.

6B.

The narrator begins to evoke the story of *Jack and the beanstalk*, inserting parts of that fairytale like lines between paragraphs. "Fee fie fo fum / I smell the blood of an Englishman." Another allusion is made to *Sleeping Beauty* "a single kiss woke up the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood." I think the author uses these allusions as an irony. Beauty was beautiful and asleep, but alive. Jack is used as a humor element. The text is a pastiche because it is an exercise in literary criticism that practically involves changing one or more elements in a preexisting work and it can lead to a new and original work.

6C.

I think that we are dealing with a mixture between irony and nostalgia. The author creates very vivid images and she adopts a language and an attitude appropriate with the scenery. She is in the same time nostalgic being able to immerse in that dark world but in the same time, she uses irony to make a discordance between the world of reason and the realm of fantasy.

6D.

The whole text refers to a contemporary audience. The tale was written with the purpose to show how the contemporary fellows destroy the magic of a fairy tale with reason. The wonderful world of legendary creatures is slowly overlooked or replaced with scientific ideas.

6E.

The narrator's voice is recognized as a contemporary one using all kind of neologisms and creating a less accessible language. She doesn't address directly to the reader.

6F.

The narrator does not announce his presence and nor does he refer to himself as a creator of fairy tales.

7. Morality

7A.

The text has, of course a moral, indirectly expressed. First, the reason destroys the fantasy and secondly, a denial of a self given by nature, will lead to at least a physical destroy of the individual.

7B.

I think that the text diverges from children and becomes a tool of criticism in the hands of the author. If I was a young child and I would have read this tale, I would be very confused. In the case of Angela Carter, we are dealing with a fragmentered fairy tale that has the purpose to liberate through subversivety (to transform, to undermine).

7C.

The traditional power structure attacked in this text is, in my opinion, gender and implicit, sex. If we talk about the Countess, a lack of sexual understanding and experience is for her a proof of weakness while for the soldier, virginity and, implicit, sexual naivety are sources of strength and power. The narrator explains, "he is immune to shadow, due to his virginity" and, "he has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states; ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance. He is more than he knows."

8. Style

8A. The style

The style is sophisticated and contemporary. The author plays with words and with the reader's imagination, in the same time.

8B. Style sample

“Wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence; she counts out the Tarot cards, ceaselessly construing a constellation of possibilities as if the random fall of the cards on the red plush tablecloth before her could precipitate her from her chill, shuttered room into a country of perpetual summer and obliterate the perennial sadness of a girl who is both death and the maiden.”

9. Audience

9A. Percieved audience

The tale is not for a juvenile audience. I don't think that children would enjoy this tale. Even thou, vampires are very “trendy” nowadays, I don't think

that this vampire would pass the children's test. The narrator seems to talk to adults over children because adult would see different side of the story, see beyond. "[...]yet he was disturbed, almost repelled, by her extraordinarily fleshy mouth, a mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth. Even – but he put the thought away from him immediately – a whore's mouth" has a certain degree of eroticism, not particularity fit for children.

9B. Involvement

The narrator tries to capture the audience and leads it, indirectly, on her own path. The narrator knows what it is the point of the tale so it directs the reader on a certain way to make him see what she wanted to show.

9C. Adequacy for class

The text has some wonderful descriptions and a very good use of adjective and sometimes synonyms. I think that parts of it, for grammar or for a vocabulary can be used in a lesson. As a whole, I would not use it.

10. Bibliography

- Carter, Angela. The Lady of the House of Love. Published in the volume: *The Bloody Chamber*. 1979
- VanderMeer, Jack. Angela Carter. 26 October 2001. Available on: <http://www.themodernword.com/scriptorium/carter.html>