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CONTEXT

A04

Legends concerning shape-shifters can be found in many cultures. Whether it be the Celtic selkie or the Native American Nanabozho or the Greek Zeus, the notion that the world cannot be trusted is expressed in many ways. Occasionally the shape-shifter is benign, but more often than not the monster is selfish and mostly malign.

CHARACTERS

It is partly the nature of the short story as a **narrative** form that dictates characters be defined by the use of carefully selected detail. Carter is not creating her characters from scratch in this collection; many are stock characters from fairy-tale convention dressed in new clothes. Some are amalgamations of recognisable character types drawn from other literary genres. The Erl-King is the most singular character in the tales as a whole; he is a kind of pagan wood spirit, elusively representing a complex combination of ideas about nature (see the **Part Two: The Erl-King** and **Part Three: Man, woman and nature** for more on 'The Erl-King'). Carter allows some of the characters to perform the role of **narrator**, though none of them tell their stories in exactly the same way. Transformation and metamorphosis are the key functions of Carter's characters: some are shape-shifters; others are disguised or masked in one way or another. The revelation of the true identity of Carter's characters is often accomplished through a thoroughly other-worldly moment of magic.

The women in *The Bloody Chamber* are in general given domestic roles, whether they be aristocrats, middle class or peasants. The men are mostly figures of authority whose power or wealth has been inherited in one way or another. These Notes will consider together those who take the role of narrator and **protagonist**; the villainous patriarchs and the predatory male characters; the male characters who are less threatening; the positive and negative models of motherhood; the few female characters who may be seen as victims of their circumstances; the female characters that represent the vivacity of life; and, finally, the human animal.

THE NARRATOR PROTAGONIST

- The new bride, 'The Bloody Chamber'
- The girl, 'The Tiger's Bride'
- Puss-in-Boots, 'Puss-in-Boots'



A **protagonist** is usually taken to be the principal character causing most of the events in a story to be enacted. Carter frequently returns to the question of who has the initiative at any moment in her stories. She wants to show who has the power to make things happen.

The bride of 'The Bloody Chamber' recalls how her innocence was stripped away from her through a flashback of linked memories (on the train, thinking of her mother alone at home, the delivery of the wedding dress, the courtship, going to the opera on the night before her wedding). Subsequently, the tale follows a traditional chronological recounting of events. She is a creature of sensations, delighting in the 'impeccable linen of the pillow' (p. 1); her satin nightdress, 'supple as a garment of heavy water' (p. 2); and the Marquis's kiss 'with tongue and teeth in it' (p. 2). Though very aware of her immediate surroundings, she only glimpses the truth of the Marquis – and herself – in 'gilded mirrors' (p. 6): she reports the moment of consummation of her marriage through the reflections in the mirrors, as if she only exists in the Marquis's eyes.

When left alone, her idle existence as a rich man's wife is oppressive. The creative act of making music is her escape. After she has discovered the truth of the secret room, she copes with the imminent threat to her life through the 'therapeutic task' (p. 30) of playing the piano. She remains an odd combination of fearlessness and resignation – 'I knew I must meet my lord alone' (p. 33) – dependent on her mother, her 'avenging angel' (p. 39), for her salvation.

The girl in 'The Tiger's Bride' is presented as a tougher personality, a survivor, but is equally powerless in many respects. She resents her inability to escape her father's neglect. She describes his 'special madness' (p. 56), his 'debauchery' (p. 59), as the 'sickness' (p. 59) of gambling. Her 'heartless mirth' in response to The Beast's request to see her 'Desnuda' (p. 65) is the response of a person hardened by experience. Although she initially feels she is part of a 'humiliating bargain' (p. 68), she changes her view when The Beast changes his demand. Carter **alludes** to the well-known axiom that refers to an unlikely meeting between the powerful and the powerless: 'The lion shall lie down with the lamb.' Typically, Carter's woman understands this by turning it around: 'The lamb must learn to run with the tigers' (p. 71). The **anthropomorphic** transformation she undergoes at the end of the tale is a remarkable compromise. She rejects the values of her father's civilisation but confirms the possibility of a 'peaceable kingdom' (p. 74) by becoming the tiger's bride and rejoicing in the revelation of her 'beautiful fur' (p. 75).

Puss-in-Boots is an amusing anthropomorphic character who boasts he is 'a cat of the world, cosmopolitan, sophisticated' (p. 76). He relishes his role as a raconteur and his language is overloaded with **rhetorical** flourishes, particularly when embellishing his part in the story. His habit of referring to himself in the third person – 'Puss takes his promenade' (p. 77) – also demonstrates his egocentricity.



He is also a **caricature** of masculine opportunism. He refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) when he says cats 'smile and smile'. Carter neatly connects politicians – 'all cats have a politician's air' (p. 77) – and 'villains' (p. 78) through this **allusion** to Hamlet's bitter observation that 'one may smile and smile and be a villain' (Act I Scene 5).

It is, perhaps, misleading to call Puss-in-Boots a **protagonist**, as the real protagonist, the 'sleek, spry tabby' (p. 82), is hidden in his story. Puss-in-Boots claims all the credit, but the success of his ventures has, in fact, entirely depended on the tabby cat's resourcefulness – and she finds time to provide him with three 'fine, new-minted ginger kittens' (p. 95). This is perhaps an example of 'history' that should be rewritten as 'her story'.

KEY QUOTATIONS: THE NARRATOR PROTAGONIST

A01

Key quotation 1: As the girl travels to The Beast's palazzo, 'my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment' ('The Tiger's Bride', p. 62).

Possible interpretations:

- Suggests her independence now her father has lost her.
- Implies the lack of economic options available to lone women.
- Links to the transformation at the end of the tale: the skin she will lose to reveal her animal nature.

Key quotation 2: On hearing The Beast's request to see her naked: 'I let out a raucous guffaw; no young lady laughs like that! my old nurse used to remonstrate. But I did. And do.' ('The Tiger's Bride', p. 65)

Possible interpretations:

- Suggests the girl's strength in the face of male power.
- Characterises the girl's independence and unwillingness to conform to stereotype.
- Links to the wider theme of patriarchal power and female submission.

CONTEXT

A04

The saying 'The lion shall lie down with the lamb' is adapted from the Old Testament: 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid' (Isaiah 11:6). The Quaker William Penn wrote in 1693: 'Nor is it said the lamb shall lie down with the lion, but the lion shall lie down with the lamb.' The Quaker Edward Hicks (1780–1849) painted *The Peaceable Kingdom* inspired by these verses.

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about how you respond.

FIVE KEY AREAS

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR ANSWER/ESSAY

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked! Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one aspect of the text (for example, the presentation of women) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as the presentation of men). Or they write about one aspect from the question (for example, 'nightmarish terrors') but ignore another (such as 'moral behaviour'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here's an example of an opening paragraph that gets straight to the point, addressing the question: **Explore Carter's presentation of women in *The Bloody Chamber***.

Carter's presentation of women focuses on their sexuality and their ability to change. Some of Carter's female characters must take control of their lives from the men who seek to control them, while others must change themselves, even their species in one case.

Immediate focus on task and key words and example from the text

2. USE OF TITLES, NAMES, ETC.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with single or double quotation marks and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'The Tiger's Bride'.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' or 'collection' rather than 'book'. Using the word 'text', shows the examiner that you are thinking about *The Bloody Chamber* as a work of literature, created by the author.
- It's also important that you remember to distinguish between 'The Bloody Chamber' the short story, and *The Bloody Chamber* the collection as a whole. You can do this by consistently referring to either the story of 'The Bloody Chamber' or the collection.

3. EFFECTIVE QUOTATIONS

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant
- Not too long
- Integrated into your argument/sentence.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

Here is an example of a quotation successfully embedded in a sentence:

Carter's warning is clear: women should fear men who are 'hairy on the inside' no matter how they may appear on the outside.

Remember – quotations can be a well-selected set of three or four single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. TECHNIQUES AND TERMINOLOGY

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions or people (for example, 'paradox' or 'archetype' or 'de Sade') but make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly.

5. GENERAL WRITING SKILLS

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid **colloquial** or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'all right', 'OK' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (*The Marquis is a typical Gothic villain because he's evil*), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

TARGETING A HIGH GRADE

A01

For example, note the professional approach here:

Carter's use of the symbol of blood suggests not only the Snow Child's death but also her virginity. We may be shocked at the bluntness of this image, and at Carter's explicit description of the Duke's action, but perhaps most shocking (though entirely typical of the collection) is the absence of any explicit or indeed implied moral judgement.

GRADE BOOSTER

A02

It's important to remember that *The Bloody Chamber* is a text created by Carter – thinking about the choices Carter makes with language and narrative will not only alert you to her methods as an author but also her intentions, i.e. the effect she seeks to create.