

Bluebeard Revisited

in Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Shirley Jackson

by

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Introduction

The word “Bluebeard” evokes images of murderous husbands and curious wives, castles with secret rooms filled with the blood-dripping evidence of the master’s anti-social behaviour. The tale of Bluebeard has been regarded as a tale of warning, and of initiation. It has even been interpreted as a tale of the futility of love, of the impossibility of two human beings ever being able to live together in harmony. It has been read, and subsequently rewritten, numerous times. I set out on this literary project expecting to find contemporary Bluebeards lurking behind every corner. But the more I looked, the more elusive he turned out to be. In some cases, I even started doubting whether he in fact existed.

The subject matter of this thesis is five different contemporary revisions of the fairy tale “Bluebeard”. These versions are “Alien Territory” and “Bluebeard’s Egg” by Margaret Atwood, “The Bloody Chamber” by Angela Carter, and “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith”, versions “1” and “2”, by Shirley Jackson. A short presentation of each author will be given at the beginning of the different chapters.

I chose these five tales for several reasons. Firstly, because they were all written within the period in which I wished to work, which is post World War II. Secondly, by representing Canada, Britain and the USA, they are also representative of a major part of the English-speaking world. Thirdly, and most importantly, these tales are, each in their own way, subversive, satirical and ambiguous. These characteristics make them into complex and demanding study objects, but at the same time highly rewarding ones.

My aim is to give attentive and close readings of these short stories, and to examine the effect the intertext of the “Bluebeard” tale has on them. I will do this within a reception study paradigm. These texts are complete works in their own right, but I intend to show that when they are read with the tale of “Bluebeard” in mind, something happens to the way in which

they are understood. The field of reception study is a large and varied one, and I will give a brief account of its main features in the following paragraphs, before describing the origins and plot of “Bluebeard”.

Reception theory

Reception theory is a form of theory which focuses on “the reader’s reception of a text.” The prime interest is not, however, “on the response of a single reader at a given time, but on the altering responses, interpretive and evaluative, of the general reading public over the course of time” (Abrams 262). Reception study is, in other words, an historicist approach to literature. Traditional literary historians believed that one must uncover a text’s “objective meaning” (Machor and Goldstein x), before beginning to think about any subjective significance, that it is possible to assert an “objective” truth about a literary work, separate from any practice of interpretation. What such theories cannot account for, however, is the fact that different schools of theory produce radically different readings of the same literary work, making it impossible to decide where an objective truth may be found. Modern reception study not only takes into account the historical, individual and social factors that may have influenced an author and subsequently his or her work, but also the findings of every school of criticism that has produced readings of that work. Machor and Goldstein emphasises this point by using Hamlet as an example. The reception history of Hamlet not only consists of the play itself, it must also “acknowledge the diverse institutional positions, literary methods, and social, sexual, and ideological beliefs that inform the play’s formal, authorial, historical, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist readings” (xi).

In this thesis I have made use of the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. They are both considered as pioneers and leading men in this field of theory, and I will briefly touch upon their theories. Jauss, albeit inspired by Gadamer, introduced the notion of

“horizon” (Jauss 8) into this field of study, a term which refers to the horizon of a reader of a given literary text, as well as the horizon of the text itself. A reader’s horizon consists of every experience, opinion, desire and thought this person may possess. Jauss’ point is that when a person encounters a literary work, his or her horizon is influenced by the work in question, and subsequently reconstructed. In addition to the effect this encounter has upon the reader, the horizon of the text also becomes influenced by the dialogue that arises between reader and text (7-9). It is crucial to understand that this dialogue occurs between a text and its writer: “[T]he producer of a text becomes also a recipient when he sets out to write” (9). In connection with the revisions of “Bluebeard” I am about to discuss, this means that the authors were themselves recipients prior to their adaptations of the tale, and that they have continued to receive alterations to their own horizons of expectation while working on their stories.

The concept of dialogicity between reader and text is also very much present in the work of Iser. In his view, the text does not reach its full potential until it is read. Through the interaction between text and reader a “virtual dimension” (Iser 54) is created. This dimension is the complete realisation of a literary work. It is important to realise that Iser names certain prerequisites for this complete realisation, one of which is the fact that the text must, up to a certain point, resist the reader. This is done when the author leaves something out, keeping several possibilities of interpretation open, so that the reader has to use his or her imagination and creative force when going into a dialogue with the text. Iser calls these pockets of resistance “gaps” (55), and he stresses the fact that these gaps may be filled in several ways, which leads to the realisation that no single reading can be said to explore the entire potential of a text.

The origins of “Bluebeard”

The fairy tale “Bluebeard” was first written down by Charles Perrault and published in France in 1697. The plot, roughly outlined, goes as follows: A young, innocent girl marries an older, wealthy man who lives in a castle far away from the city. He tells his bride that she may wander about the place as she likes, except from one room which she is strictly forbidden to enter. Before leaving his castle for a time, the man gives her the key to the forbidden room and says that he trusts her not to use it. Despite her good intentions to keep to this rule, her curiosity gets the better of her, and she enters the room. She discovers a vault of horror, where the severed bodies of her husband’s previous wives are floating in a basin of blood. In shock, she loses the key in the basin of blood, and it leaves a stain that can not be washed off. Coming home sooner than expected, Bluebeard notices the stained key and condemns his wife to death, but gives her time to say her prayers. This leaves her with just enough time to send a message home, making her brothers able to reach the castle just in time to chop Bluebeard’s head off, and save her life. The Brothers Grimm also published two versions of “Bluebeard”; with the English titles “The Robber Bridegroom” and “Fitcher’s Bird”. The latter is the more well known, and in this story, the murderer is a wizard who disguises himself as a beggar, and places a spell upon three sisters, one at a time, compelling them to go with him. Here the telltale object is an egg, not a key, but the story progresses along the same lines as Perrault’s “Bluebeard” (Bacchilega 104-108).

Cristina Bacchilega gives an account of a number of different readings of the Bluebeard motif in her book Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies. She points out two different forms of interpretation: One way of seeing “Bluebeard” is as a cautionary tale, where women are warned against the temptation of curiosity, which will undoubtedly lead to destruction. The other way of reading it, is as a tale of initiation, where the future of the heroine fully depends on her curiosity and ability to learn and discover the answers she needs

in order to face future challenges (106-107). What we see here, are the Bluebeard motif's paradoxical qualities, where the the notion of curiosity possesses a dual quality; it can function both as the character flaw that brings about the heroine's doom, and as the feature that leads to her salvation and survival, depending on the reader's perspective. This dual quality is also embedded in the plot of the various "Bluebeard" stories when it comes to the nature of the protagonists, whom Bacchilega refers to as "double agents" (103). The point is that when Bluebeard marries his last wife, he has met his match. In some way or other, usually by her cunning, she manages to defeat him, to beat him at his own game. She is not the passive feminine heroine, but an active agent in the plot, equal to Bluebeard (111-113). This may very well be a reason why this tale is popular among women who seek to revise and rewrite fairy-tale lore, along with the fact that it begins with marriage and the horrors that follow, as opposed to the stereotypical fairy-tale ending where they live happily ever after.

"Bluebeard" is not one of the canonical fairy tales of today. According to Maria Tatar, the tale was thought to be unfit for the fragile minds of the young during the time in which the collection of tales took place. The stories were found at farmers' wives firesides as well as in the parlours of the aristocracy. "Bluebeard" was even denounced as "yellow-journalism" (Tatar 13), due to its explicit content of bloody murder and transgressive wives. What I find significant in connection with this tendency to repress "Bluebeard", is that it is by no means the only tale that displays explicit content. There are numerous stories where trolls, ogres and dragons get their heads lopped off, in other tales sweet, innocent young girls are poisoned and left for dead, in other instances people are eaten alive by animals or giants. In short, the world of fairy tales never was a safe place, so why should the tale of "Bluebeard" receive such a harsh judgment? Could it be because no matter how vigorously one would try to "sanitize" it to make it less offensive, this tale nevertheless puts the entire institution of marriage in a less flattering light? Or did the notion of the curious wife become too suggestive? The feature of

her inquisitiveness has been interpreted as sexual curiosity, leading to marital infidelity, discovered through her blood-soiled key, or egg; the blood of course representing the virginal blood every husband expected to see on his wedding night. Tatar asserts that:

Like many of our foundational cultural stories, “Bluebeard” turns on a woman’s desire for forbidden knowledge and, in its canonical French form, describes that desire as a curse. The intellectual curiosity of men may have given us fire, divided us from animals, and produced civilization, but the curiosity of women – as we know from the stories of Pandora, Eve, Psyche, and Lot’s wife, among others – has given rise to misery, evil and grief. (3)

What I wish to stress here is the notion that male and female curiosity have been dealt with in completely different terms for such a long time. It is therefore highly appropriate to be aware of the conflicting ways of interpreting “Bluebeard”, and I will touch upon the connection between the biblical Eve and Bluebeard’s wife later.

Fairy tales are thought to be universal, and their morals and plots have been heralded as eternal truths, something that will never change, because these tales were forged “once upon a time”, in a mythical past when people were closely linked to each other and nature, and everybody knew what life was all about. When regarded from a more analytical point of view, however, these “eternal truths” become rather elusive. In the words of Tatar: “‘Bluebeard’ has an extraordinary cultural elasticity” (7). This means that the tale of “Bluebeard” has survived the centuries by being able to lend its constituent parts to various, ever-changing cultural circumstances. This is not only true for “Bluebeard”, it applies to every tale that survives centuries of radical transitions within society. These surviving stories are refashioned, redefined and rewritten over the years, in order to be applied to the social climate of new historical moments. One may even call it a process of revitalization. This is also why these stories are excellent examples of applied reception theory, because a revision of a tale is a result of the reception of the author. The elasticity and adaptability of these stories are what keep them alive. The tales I am dealing with were written two centuries after the first written

version was published, and they have undergone massive changes. But they are still recognizable versions of the same story.

The first chapter will deal with Atwood's "Alien Territory", with "Bluebeard's Egg" following in chapter two. Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is the topic of chapter three, while both versions of Jackson's "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith" will be dealt with in chapter four.

Chapter 1: Margaret Atwood's "Alien Territory"

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. She is a critically acclaimed author who has received, and been shortlisted for, numerous awards, among which are The Booker Prize, the Governor General's Award, and the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Prize. Some of her most celebrated novels are The Circle Game (1966), Life Before Man (1980), Cat's Eye (1988), The Robber Bride (1993), Alias Grace (1996) and The Blind Assassin (2000). Her poetry has also received awards, especially Morning in the Burned House (1995), and her short fiction is also widely recognized, among which the most important collections are Dancing Girls (1979), Bluebeard's Egg (1983), Wilderness Tips (1991), and Good Bones (1992) (Howells 1-9). Atwood's work is well known for its exploration and questioning of stereotypes, putting a certain kind of pressure on her readers, to make them think differently about issues in life that have previously been taken for granted. Her work is also highly imaginative, sporting "fantasies which exist alongside everyday life and which absorb the neuroses of contemporary Western society" (2). As we shall see, this is an adept description of Atwood's two tales which are dealt with in this thesis.

Where other versions of "Bluebeard" are dark, dismal and dangerous, Margaret Atwood's "Alien Territory" has found its place in the gap between the horrible and the comical, between seriousness and irony. This story harbors all of these traits and combines them in surprising ways, especially when it comes to the dynamics of the relationship between men and women. "Bluebeard" was originally a tale of a murderous husband, but Atwood has managed to enrich the old plot with humor and moments of compassion as well, thus rescuing her main character from spending eternity as a slaughterer of innocent wives.

As stated in the introduction, one objective in this thesis is to examine the effect of reading these different tales with the plot of "Bluebeard" in mind. With "Alien Territory", this

effect is especially poignant, because there is no mention of neither a Bluebeard nor his murdered wives until the narrative is nearly finished. “Alien Territory” is divided into seven numbered parts, and “Bluebeard” is not brought into play until part six. It therefore follows that if one is not aware of the existence of “Bluebeard” as an intertext in “Alien Territory”, the text will be interpreted innocently of this, at least until one encounters part six. At that point, a revision of one’s ideas will be called upon, and how the second reading, with “Bluebeard” in mind, will differ from a first reading where “Bluebeard” is present right from the start, is an interesting thought experiment. The work of Hans Robert Jauss suggests that such a difference might actually exist. The reader’s horizon of expectations are always subject to change, something happens to one’s understanding of a text every time it is encountered. It is therefore probable that the expectations of a text indeed are different between a person who already has read it once without any particular intertext in mind, thereby coming to one set of conclusions, only to revise his reading when an intertext is conceived of, and the person who faces the same text, but with expectations of a particular intertext in mind.

Stranger in a strange land

The relevance of the title is established right from the outset in “Alien Territory”, through the introduction of a person who may be interpreted as the main character, and whose life story begins before he is even out of the womb. However, not being born yet does not stop him from having a few preconceived notions; he is already a stranger: “He conceives himself in alien territory” (Atwood, *Good Bones* 75). The territory referred to is his mother’s womb, and the idea of a fetus feeling estranged from the womb does not only mark this narrative as a tale of symbolism, but also establishes a main point, namely the notion of fear. At a first glance, this fear may very well be interpreted as a male fear of female bodies. “Alien Territory” is divided into seven parts, and by the time the second part begins, it becomes clear that, at least

to begin with, the main character is not one single man, but men in general, symbolised by the person encountered at the beginning.

This person's paranoid disposition is clearly demonstrated while he is still in the womb, where he interprets his mother's heartbeat as "the drums of the natives, beating, beating, louder, faster, lower, slower. Are they hostile?" (75). The ominous drums, which have frightened characters such as Daniel Defoe's Crusoe and Joseph Conrad's Marlowe, may be said to signify the potential mortal danger in everything unknown, especially when the listener is a white, exploring male. The evocation of the fear of the explorer in a faraway land and the following association of this fear with the sound of a mother's heart, might be thought of as creating contradictions. In our culture's system of references, love is connected with the heart, and a mother's love is thought to be, sometimes in an idealized way, the only form of unconditional love possible. One could say that this implies the death of all unconditional motherly love, that it simply does not exist, and that a mother might even be a danger to her progeny. It could also be an allusion to every living being's potential to die, even in the womb, and that life and health might very easily be taken away from you. And, as I will argue, it is an example of Atwood's way of utilizing irony as a means of evoking the humor which runs through the story.

Keeping in mind the intertext of "Bluebeard", the irony takes on a deeper meaning. The comic effect of the paranoia of the unborn is hugely enhanced if there is a possibility that the person in question is a symbol of the murderous Bluebeard, who does not seem to possess any fear whatsoever. Seen in the light of the main text, "Alien Territory", perhaps one could argue that Bluebeard was deeply afraid of his mother as a child, and that this is the reason why he grew up to be a serial murderer of women. Perhaps his father slew his mother, and their son's mind became thwarted into thinking of such actions as appropriate and natural as a consequence. Or, to put it in an ironic 20th century turn of phrase, perhaps he just has intimacy

issues. The possibilities of interpretation multiply quickly when the ironic twists in “Alien Territory” force the readers to revise their relationship to the story “Bluebeard”. In other words, it makes them realign their horizon of expectations with this particular reading experience.

The notion of a fetus possessing the ability to worry about hostile natives is in itself amusing, in addition to functioning as a foreshadowing effect, presenting the reader with the clue that fear, in some form or other, will prove to be a key element in this man’s life. Already as a fetus, he has alienated himself from his immediate surroundings, and from the only living being he has any knowledge of, making him worry about his personal safety even when protected by his mother’s flesh. However, the ironic aspect of the fear expressed here goes further than that. The effect becomes even more visible because Atwood calls forth associations with celebrated male writers such as Conrad and Defoe, linking their deeply rooted presence in the literary canon to her ironic account of the premature fear and paranoia of the future explorer and ruler of lands.

Moving on with the story, the man feels no less like an alien outside his mother’s body. Perceiving the cradle as a prison, with his parents as guardians, his paranoid disposition, shown in his reaction towards his mother’s heartbeat, has not subsided: “And to make it worse, they surround him with animals [. . .] each one of them stuffed and, evidently, castrated, because although he looks and looks, all they have at best is a tail. Is this the fate the aliens have in store for him, as well?” (76). This is another playful hint, this time towards psychology and various theories concerning man’s alleged fear of castration, which affects him already as an infant. No one is to be trusted – least of all the alien race known as “parents”.

To keep to the topic of psychology and male genitalia, Atwood does away with a few elements of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis in one elegant sweep:

Sigmund was wrong about the primal scene: Mom and Dad, keyhole version. That might be upsetting, true, but there's another one: Five guys standing outside, pissing into a snowbank, a river, the underbrush, pretending not to look down. Or maybe *not* looking down: gazing upward, at the stars, which gives us the origin of astronomy. (77)

Evoking Sigmund Freud is another way of hinting at the fallibility of the self-assertive male authority figure, and that in two ways: firstly, by claiming that Freud was wrong, and, secondly, by questioning his elevated status as *the* psychoanalyst by using only his first name. If psychoanalysis may be said to be another form of exploration, which I suggest it can, then Sigmund Freud is just another man seeking to invade and conquer unknown territories.

The questions concerning the unknown begin soon enough: "*Where did I come from?*" he asks [. . .] *Out of me*, the bulgy one says fondly, as if he should be pleased. *Out of where? Out of what?* He covers his ears, shutting out the untruth, the shame, the pulpy horror" (76). Atwood suggests here that man's need to explore and discover stems from an initial disbelief in and shame of his origins. The messy facts of how life begins are being denied, and the thought of flesh, of bodies and of having to co-exist not only with your own body but your mother's as well, make the boys fool themselves into thinking there is a way in which to escape:

No wonder that at the first opportunity he climbs out the window and joins a gang of other explorers, each one of them an exile, an immigrant, like himself. Together they set out for their solitary journeys. What are they searching for? Their homeland. Their true country. The place they came from, which can't possibly be here. (76-77)

These young explorers do not see the truth right in front of them, which is why setting out together on a solitary journey is not such a paradox as it may initially seem. By denying the physical link between themselves and other human beings, symbolized by their denial of the fact of birth, they after all deny themselves the mental companionship of their fellow

jailbreakers. By imagining themselves as solitary, they become solitary, even when in close proximity to others.

The danger of the body

The notion of the body is man's ultimate challenge in this story. Bodies evoke disbelief and fear, because once denied, the body becomes incomprehensible:

The thing is: men's bodies aren't dependable. Now it does, now it doesn't, and so much for the triumph of the will. A man is the puppet of his body, or vice versa. He and it make tomfools of each other: it lets him down. Or up, at the wrong moment. Just stare hard out of the schoolroom window and recite the multiplication tables, and pretend this isn't happening! (81)

By evoking many a teenage boy's worst nightmare, Atwood also evokes empathy and compassion for the man and his predicament – although in an ironic, tongue-in-cheek kind of manner.

However, like any good Bluebeard-story, there still is an element of danger in Atwood's tale. In "Alien Territory" this element does not consist only of one homicidal husband. Atwood instead uses the bigger picture, which shows us a far worse aspect of the way of mankind, that is, our tendencies to destroy one another's bodies in multiple numbers: "The history of war is a history of killed bodies" (78). Later, the reference to death becomes more specific: "Why do men want to kill the bodies of other men? Women don't want to kill the bodies of other women. By and large. As far as we know" (79). This statement is a good example of Atwood's way of creating twists in a text. She starts the paragraph on war with the gruelling realities of it, followed by the observation quoted above, which might very easily be interpreted as her putting the entire responsibility for every atrocious act in history on to the shoulders of men. But in adding the phrases "By and large. As far as we know", which act almost as disclaimers, she carefully inserts an ironic twist into the argument, thus hinting

towards the fact that women are not as innocent as they may appear. They are just more skilled at hiding the less presentable sides of themselves from the world. In the words of the unnamed first-person narrator: “Every morning I get down on my knees and thank God for not creating me a man. [. . .] A man, who can’t fake it” (82). The woman’s body is not threatening to its owner. It is stable and predictable, and keeps its owner safe in the knowledge that she can trust her body to “fake it” whenever she needs it to. The body is not an alien entity, it is understood and accepted, which makes suspicious rage towards other bodies unnecessary.

Men’s bodies are not only not dependable. They also pose a threat to each other: “What men are most afraid of is not lions, not snakes, not the dark, not women. Not any more. What men are most afraid of is the body of another man. Men’s bodies are the most dangerous things on earth” (79-80). In the previous passage of the story, Atwood gives a number of “traditional reasons” (79) for war, the last one being the desire to protect women and children from the bodies of other men. This may very well be true, but in letting the passage quoted above follow directly afterwards, Atwood creates the effect of turning her argument around, making it clear that the ones who really feel in need of protection are not women and children, but men themselves. When men’s bodies are being singled out as the most dangerous things on earth, the danger in question is the danger they pose towards each other, imagined or real. The fear stems from the ever-present denial of the body. Alienation from one’s own body leads to a lack of understanding of it, which again, in Atwood’s writing, leads to fear of other bodies, and the need to protect oneself from them by way of destruction, if necessary.

Danger revised

There is, however, another aspect of the quotation dealing with men’s fear of other men’s bodies that I would like to address, namely the sentence “Not any more”. It indicates that

men's fears have changed, somehow, over time, from what might be considered "traditional" fears – the dark, wild animals and the more psychoanalytical notion of a fear of women, into fear of each other's bodies. One might see it as a hint towards a need for revision of these old notions of fear, and a recognition of the fact that "Alien Territory" in itself is a revision of an old tale. Hans Robert Jauss' point concerning the relationship between text and writer is again brought into play, through a recognition of the fact that Atwood's reception of "Bluebeard" has changed not only her own horizon, but her revision of the tale also causes changes within her readers. Through her ironic twists and turns, Atwood takes the Bluebeard-motif a step further, past the wife-battering, violence-towards-women-feminist view, into a universe of male self-destruction due to their fear of, and lack of understanding of, themselves. This point is brought forward very clearly at the end of part six, which is a retelling of "Bluebeard". The wife of Bluebeard in "Alien Territory", upon entering the chamber of horror, finds not the bodies of his previous wives, but a dead child: "*It looks like you*, she said, not turning around, not knowing what else to say. [. . .] *It is me*, he said sadly. *Don't be afraid*" (85). The child in the vault is not a "real" child, it is a symbol of the extent to which this man has destroyed himself. The rage and bloodthirst in this story is not directed outward towards other human beings, but inwards. As the man says, she should not be afraid because she is not the one in danger per se. When they go "*Deeper*" (85) into the dark parts of his castle, or the dark parts of his mind, if you will, it will most likely not be a pleasant experience, in that it means getting to know his alienation, self-denial and subsequent self-destruction. Cristina Bacchilega sees this destruction as pertaining to both genders, because the destructive quality of the sexual politics found in "Bluebeard" is dangerous for men as well as women. She states: "Both men and women are alienated from themselves and their 'significant others'; both assume a mythic or metaphysical life within the no-body plot; both continue to mutilate themselves and to move into the other as if entering 'alien territory'" (Bacchilega 118).

The self-mutilation on the part of the woman is shown through her desire to “understand him. She also wanted to cure him. She thought she had the healing touch” (Atwood, *Good Bones* 83). Bacchilega interprets this as the woman’s willingness to suffer for him, thus mutilating herself. This is what happens when they go “*Deeper*” (85): she is being transported into his fleshless vacuum of a world.

The ladykiller

The Bluebeard of “Alien Territory” is not a killer in the usual sense of the word. When Atwood writes that “this sister was in love with him, even though she knew he was a serial killer” (83), I believe that the author is hinting towards the possibility that he might be a ladykiller, someone who seduces and later discards a considerable number of women. This is supported by the passage where the wife is rummaging through the man’s house and finds

his previous women quite easily. They were in the linen closet, neatly cut up and ironed flat and folded, stored in mothballs and lavender. Bachelors acquire such domestic skills. The women didn’t make much of an impression on her, except the one who looked like his mother. That one she took out [. . .] and slipped into the incinerator in the garden. *Maybe it was his mother*, she thought. *If so, good riddance.* (83-84)

The women stored flat in the closet are only the photographs of his former wives. Mere photos are not very frightening to a self-assertive young woman, so there is no wonder they do not make an impression on her. A mark of Atwood’s sense of humor lies in her inclusion of the mother-in-law, and in letting her picture be burnt in the incinerator. Mother-in-laws sometimes are quite frightening, so this might be taken as a word to the wise, to get rid of any mother-in-laws while you still can. The irony is also very neatly expressed here, by letting the young bride find the previous ones in the linen closet – the part of a house which, possibly next to the kitchen, is most closely associated with women and wives. Not only does it seem like the perfect place to keep former prey, to keep to the ladykiller theme, but to make the

readers think of Bluebeard, formerly an image of brutish and bloodthirsty manhood, ironing and folding his linen, turns the former image inside out. Atwood shows us the consequence of getting rid of one wife after the other, which naturally is that you have to learn to cook and clean for yourself. Everyday life catches up with everyone, even Bluebeard. This type of consequence rarely turns up in traditional tales, it is a product of a twentieth-century mindset, which again may be said to be a product of the horizons of the preceding centuries, connecting with and changing each other through an endless process of interaction.

Redemption

The last part of “Alien Territory”, number seven, does not at first glance appear to be directly connected to the previous part, the retelling of “Bluebeard”. Part six finishes with the dismal lines: “‘*Where are we going?*’ she said, because it was getting dark, and there was suddenly no floor. ‘*Deeper*’, he said” (85). Part seven continues on a seemingly completely different track, with what looks like a description of a group of apparently worthless men:

Those ones. Why do women like them? They have nothing to offer, none of the usual things. They have short attention spans, falling-apart clothes, old beat-up cars, if any. The cars break down, and they try to fix them, and don’t succeed, and give up. [. . .] They don’t put food on the table. They don’t make money. Don’t, can’t, won’t. [. . .] They offer their poverty, an empty wooden bowl; the bowl of a beggar, whose gift is to ask. (85-86)

As Bacchilega also points out, if the suffering on the part of the woman in part six is emotional, the nature of the suffering is very much economical in part seven (Bacchilega 119). It is, however, striking that the type of man described in part seven seems to be dramatically different from the Bluebeard character in part six. The Bluebeard here possesses every desirable material and economical means, but is completely cut off from his inner self, and is trapped in his self-made mechanism of destruction. Not so with the men described in

part seven. They do not possess much in the way of money, house or ambition to acquire such things, but they seem to be tangible persons, “real” people:

They have bodies, however. Their bodies are unlike the bodies of other men. Their bodies are verbalized. *Mouth, eye, hand, foot*, they say. Their bodies have weight, and move over the ground, step by step, like yours. [. . .] *Hurt*, they say, and suddenly their bodies hurt again, like real bodies. *Death*, they say, making the word sound like the backwash of a wave. Their bodies die, and waver, and turn to mist. (Atwood, *Good Bones* 86-87)

These are “real” people, with a weighted presence and the ability to feel pain, and ultimately to die. This quotation emphasises the importance of the verbalized body, suggesting that not speaking about the body is the same as not acknowledging it, thereby, symbolically speaking, having no body. And as we have seen, denying the body is, in this narrative, a guaranteed path to self-annihilation. Redemption from the fate of destruction is found in the last lines of the tale, where verbalization is emphasised even more, this time in connection with a recognition not only of one’s own body, but of other people’s bodies as well:

Because if they can say their own bodies, they could say yours also. Because they could say *skin* as if it meant something, not only to them but to you. Because one night, when the snow is falling and the moon is blotted out, they could put their empty hands, their hands filled with poverty, their beggar’s hands, on your body, and bless it, and tell you it is made of light. (88)

Bacchilega asks whether the narrator’s statement that the body is made of light is “just one more disembodied trick” (Bacchilega 119), performed by any man, but I will argue that this is not the case. I interpret this passage as a road to redemption, in which one recognizes, verbalizes and acknowledges one’s own body, and thereby one’s own very existence, as well as the body and existence of “the significant other”. This is what it takes to escape the fear of an “alien territory”, the very fear that destroys the man, or Bluebeard, himself, causing him to murder his inner self, symbolized by the dead child. This fear is also what consumes his wives, taking them “deeper”.

Chapter 2: Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg"

Due to the title, the idea of "Bluebeard" as an intertext in this narrative is inescapable. I will argue that this is a clearly calculated decision on the part of the author, in order to mislead readers into expecting to find a sinister, shady husband and a wife in some kind of distress. At the very least, one expects a marriage in trouble. What kind of trouble, though, depends on how one is inclined to interpret the Bluebeard plot prior to having read "Bluebeard's Egg". If one prefers the "old-fashioned" interpretation, in which the wife of Bluebeard is punished for her curiosity, one might perhaps read into Sally's character slightly more curiosity and other less favourable traits than is the case. If one, on the other hand, interprets the plot as a vindication of the ingeniousness and bravery of the wife, where her troubles function as an initiation, one may judge the various characters in a different light.

True blue?

"Bluebeard's Egg" takes place in a contemporary Toronto environment, where the main character is Sally, the third wife of Ed, who is a successful cardiologist. At first glance, the successful part of Ed's character is hard to discover, mainly due to Sally's habit of emphasising his stupidity:

Sally is in love with Ed because of his stupidity, his monumental and almost energetic stupidity [. . .] He's no mere blockhead; you'd have to be working at it to be that stupid. [. . .] On bad days though, she sees his stupidity as wilfulness, a stubborn determination to shut things out. His obtuseness is a wall, within which he can go about his business. (Atwood, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 161)

Ed's inner life, his mind and thoughts, are his alone, and because we already have been coaxed into looking for a Bluebeard in this narrative, it is tempting to take Sally's idea of him trying consciously to appear stupid at face value, in which case his private thoughts might be

interpreted as a Bluebeard's secret chamber. There are, however, other clues in the beginning of the narrative that point to the possibility that Ed is nothing more than an ordinarily introvert person. He is described as "puttering around the rock garden now [. . .] He likes doing things like that, puttering, humming to himself" (160). Puttering about the garden brings forth associations to old-age pensioners rather than a devious, possibly violent murderer of a husband.

Another important aspect to a Bluebeard figure would be a constant awareness of women. Sally instead pictures Ed in high school as someone completely in the dark when around women: "Girls would have had crushes on him, he would have been unconscious of it; things like that don't change" (160). Evidently, this is true, because as an adult, Ed has not become more aware of women's intentions: "Women corner him on sofas, trap him in bay-windows at cocktail parties, mutter to him in confidential voices at dinner parties" (164). Sally even admits to being the one who "*hunt[ed] him down*" (161), thus herself playing the active part in the commencement of their relationship. All these examples do indeed not suggest any likeness between Ed and Bluebeard whatsoever, since the former is simply introvert and seemingly completely unaware of the fact that women find him attractive.

Sally, on the other hand, is very much aware of other women's intentions, she recognizes many of the tricks they use to "corner him" as the very tricks she herself used to capture his interest. The fact that she is his third wife fits very neatly in with the Bluebeard plot, as well as being a hint towards the possibility that Ed gets tired of a spouse after a while. Furthermore, we are told that Ed refuses to discuss his previous marriages with Sally, who is desperate to find out whether he knows what went wrong, so that she can prevent the same thing from happening to them. If one is inclined to accept Ed as Bluebeard, his reluctance towards discussing his previous relationships may, on one hand, be interpreted as some sort of

deep, dark secret. On the other hand, it may simply prove that he considers these marriages to be over and done with, and therefore not an interesting topic for discussion.

Intertextuality

In addition to “Bluebeard”, there are several other examples of intertextuality in “Bluebeard’s Egg”. Beginning with fairy tales, Sally’s biggest fear is to be the false bride. The false and the true bride is an element from the Grimm Brothers’ tale with the English title “The Goose-Girl”, in which a princess is to be married to a prince, but is forced by her maid to change places with her during their journey to the prince’s court. The true bride is set to work as a goose-girl, while the false one assumes the role of princess. In the end, their true identities are revealed, and the false bride is punished in just the same manner as Atwood has Sally describe: “she will be put into a barrel stuck full of nails and rolled downhill” (162). These fears are directly connected with Ed’s previous marriages, as the two former wives obviously were “false” ones.

Sally, in connection with her preoccupation with Ed’s alleged stupidity, describes him as “a child of luck, a third son who, armed with nothing but a certain feeble-minded amiability, manages to make it through the forest with all its witches and traps and pitfalls and end up with the princess, who is Sally, of course. It helps that he’s handsome” (161). This is well-known fairy-tale material, and it might not be from one tale in particular. The third son, and forests with monsters and traps in them which have to be overcome before the reward in the shape of a princess is granted him, are all elements that can be found in several tales. The function of references such as these is to direct the attention of the reader towards reading “Bluebeard’s Egg” as another fairy tale – and most noticeably “Bluebeard”.

Sally encounters two classic literary works in her evening class “Forms of Narrative Fiction”, namely Homer’s “The Odyssey” and Joyce’s “Ulysses”. W. J. Keith makes a point

in including these works in the article “Interpreting and Misinterpreting ‘Bluebeard’s Egg’”. Keith also picks up on references in the text to A. A. Milne’s “Winnie the Pooh”, and Agatha Christie’s detective fiction (Keith 252). Sally is sometimes reminded of Winnie the Pooh when looking at Ed: “*My darling Edward, she thinks. Edward Bear, of little brain. How I love you. At times like this she feels very protective of him*” (Atwood, *Don’t Bet on the Prince* 160). Linked with a children’s book, Ed’s alleged stupidity and innocent nature are again emphasised, while Sally is portrayed as more or less his guardian. He is the one trapped by other women, he is the one happy to putter about for himself, and she is the one feeling protective of him. In order really to drive the message home, Atwood has Sally describe how Sally’s mind works after having read too much of Agatha Christie’s detective fiction:

[T]he kind in which the clever and witty heroine passes over the equally clever and witty first-lead male, who’s helped solve the crime, in order to marry the second-lead male, the stupid one, the one who would have been arrested and condemned and executed if it hadn’t been for her cleverness. (162)

Again, Sally is, at least in her own view, the active, witty one playing the female lead role, and Ed is the blundering innocent half-wit who needs to be protected from himself. Keith also aptly points out that Ed is here likened to someone suspected of a crime he has not committed.

So far, the only elements in this narrative that suggest foul play on Ed’s part are the cleverly inserted references to fairy tales, which lead us to expect that something may be hidden in the tale.

Sally’s suspicions

Throughout the tale, Ed remains suspiciously inert, his character never evolves into anything even resembling a danger – on any level. Sally, on the other hand, admits to being the one who hunted Ed down, and her reaction towards other women who try to capture his interest at parties, is not consistent with the typical victim:

Some of these women have been within inches of getting Ed to put his head down on their chests, right there in Sally's living room. Watching all this out of the corners of her eyes while serving the liqueurs, Sally feels the Aztec rise within her. *Trouble with your heart? Get it removed*, she thinks. *Then you'll have no more problems* (165).

The Aztec people, notorious for their human sacrificial practices and general level of bloodthirst, is not what one associates with someone living under the thumb of a traditional Bluebeard. The thought of avoiding trouble by having one's heart removed, stems from Sally's own fears of not being good enough for Ed, her fears that one day he will actually be fascinated by one of these women.

There is, however, one episode in the text that suggests the existence of a Bluebeard. Sally recalls the time when Ed and his fellow heart surgeons received some new, fancy equipment at the hospital, a machine which was far superior of the electrocardiogram and could show pictures of the beating heart in black and white. Ed was unusually excited about this new machine, and Sally, trying to keep up with what interested Ed, decided to come by the hospital and take a look at it:

It was in a cramped, darkened room with an examining table in it. [. . .] [Ed] came over to her and tore a hole in the paper gown, above her left breast. Then he started running a probe over her skin. [. . .] 'That's it?' said Sally dubiously. Her heart looked so insubstantial, like a bag of gelatin, something that would melt, fade, disintegrate, if you squeezed it even a little. [. . .] [Ed] seemed so distant, absorbed in his machine, taking the measure of her heart, which was beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control. (168-169)

In a way, her heart really is under Ed's control, due to her fear of losing him. This fear is also what makes her heart look, and subsequently feel, so fragile. On the screen it really looks like it will break if Ed leaves her. Her heart is exposed, and clearly not only the physical, beating heart, but also her emotions, symbolised by the heart. Her fragile emotions are exposed to herself, in a way that makes her see clearly how much influence Ed really has on her life.

The room in which the machine is kept also frightens Sally: [T]his whole room was sexual in a way she didn't quite understand; it was clearly a dangerous place. It was like a massage parlour, only for women. Put a batch of women in there with Ed and they would never want to come out" (170). This certainly could be interpreted as a Bluebeard's secret chamber, if it were not for Sally's deeply rooted fears of being left like the two former wives. The room is only dangerous in her own mind, where she pictures Ed being seduced by unknown women every day.

The biggest threat to Sally's marital bliss may, however, turn out to be her best friend, Marylynn. Marylynn is divorced, attractive and a successful businesswoman. She runs her own interior-design firm, and has decorated parts of Sally and Ed's house, including the closets in their bedroom. The symbolic quality of letting another woman make decisions about the bedroom one shares with one's husband is quite conspicuous, and even more so when this woman is a friend and a regular visitor. It would certainly suggest that Sally ought to be careful – if the potential threat, either from Ed or from Marylynn, actually exists. Sally gets more self-conscious when Marylynn is around: "Whenever Marylynn is coming to dinner [. . .] Sally takes especial care with her clothes and make-up. Marylynn, she knows, is her real audience for such things, since no changes she effects in herself seem to affect Ed one way or the other, or even to register with him" (163). One reason for Sally to make Marylynn notice her, is that it may of course be nice to have someone registering and commenting on the efforts one has made to look good. Such behaviour is very typical of female friendships, and it becomes especially important if one's husband does not seem to notice. Another reason for taking so much care around Marylynn, would be the faint feeling of competitiveness and envy Sally has towards her friend: "[Marylynn] is in soft grey, which makes her hair look silver, and Sally feels once again how banal it is to have ordinary dark hair like her own, however well-cut, however shiny. It's the confidence she envies, the negligence. Marylynn

doesn't seem to be trying at all, ever" (179). Sally, who "feels the Aztec rise within her" at the thought of women making passes at Ed, also feels somewhat uncomfortable around her stylish and attractive best friend.

What is important to notice when dealing with "the Aztec" within Sally, however, is that she displays a violent side to her character which may be said to mirror the violence one would expect to find in a Bluebeard figure. According to Bacchilega, doubling is a crucial feature to be aware of when dealing with the Bluebeard motif (Bacchilega 111-112). I have claimed that Sally is looking for a Bluebeard who does not exist in her life, and if she is the one who harbors such violent traits in this narrative, then Ed comes across as an unlikely candidate for Bluebeard.

Ed and Marylynn?

Sally and Marylynn enjoys talking about how stupid Ed is, something which they are doing while Sally is preparing the food for a dinner party she is giving later that night, where Ed's colleagues and Marylynn will be present. Sally refers to something Ed has said about "femininists [sic]" (Atwood, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 179), and Marylynn laughs and says:

'You should get him a seeing-eye dog, [. . .] to bark at women.' 'Why?' says Sally, still laughing but alert now, the cold beginning at the ends of her fingers. Maybe Marylynn knows something she doesn't; maybe the house is beginning to crumble, after all. 'Because he can't see them coming,' says Marylynn. 'That's what you're always telling me.' (180)

As we see here, Sally gets paranoid at any mention of the words "Ed" and "women" in the same sentence. Her unease with Marylynn becomes stronger as well, now that she has had the thought that Marylynn might know something Sally does not. This may explain Sally's reaction to the rest of their conversation: "'I bet [Ed] thinks I'm a feminist [sic],' says Marylynn. 'You?' says Sally. 'Never.' She would like to add that Ed has given no indication

of thinking anything at all about Marylynn, but she doesn't. She doesn't want to take the risk of hurting her feelings" (180). I will argue that Sally is worried about her own feelings here, not Marylynn's. It is also a hint towards Sally's need to assert herself, to convince herself that she is not any less of a woman than her friend. The desire to tell Marylynn that Ed does not think about her has nothing to do with her friend's feelings, that is just the excuse Sally uses to herself. What is really going on is that the previously mentioned Aztec within Sally has reared his head again and wants to tell Marylynn to back off from her husband.

The incident which truly sets Sally's already unsteady nerves on end, takes place at the dinner party with Ed's colleagues and Marylynn. Afraid that Marylynn will be too attentive to one of the married colleagues, Sally persuades her to show Ed the new table Marylynn has helped Sally find. After a while Sally goes to find them:

Ed is standing too close to [Marylynn], and as Sally comes up behind them she sees his left arm, held close to his side, the back of it pressed against Marylynn, her shimmering upper thigh, her ass to be exact. Marylynn does not move away. It's a split second, and then Ed sees Sally and the hand is gone; there it is, on top of the desk, reaching for a liqueur glass. 'Marylynn needs more Tia Maria,' he says. 'I just told her that people who drink a little now and again live longer.' His voice is even, his face is as level as ever, a flat plain with no signposts. (180-181)

The question here is whether Ed is extremely skilled in deceiving Sally, when he manages to keep perfectly calm and untroubled in such a situation, or whether the entire situation really is just an accident, or something that has happened only in Sally's mind. Soon Sally starts wondering if "she really saw what she thought she saw" (181). Both Ed and Marylynn behave as normal afterwards, there is no evidence that anything at all has happened between them.

Sally's transposition

Sally's imaginative skills are crucial features of "Bluebeard's Egg". Keith points out her tendencies towards thinking of her relationship with Ed in literary terms, likening him with

Winnie the Pooh and a character from an Agatha Christie murder mystery (Keith 252).

Thinking of herself as a false or a true bride gives us another connection with the realm of fairy tales, as well as when she pictures Ed as someone miraculously surviving the perils of the enchanted forest to find Sally, his fairy-tale princess. Seeing that her mind already is accustomed to using literary references, it is no wonder that she performs well in her current evening course, “Forms of Narrative Fiction”. During the course, they have been given various tasks, such as writing a short murder mystery, and to choose spots around Toronto as the ports of call in The Odyssey. Now they have been given the task of writing a transposition of a fairy tale, set in a contemporary environment. The teacher reads them the story “Fitcher’s Bird”, a version of “Bluebeard”. This gives us a motivation for the title “Bluebeard’s Egg”, as well as the idea that this transposition is what leads Sally into forcing the Bluebeard plot onto Ed and their life together. Keith reasonably claims that the fact that Sally and her classmates have to choose a point of view for their transposition is the key element in “Bluebeard’s Egg”, because it leads to the realisation that everything we have been told has come from Sally’s point of view: “Atwood is employing limited third-person narration. An authorial voice is invoked, but everything is seen from Sally’s viewpoint and consciousness” (252).

When pondering over her essay, Sally tries out, and discards, different possibilities of how to cast her version. It is tempting to cast herself in the role of heroine, but she quickly discards the thought, feeling it would be too obvious. Christina Bacchilega sees this as an example of the doubling that takes place in the Bluebeard plot: “While identifying with ‘the cunning heroine’ [. . .] by posing as trickster, Sally also self-consciously doubles as the Bluebeard figure, the wizard. After all, she hunted Ed down [. . .] ; she is the one objectifying her husband” (Bacchilega 114). Sally even admits to the objectification, when she pictures him:

in terms of the calendar art from the service-station washrooms of her childhood, dredging up images of a boy with curly golden hair, his arms thrown around the neck of an Irish setter [. . .] Ed is a real person, with a lot more to him than these simplistic renditions allow for; which sometimes worries her. (Atwood, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 161)

When trying to make Ed fit in with the characters in her transposition, she sees him as yet another object, the egg: “Ed Egg, blank and pristine and lovely” (178). Sally decides to write her transposition from the point of view of the egg, but we never get to read her version, because Sally has to get ready for the dinner party that evening. This is the very party where her suspicions towards Ed and Marylynn surface, and “Bluebeard’s Egg” leaves off with Sally trying to sleep that night.

If one is willing to accept the notion that Sally is superimposing the Bluebeard plot onto her life, however, one might actually claim that we have read her transposition already, because she has already worked it out subconsciously. From such a perspective, “Bluebeard’s Egg” becomes a version of “Bluebeard” in the sense that it is a story about a woman who, among other things, is writing a modern-day version of “Bluebeard”. The woman in question is highly inventive and has a vivid imagination, which has led her to force the Bluebeard motif onto her own life.

Bacchilega interprets Ed not as a Bluebeard figure as such, but as a character who evolves into being more sinister and devious at the end of the narrative. She claims that Sally in the end has to recognize that she has been deceived by Ed, and that he really did place his hand, intentionally, on Marylynn’s behind. She states that the room at the hospital where the heart machine is kept, is his “Bluebeard’s chamber”, “the room where she imagined him healing and restoring life can also be a place for betraying and ‘killing’ women – herself included” (Bacchilega 115). In this particular instance, I do not agree with Bacchilega. As I have shown, Sally has already acknowledged the danger present in the room with the heart machine, she has thought of it as “clearly a dangerous place” (Atwood, *Don't Bet on the*

Prince 170) right from the start. I have noted that the danger she is sensing is a figment of her own mind, a result of her fear of being left behind.

To further develop, and even help query my argument that Atwood is using Sally's point of view to coax us into interpreting Ed as a Bluebeard, I would like to draw the attention towards a place in the text in which the ambiguity that is present throughout the tale takes on a distinct shape:

Right now the kids are receding, fading like old ink; Ed on the contrary looms larger and larger, the outlines around him darkening. He's constantly developing, like a Polaroid print, new colours emerging, but the result remains the same: Ed is a surface, one she has trouble getting beneath. 'Explore your inner world,' said Sally's instructor in *Forms of Narrative Fiction* [. . .] [Sally] is fed up with her inner world; she doesn't need to explore it. In her inner world is Ed, like a doll within a Russian wooden doll, and in Ed is Ed's inner world, which she can't get at. (173)

One could take the statement that "Ed is developing" at face value, and interpret it as a hint that his character within the narrative is developing into something more devious. The problem with such an argument is, however, that his character has been closed off and hard to reach since the beginning; there is really little evidence that he evolves into anything through the story.

Keeping in mind Keith's assertion that everything we are told in this narrative is from Sally's point of view, I will argue that what is looming and developing in front of her is not a dawning understanding of Ed, but her fear of losing him. This fear is triggered by the fact that she does not have any means of gaining access to his inner world, which is far more frightening to her than what may actually be on his mind. What one does not see, or does not know, enables one to imagine the most horrific of possibilities, and in Sally's case this would be Ed's secret desire to leave her. I choose to read this as an echo of early interpretations of Bluebeard, where the curious wife gets her just desserts. Sally's troubles originate in what she does not know about her husband, but are these troubles brought out as a reproof of Sally's

desire to know? As analysed by Maria Tatar, several critics have interpreted Bluebeard's castle as a metaphor for his psyche, and the secret, innermost chamber in the castle as the symbol of his darkest, deepest personal traits (Tatar 50-53). Undoubtedly this sounds a lot like Ed who keeps his personality locked away, if it were not for one slight detail. Has he given Sally a key, or anything that may be interpreted as such? A keyhole desk is featured in the tale, but it was brought to the house by Sally herself, and may therefore be said to symbolise her desire for a "key" to "unlock" her husband. I propose that he has not provided any sort of key, and that every ambiguity as to his "true identity" is a result of Sally's knack for over-analysing.

Sally's sense of security within the marriage is running low, even prior to her suspicions concerning Ed's hand on Marylynn's behind. Sally pictures Ed's inner world as a forest where he wanders about looking after plants and animals, with an angel dropping by from time to time bringing him food: "[B]ut the angel is getting tired of being an angel. Now Sally begins thinking about the angel: why are its wings frayed and dingy grey around the edges, why is it looking so withered and frantic? This is where all Sally's attempts to explore Ed's inner world end up" (Atwood, *Don't Bet on the Prince* 173). She knows she is far too preoccupied with Ed than is good for her, which she admits is the real reason for her evening courses. She needs something else to think about.

But even when she is trying to think about something else, Sally still makes Ed fit into her transposition of "Bluebeard". I choose to interpret her thoughts about Ed in this setting as "true", meaning that she is, for once, describing Ed as he really is: "Ed certainly isn't the wizard; he's nowhere near sinister enough. If Ed were the wizard, the room would contain a forest, some ailing plants and feeble squirrels, and Ed himself, fixing them up" (177-178). She describes Ed as someone who is far from being a Bluebeard or wizard, which I believe is absolutely right. If one entertains the opposite notion, that Ed is more devious than I am

giving him credit for, one is forced to take account of the fact that Sally for a moment considers leaving the secret chamber empty in her own transposition. She abandons the idea, however, because that “would leave her with the problem of why the wizard would have a forbidden room in which he kept nothing” (177). Sally does not see that the secret chamber in her own tale indeed *is* empty, because there is no Bluebeard, or wizard, in her life. She fears that something is wrong, which makes her desperate to find a villain, someone to blame, and following her tendencies to look for explanations in literature, it is no wonder that she has turned to old fairy-tale stereotypes in order to succeed in this search. I propose that there in fact are no external villains or Bluebeards here, the only dangerous character in Bluebeard’s Egg is Sally herself, who does not see that her own fears of being inferior, of not being good enough, are what causes her uneasiness. She is afraid of suffering the same fate as Ed’s previous wives, which is divorce rather than death.

Sally has even refrained from stressing the issue of having a baby with Ed, even though she has been hoping for a child of her own since they married. She thinks that Ed has had enough with children, and almost as an afterthought, she thinks to herself: “Anyway, the other two wives had babies, and look what happened to them” (171). Tatar, in performing an analysis of a German “Bluebeard” version, called “Blaubarts Schatten” (Bluebeard’s Shadow) (1991), asserts that the ancient German tale of Cunmar the Accursed is one of the folk tales which may have inspired the more famous “Bluebeard”. Cunmar was thought to murder his wives when they became pregnant, and to the main character of “Blaubarts Schatten”, “the bloody chamber represents Bluebeard’s dread of maternity [. . .] Ultimately Bluebeard’s need to destroy his wives is driven by the desire to eliminate the children who threaten his authority, autonomy, and dominion” (Tatar 129). In “Bluebeard’s Egg”, Ed’s two children from his previous marriages have both left for university, and have thereby been “removed” from their father’s life. Sally seems to have drawn much the same conclusion as the main

character in “Blaubart’s Schatten”, in that she thinks that Ed will push her away if she lets her maternal instincts manifest themselves. But these are Sally’s ideas exclusively, nothing is being revealed as to Ed’s feelings towards such a situation. Sally simply states that “Ed wasn’t around much for the kids” (Atwood, *Don’t Bet on the Prince* 172), which of course is regrettable, but it does not prove that he does not love them, nor that he does not want to have another. It is hardly unusual for parents who work to feel that he or she has not been around the kids as much as they would have liked.

The egg

Finally, we are left with the issue of the egg. Sally has seen Ed as an egg, closed off, an immaculate surface, but the egg she sees half asleep at the end of the narrative is far more than a slick surface:

But now she’s seeing the egg, which is not small and cold and white and inert but larger than a real egg and golden pink [. . .] glowing softly as though there’s something red and hot inside it. It’s almost pulsing; Sally is afraid of it. [. . .] This is something the story left out, Sally thinks: the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it? (182)

In the words of Tatar, the presence of the egg “at the end of the narrative signals the triumph of birth and beginnings over endings and death” (Tatar 113). Seen in connection with Bluebeard’s alleged dread of maternity, this ending certainly seems to re-establish life in the face of death, a symbol of fertility about to burst. Tatar also suggests that the egg, when hatched, will be smeared with blood, like the egg in “Fitcher’s Bird”, and that when this happens, Sally will gain access to Ed’s secret chamber and learn the truth about him.

The element of rebirth is central also to Bacchilega’s argument, although she emphasises the notion that it may mean rebirth for Ed as well (Bacchilega 115). Sally has

been forced to stop objectifying him, and now he may evolve into a “real” person in Sally’s eyes. She has seen him as an egg, now “Ed Egg” is ready to hatch.

In connection with the glowing, pulsating egg, Sally sees “her own heart, in black and white, beating with that insubstantial moth-like flutter, a ghostly heart, torn out of her and floating in space, an animated valentine with no colour” (Atwood, *Don’t Bet on the Prince* 182). She is seeing it just as it appeared on the screen of Ed’s fancy new heart machine, and what is striking about this image is that her heart, on the one hand, is described as cold, ghostly, in black and white, almost as one would describe an egg. The egg, on the other hand, resembles a warm, beating heart. Mirroring each other in this way, the heart and the egg become inextricably linked, which also leaves us with several possibilities of interpretation. That Sally sees her heart as it is shown on Ed’s screen, might be taken as a hint towards his power over her heart. He can fix it, both literally, being a heart surgeon, and symbolically, by letting her in on how his world works and what her place is in it. Of course, this also poses a risk, because he might just as easily break her heart, if he turns out to be the treacherous villain towards which the ambiguities in this narrative point. The egg might even be Sally’s own heart. Her heart is definitely a treacherous element in this tale, it is what is responsible for her inner fears of inadequacy compared to other women. Or is this really all about Ed’s heart, which is about to open up to her, and reveal itself?

Chapter 3: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"

Angela Carter was born in England in 1940, and died in 1992. She is acknowledged as one of the most important British postmodern authors, and her work is widely studied. In addition to her novels and short story collections, Carter wrote children's stories, poetry, radio plays, as well as film scripts. She also translated several books, among which are the first and second Virago Book of Fairy Tales. Her writing is renowned for its "forceful attack on the gendered constructions of sexual identity, [. . .] using fantasy to assert the claims of reason" (Childs 103). Some of her most famous work include the novels Shadow Dance (1966), The Magic Toyshop (1967), Heroes and Villains (1969), The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffmann (1972), The Sadeian Woman (1979), Nights at the Circus (1984) and Wise Children (1991). Her short fiction includes the collections Fireworks (1974) and The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (1979) (100-105).

The ruby choker of irony

"The Bloody Chamber" is the only tale under discussion that is not set in a contemporary environment. It looks like a traditional fairy tale, which enhances the symbolic qualities of the story. Set in France in the early 20th century, "The Bloody Chamber" teems with hints of danger, blood, murder, and dismal fates right from the onset. One might even go so far as to say that Carter is overwhelming the readers with signs pointing to the trials of the main character. It starts with the engagement ring, set with an enormous fire opal, which makes the bride's old nurse exclaim: "[O]pals are bad luck" (Carter 9), and it moves on to the grotesque wedding gift: "A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat" (11). The way in which the bride interprets the gaze of her fiancé upon her, is enough to make anybody shiver: "I saw him watching me [. . .] with the assessing eye of a

connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab” (11).

The images of slaughter are numerous, and even the title of the tale, “The Bloody Chamber”, is more than enough to suggest the possible fate of the narrator. It renders all other allusions towards violent death unnecessary – that is, if the point of all these hints really is to make the readers guess what kind of story this is, which I am arguing is not the case. If the fact that the story is being told in retrospect by the main character herself is not enough to make readers understand that she does not die, I expect that a great deal of readers already are familiar with the tale of Bluebeard, thus being well aware of events to come. These exaggerations are, more importantly, tools to create two different effects: One is to become “blinded” by the lavish and intricate style of writing, losing oneself in succulent details, and the other is to recognise the importance of the symbolism in the text. D.C. Muecke describes this effect in his writing on irony in literature, when saying that “the work has become a spectacle to observe with detached amusement as well as a story to be absorbed by” (Muecke 78). This “detached amusement” is precisely the frame of mind that allows a reader to start looking for clues in the work in question. In “The Bloody Chamber”, such clues create an ironic effect concerning our heroine’s fate, an effect which is emphasised when we are presented with the story behind the ruby choker. This particular piece of jewellery was the Count’s grandmother’s version of a fashion of

the aristos who’d escaped the guillotine [and who] had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance! (Carter 11)

The ruby choker is an ironic symbol of escaping death, which is now in the possession of our heroine, like some sort of magic talisman, protecting her. This is in itself ironic, as it is given to her by the man who eventually will try to kill her.

In addition to being a proof of survival, the ruby choker also signifies a change in this young girl's personality and sense of self. When she sees how it makes her appear in the mirror, the narrator notes:

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. (11)

The question is: Where does the corruption lie? She is a poor girl, so corruption might mean a willingness to accept the lifestyle of the rich. Symbolically speaking, it may also be an allusion to the physical pleasure of married life, the young innocent girl's change into a sexual being. There is a clear sense of a loss of innocence or perhaps rather of naivety, whether it be sexual or economical. The notion of corruption may be connected with the notion of growing up, and of developing an awareness that two of the crucial factors of adult life are a knowledge of economy as well as of sexuality. To me, it seems that the idea of corruption here works as an ironic sideways glance towards the mundane side of life, coupled with a sense of humour. That something as exotic and precious as a ruby choker can represent an initiation into the banalities of adult life, is an amusing paradox, but it is, furthermore, a paradox which anchors the tale in our contemporary society.

Masks and mirrors

Throughout the tale, the sense of irony is enhanced by the use of an imagery of mirrors, masks and tricks. The face of the Count, the Bluebeard, is described as a mask: "[E]xperience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth, like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been

eroded by successive tides. And sometimes that face [. . .] seemed to me like a mask” (8-9). The Count does indeed mask his true intentions about this marriage from his bride, but the concept of masks is important on a symbolic level as well. A mask represents some sort of deception, as one also might say that the surface level of “The Bloody Chamber” does. An important incident in the couple’s sexual relations makes the bride wonder if she has seen “the real man, whose face I had glimpsed in the storm of orgasm” (26). She is desperately seeking for what she believes must be his true self, which is why she latches on to the very first hint she gets. I will argue that she is wrong, that she has not seen anything “real” during their marital exercises. In my opinion, sex does not reveal the Count’s true self in this tale. As I have established, the readers know that he will try to kill her, that the psycho serial murderer is in fact this man’s true self, and such knowledge is not revealed in a split second of orgasm. A distorted face and a few profanities uttered in the heat of the moment, so to speak, do not suggest or reveal a psycho serial killer, not even to a desperate bride. Indeed, she can not in fact have seen anything of real importance, because shortly after her musings on the subject, she proceeds to the forbidden room, clearly devoid of any real suspicion. The realisation that the moment of orgasm does not reveal anything in a tale such as this, where sexuality in varying shapes is alluded to several times per page, in a text written by an author well known for her preoccupations with sexual politics, may indeed seem like a paradox. I intend to take a closer look at the various gender relations in this narrative later, and I will clarify and expand on the notion that the lack of sexual significance in this instance may not be such a paradox after all.

The joke is not only on the bride, but on the reader as well, if one is prepared to take every “revelation” in this tale at face value. As a reader, one might very well become nearly as desperate as this bride, not because of not being able to see the Count’s true self as such, but in seeing something that might be interpreted as the true self of the tale, in a manner of

speaking. The mask of “The Bloody Chamber”, as is also the case with the mask of the Count, is not easily penetrated. By showing us that the topic of sex does not necessarily reveal much, to the main character or to the reader, Carter suggests the possibility of several layers of interpretations.

As the newlyweds are about to arrive at the Count’s castle, we are given further clues to his mask-like qualities, as well as a few more hints at death and misery. The narrator clearly remembers “his eyes, dark and motionless as those eyes the ancient Egyptians painted upon their sarcophagi, fixed upon me”(12). Carter connects the Count’s character with allusions to funerals throughout the story.

The couple’s bedroom is overflowing with odorous funereal lilies, another symbol of death, as well as a vast collection of mirrors. The symbol of the mirror is widely used throughout the tale, giving rise to several possibilities for interpretation. The incident where our main character sees herself in the mirror wearing the ruby choker, when one might say that her adult life, her future and what it may entail, is reflected back to her, has already been noted. Kathleen E. B. Manley, in her essay “The Woman in Process”, sees the extensive use of mirrors in “The Bloody Chamber” as a symbol of a young woman’s “journey toward establishing herself as a subject; this journey involves consciously seeing herself as others (and particularly the Marquis) see her” (Manley 73). Furthermore, Manley claims that the main character’s quest for subjectivity is a way in which the young girl can find and shape her own story, instead of simply adopting the one which the world around her, and particularly the Marquis, here referred to as the Count, is trying to impose upon her.

The next significant place where mirrors are encountered, is in the couple’s bedroom. Several critics have commented upon the scene where the “formal disrobing of the bride” (Carter 15) takes place. Mary Kaiser, who sees the entire book The Bloody Chamber as a project of “portray[ing] sexuality as a culturally relative phenomenon” (Kaiser 30-), sees this

particular scene, as well as others similar to it, as examples of the view of women during a turbulent time period, where, on one hand, women's suffrage movements were stirring, while there, on the other hand, existed a sort of sub-conscious desire for victimization of and vulnerability in women. She sees the Count as representative of this victimization mode, and even draws parallels to Jack The Ripper. To Kaiser, "The Bloody Chamber" becomes "a symbolist version of the battle of the sexes" (30-). Her notion of "battle" is strengthened by the figure of the bride's mother, depicted as "woman-as-avenger on a grand scale" (30-), seen as a symbol of the forces working for the empowerment of women at the turn of the century.

Doubling and dichotomies

The notion of opposing forces within the tale is noteworthy not only in a socio-historical context, as exposing the struggle for women's empowerment, but on a symbolic level as well. These forces represent a strong dualism, a feature highly present in "The Bloody Chamber". I interpret the numerous mirrors scattered throughout the story as symbols of a certain dualism, extending their reflective properties beyond mere duplication of whoever looks at him- or herself in them. As has been noted by a number of critics, the inherent structure of the tale of Bluebeard consists of an acute awareness of doubling and dualism. In the traditional Bluebeard story, the last bride in the end outwits the protagonist and beats him at his own game, thus becoming his match, or, in other words, his double (Bacchilega 111-113). The dichotomies are fuelled by the stark contrasts between every character, and none of these is more strongly emphasised than the contrast between the Count and his bride. Beyond the obvious man-woman dichotomy, we find that these two are each other's exact opposite in every instance: rich-poor, old-young, adult-child, corruption-innocence, evil-good, death-life, active-passive.

The construction of clear dichotomies does not, however, stop there. Stark contrasts pertain to every character, even the Count's previous wives. They are representative of his highly diversified taste in women; there is one poorly educated barmaid, an operasinger, and a Romanian countess by the name of Carmilla, and the latter clearly brings forth associations to gothic vampire tales such as Bram Stoker's "Dracula", and, of course, Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla". One could argue that these women are not protagonists in the active sense of the word, but their presence, lifeless or not, is still very much a feature of both the castle and the tale itself, and therefore significant. These women, as well as the last bride and, to a certain extent, her mother, are symbols of the objectification of women. The Count has married and killed an array of women, all of whom display characteristics of particular types of women. They were part of his collection in life, due to their personal uniqueness, and are still a part of the collection in death, albeit arranged differently in his chamber of horrors:

The opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen [and] on her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers. [. . .] Beyond the catafalque, in the middle of the shadows, a white, nacreous glimmer; [a] skull was strung up by a system of unseen cords, so that it appeared to hang, disembodied, in the still, heavy air, and it had been crowned with a wreath of white roses, and a veil of lace, the final image of his bride. (Carter 28-29)

The Romanian countess, "who might have thought her blood would survive his depredations" (29), is found inside the Iron Maiden, "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" (29). These women are on display, in a room with space for more victims. This kind of display of women as objects, as trinkets in a sadist's collection, may very likely be a reason why some critics accuse Carter of reinforcing old dominant male patterns of writing.

The religious aspect

There are, however, reasons to refute critics who seem to believe that Carter's writing is some sort of macho-support in disguise. In her essay on liminality in "The Bloody Chamber", Cheryl Renfroe makes a solid assertion in juxtaposing the plot of Bluebeard with the Biblical notion of original sin. Renfroe, who credits several other critics for contributing to this point, emphasises the likeness between Eve, who succumbs to the temptation of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and the bride of Bluebeard, who succumbs to the temptation of the key. The resemblance between the mode of interpretation of Bluebeard that condemns the bride for being curious and disobeying her husband, and the male-dominated Christian church's traditional condemnation of women on account of the disobedience of Eve, is so striking that it may be hard to believe it a mere coincidence. In the tale of Bluebeard, the notion of curiosity and subsequent disobedience carries two different interpretations. One is that Bluebeard's bride dooms herself by disregarding her husband's orders. The other is that her disobedience is the path that leads to knowledge and salvation from being killed. When this is applied to the Biblical counterpart, "the story of Eve is still widely held to be the story of the end of paradise, and not the beginning of human ability and advancement through the trial and error of free will" (Renfroe 88). To the traditional church, the possibility of laying the blame on a woman may have been rather comfortable. In Christian belief, God is omniscient, the sole entity in all of creation that knows everything that has been, is, and will be. Some may therefore think that he knew exactly what would happen that day in the garden of Eden.

According to Renfroe, the Count in Carter's tale bears a strong resemblance to the master of Eden in Genesis when it comes to the question of omniscience. She argues that just as God knew what Eve would do faced with the apple, the Count knew what his bride would do with the key. To support this claim, Renfroe quotes a passage from "The Bloody Chamber", a conversation between the bride and the blind piano tuner:

‘Who can say what I deserve or no?’ I said. ‘I’ve done nothing; but that may be sufficient reason for condemning me.’ ‘You disobeyed him,’ he said. ‘That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.’ ‘I only did what he knew I would.’ ‘Like Eve,’ he said. (Carter 37-38)

In response to this dialogue, Renfroe argues that:

In this identification with Eve and in the subtle acknowledgment that the patriarchal God, not woman, is acting as the malignant force, Carter’s attempt at social change through the liminality of the literary fairy tale is most potently at work. (Renfroe 89)

Likening the Count to God may look like sacrilege to some readers, but this argument solidly fixes the narrative in an “empowerment-of-women”-position.

Mothers and daughters

Critics may claim that when Carter portrays the bride – who traditionally is someone who outwits the murderer and plays an active part in her own rescue – as a person who quite passively seems to accept her fate as she puts her head down on the chopping block, she does not seem to care much for feminist ideals of the empowering of women. People making such a claim fail to see that what is at play here is, more importantly, another dichotomy, that between mother and daughter. The daughter, the young, naïve, passive woman, is contrasted with her older, wiser and active mother: “My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I?” (Carter 7). The mother, who comes to her daughter’s rescue just in the nick of time, possesses all the qualities which her daughter lacks, although the young girl recognises some of her mother’s “nerves and a will” during her stay. The mother comes across as a person with qualities traditionally seen as masculine; she is active, brave, forceful, defiant and strong. This makes her more of a match for the Count than

her daughter is. She is a woman who possesses all these qualities and more, in contrast to her traditionally feminine daughter.

The daughter, in contrast, shares a number of characteristics with her future husband, the blind piano tuner. He is described as having a “slight, stooping figure [and] he smiled a little, almost in shame. Though they were blind, his eyes were singularly sweet” (31). Both the piano tuner and the bride are shy, polite, and nervous. He also claims to possess “some sort of intuition [which] told me you could not sleep and might, perhaps, pass the insomniac hours at your piano” (31). Intuition has traditionally been regarded as a feminine trait, as well as the capacity for being shy, nervous and passive. Contrasting characters in the manner Carter does, exaggerating their differences, while at the same time assigning male and female traits across gender borders, makes me think that readings that emphasise strictly defined gendered relations may not quite hit the mark here. Gender identities, “mixed”, as it were, are also where my previous point concerning the lack of sexual significance comes back into play. If mere gender does not reveal what lies beneath the surface of the characters, then a mere sexual intercourse is also inadequate for getting beneath the surface of the Count. Submissiveness, passivity and intuition exist on both sides of the gender border, as well as power, vigour and courage. Seen in this light, Carter’s writing may be said to be feminist in the way that male and female traits and qualities exist equally in every main character, making their physical gender less significant. The villain still is a man, and the saviour is a woman, but their characters are well balanced up against one another. The mother may not be a murderer, but she has acquired the habit of walking around with her late husband’s service revolver in her purse, and is, in the end, quite capable of ending the life of her son-in-law. The woman warrior in her is now fully evolved, and has become the complete match for Bluebeard.

An elusive castle

The castle in which the Count and his bride are to live, is described as a “magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation in which he had been born” (8). If there is anything to be said about fairy castles made of foam, it must be that they are not places easily found in the real world. This Bluebeard is a symbol, an avatar, born in the realm of fairy tales and fantasy. Another trait of such fairy places, is that they may dissolve and disappear, these are places of tricks and games. This particular one is also the place of marriage, however short a period it may last. The young bride feels exiled “into the unguessable country of marriage” (7), and this country in particular turns out to be a different world entirely, a world of tricks and mirrors and walls made of foam, where she is to live with a figure of violent death and manhood. Remembering the ironic twist that these symbols are given, the place might well be interpreted as a comment on marriage, seen as an illusory union based on foam and fairy-castles, or perhaps on the art of writing fiction, a reminder that fiction is also a trick. Furthermore, when seen in connection with the other Bluebeard versions I am dealing with, one might even ask the question whether there is in fact a Bluebeard here at all. Both with Atwood and Jackson, to whom I will return in chapter 4, the characters who have been interpreted by many readers as Bluebeard, turn out to be ordinary men, with the symbol of Bluebeard pasted on their faces by the female protagonists, for different reasons. With Carter, we are moving into a purely symbolic landscape, heavily laden with irony, where the traditional male and female traits seem to have switched places.

Shame

At the end of “The Bloody Chamber,” a balance that may very well be supposed to be natural, is restored. The Count is dead by the mother’s hand wielding the father’s gun, a collaboration of the bride’s parents defying the boundaries of the grave, as it were. The Count’s bride has

married her piano tuner, and the married couple live happily together with the mother. The inheritance left to the bride has mostly been used for worthy social causes, turning the castle into a school for blind children, with the entrance to the chamber of horrors safely demolished. The bride has only kept enough to provide modestly for the three of them, in setting up a small music school.

But one snake is still left in paradise. When the bride's disobedience to her husband was discovered, he pressed the bloodstained key to her forehead, where it left a mark: "No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but, because it spares my shame" (41). The narrator herself notes that this mark makes her think of "a brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain" (36). The biblical references are numerous throughout, and the likening of her mark, put on her forehead by the Count, to the mark of Cain, put on his forehead by God, supports an interpretation that juxtaposes the bride with Eve and the Count with God. The mark of Cain was given him after he had killed his brother Abel, as a warning from God to all other creatures that Cain could not be touched by any other than God himself. Likewise, the Count gives his bride the mark to signalise that he alone has the power to punish her for her sin against him.

In addition to the mark of Cain, the shame she feels by the thought of this mark is another feature which brings with it religious connotations. To feel shame, and subsequently to be repentant, is one of the cornerstones of Christianity. The penitent will receive the forgiveness of God and go to Paradise. Seeing that the character that can be interpreted as an avatar of God in this narrative is a dead serial murderer, I sincerely doubt her shame and penitence is directed towards her husband as such. I believe it has more to do with the fact that she was attracted to and lured by a man who I will argue can be interpreted as a false father. Danielle M. Roemer makes a number of convincing claims in relation to this point in

her article on the Marquis, stating that his wealth and power must have been a subconscious temptation to a girl whose mother had “defiantly beggared herself for love” (8). He is not only incredibly wealthy, but also possesses an impeccable taste in music, clothes, literature and art, so that her every interest and whim can be catered to in a heartbeat.

Drawing on the writing of Bacchilega, Roemer also points out that the young woman’s initial attraction to the Count requires some sort of connection between them, a subconscious recognition on her part of some trait they have in common. According to Roemer, “[t]hat affinity is grounded in the two characters’ sensual and desiring response to experience. Although their ethics and intensity of desire differ, the Marquis tries to convince the wife that her wants complement his own” (Roemer 104). Bearing in mind that “The Bloody Chamber” is told by the main character in retrospect, this accounts for the passage in which she sees herself with the ruby choker for the first time, and “sensed in [her]self a potentiality for corruption that took [her] breath away” (Carter 11). Her recognition of this side of herself did not take place, at least not consciously, at that moment. It happened later, when she had had time to truly reflect on her own story. She is ashamed because she has had to recognize certain aspects of her own nature in the nature of her murderous Count. Her shame is the result of another mirror in this narrative, in which her own “potentiality for corruption” has been reflected back to her. To bring back the analogy of Cain, his mark was given him as a visible sign of his sin, of the beastly part of his nature that permitted him to kill his brother. By the same token, the mark on the young widow’s forehead is a sign of her sin, which was not to disobey her husband, but to let the temptation of material goods get the better of her. She tries to absolve herself by giving the Count’s castle and treasures back to society, but the mark cannot be hidden. An absolute eradication of the past is not possible.

Here I would like to bring back Manley’s arguments of this narrative being about a young girl writing her own story. Manley’s claim concerning the bride’s feeling of shame is

that her husband has “attempt[ed] to write his bride’s story: not only a story of wives’ disobedience, but in her case the story of the virgin-or-whore choice for women. The bride’s innocence, to him, signifies the possibility of guilt; she believes this story of her could be true” (Manley 74). In this case, I will not make use of the “virgin-whore” dichotomy as a sexual argument. This kind of physical relation is not what is bothering the young widow. Her shame lies in her belief that she was tempted by gold and riches, not by physical pleasure. The virgin thus becomes the one who is pure and free from the world’s sordid topic of wealth and earthly greed, while the whore is the one who is tempted by material belongings. The mother, who is the girl’s role model, freely gave up on all of her material needs for love. Her mother is her moral compass, and seeing that the girl has gone in a completely different direction – and has nearly got herself killed for it – it is no wonder that she feels like a whore for earthly wealth, especially since she admitted to her mother that she did not really love the Count.

It is no wonder that she feels like a whore, because the “virgin-whore” dichotomy is the only set of categories she has inherited. This is where we recognize Manley’s statement that the girl believes the story the Marquis has told, and therefore is ashamed. Within the constraints of the extremely narrow “virgin-whore” dichotomy, she has no other choice than to define herself, or to believe in the definition of herself, as a whore. If she manages “establishing herself as a subject” (73), she might also find different sets of categories that allow for a more nuanced image of both the world and herself.

One may then ask the question whether she is suffering the mark on the forehead justly or unjustly. Is it too harsh a punishment? One might say that the mark is part of the ideal that says that one should take on the responsibility of one’s own actions, and suffer the consequences regardlessly. One may also say that the kind of logic presented here, the kind that makes people say “it is my own fault, I should have known better,” is a typically self-effacing feminine trait, and that she should stop blaming herself for what happened. In this

light, the mark becomes not the mark of Cain put there by some all-powerful entity, but her own mark, put there by herself for self-punishment.

There is, however, still hope for our heroine. I would argue that an element of forgiveness also appears in the story, symbolized by the blind piano-tuner, who “sees [her] clearly with his heart” (Carter 41). As noted by Roemer, the young girl’s motives for marrying the Count were not as corrupt as she herself believes them to be, because part of them came from “her strong emotional need to recuperate the loss of her father” (Roemer 105). Her soul and moral fibre is thus not completely warped, and she is found worthy of a husband who is not only blind to the physical world, but also to her very faults.

Chapter 4: Shirley Jackson's "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith" versions "1" and "2"

Shirley Jackson was born in the USA in 1916, and died in 1965. During the course of her writing career, she became a favourite among critics as well as the public, and her short fiction, for which she earned much of her acclaim, was extremely popular among various magazines and journals of the time, such as Harper's, Reader's Digest and The New Yorker (Hyman and Stewart xi). Her work was also adapted for television and the theatre, as well as a couple of feature films. Being published in critically acclaimed magazines such as The New Yorker as well as in magazines aimed at housewives, she belonged to two very different literary spheres. As Paul N. Reinsch states: "Her prominent position in these two different literary worlds symbolizes her position as a woman attempting to reconcile pre- and post-war living situations in America" (Reinsch 2). As we shall see, "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith", both versions, fall into the category of social commentary. Jackson's perhaps most well known work is the collection of short stories The Lottery (1949), as well as the novels The Haunting of Hill House (1959) and We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962) (1-3). A great deal of her short fiction has been collected and published posthumously by two of her children, Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart, in the book Just an Ordinary Day (1997). The entire first half of the book consists of stories that have never before been published, and which have been left undated by the author. "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith", both versions, first appeared among these undated stories.

I have chosen to present both versions of "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith" in one chapter, not only because they are written by the same author, but because they are in several ways very

similar to each other, while at the same time certain differences between them make a reading that is attentive to effects each of them may have upon the interpretation of the other, fruitful. To begin with, I will give a brief account of both versions, before beginning a discussion of version 1.

Both versions are focalized through the main character Mrs. Smith, a woman who sees herself as a bit of an old maid, because she did not get married until the age of 38. This makes her self-conscious, and in “Version 1” she thinks that the fact that she is getting married at her age is the reason why all the neighbours are talking about her behind her back. It is clear, however, that the actual reason behind this behaviour is that the neighbours all think Mr. Smith is a serial killer, or, in other words, a Bluebeard figure. The discrepancy between what Mrs. Smith thinks is going on, and what the neighbours are thinking about, creates tensions and ironic effects in the text.

In “Version 1”, the suspicion of murder most foul is articulated by the downstairs neighbour, Mrs. Armstrong, who virtually ambushes Mrs. Smith on her way home with the groceries. She shows Mrs. Smith a newspaper clipping with the picture of the suspected murderer, which supposedly looks exactly like Mr. Smith. Mrs. Smith never suspects her husband of anything, and is quite offended by Mrs. Armstrong’s hints at murder, as well as her nosy questions about whether the newlyweds have taken out insurance. The murderer from Mrs. Armstrong’s newspaper clipping buried his victims in the cellar of his cottage in the countryside. A wonderful ambiguity is displayed at the end of the story, when the newlyweds have agreed to go to Mr. Smith’s country house the next day and start working on it to make it fit for living in. The ambiguity is enhanced by very last sentence of the tale: “‘And that way,’ Mr. Smith said, as though talking to himself, ‘I can get started on the cellar first thing tomorrow morning’” (Jackson 88). The question whether Mr. Smith really is a Bluebeard, is left entirely up to the reader, however.

The scenario in “Version 2” is very similar to the first one, except for one important fact. While the bride in “Version 1” is completely in the dark as to everybody’s suspicions, the one in “Version 2” is very much aware of what is going on in the neighborhood, although she admits that she is “not sure any more than *they* are, we all of us only suspect” (89). In “Version 2” the nosy downstairs neighbour’s name is Mrs. Jones, but her questions and allegations are the same as in “Version 1”. “Version 2” reads like a slightly more developed tale, and we get more information about Mrs. Smith’s thoughts and feelings in regard to her situation.

Version 1

Mrs. Smith has a sense of being watched closely at the grocery store, something that has been going on for several days. It has caused her to read out her order directly to the grocer, instead of walking about the store herself, like the other women. An ominous silent sigh sweeps across the store when she tells the grocer that she and her husband might be going out of town for the weekend. When the grocer finally finds the courage to carefully start telling her what is going on, there is a discrepancy between what is actually being said, and Mrs. Smith’s reaction to it. This stems from the fact that she is convinced he is talking about something entirely different. She is so self-conscious of being newly married at her age, that it is the only reason she can conceive for the neighbours’ interest in her: “I suppose I embarrass them because I am a little foolish about it” (80). We, the readers, may react to her being “foolish about it”, in terms of her preoccupation with what other people think about her age, while the neighbours’ concerns are something entirely different. This creates the effect of pulling the readers into the story, while adding to the sense of irony, which plays itself out between Mrs. Smith’s misguided assumptions about her neighbours, their suspicions towards Mr. Smith, and the readers’ reactions.

On her way home with the groceries, Mrs. Smith is surprised by Mrs. Armstrong, the downstairs neighbour and busybody. Mrs. Armstrong is not able to contain herself, and bursts out: "[Y]ou poor, poor dear. I guess he told you to stay away from the neighbors?" (82). The expression "poor, poor dear" works almost like a mantra for Mrs. Armstrong, who repeats it several times, adding to the ominous mood. Mrs. Smith does not seem to pick up on the vibe, and when the "poor, poor dear" is uttered yet again, this time as a response to their plans for going to the country to work on the house, Mrs. Armstrong manages little else than to offend her neighbour, who takes these utterances as an implied criticism of her husband. Criticism it most certainly is, but not in the sense Mrs. Smith thinks. Mrs. Smith is the victim of what D.C. Muecke calls dramatic irony, which occurs when someone in a narrative, or a stage play, is unaware of the state of events. Muecke also states: "Dramatic Irony seems more effective when not only the audience or reader but also someone in the play or narrative is aware of the victim's ignorance" (Muecke 65). This is definitely the case here, where several persons try to make the woman see the situation their way.

The despair of Mrs. Smith

But the tale of Mrs. Smith is also more complex than that. On a psychological level, she is a lonely, quite desperate woman, which one clearly sees in the following passage:

[T]hree weeks ago, she told herself, I was miserable and without a friend in the world. Father was gone, and there I sat, all alone and – she skipped hastily over the thought – even wondering what it would be like to walk out into the sea and just keep walking on and on, and then he sat down beside me; 'I hope you won't think me forward,' he said. Mrs. Smith gave a little secret laugh, and sipped her coffee. (Jackson 86-87)

She has been contemplating suicide when Mr. Smith, like a knight in shining armour, to use a fairy-tale phrase, comes to her rescue. He is her saviour from a life in loneliness and solitude, and she is not about to give up on her dream of a better life just because some nosy neighbour

accuses her wonderful husband of some unbelievably heinous crime. As Mrs. Armstrong is getting ready to leave, Mrs. Smith's complete refusal to even think about what she has been told, becomes strikingly clear:

'Mrs. Armstrong,' she said, 'I assure you, emphatically, that I have absolutely no interest in sordid crime. I am not, of course, attempting to criticise your pleasure in murder and sudden death, but it is simply not a subject that appeals to me. Suppose we talk about something else while we finish our coffee?' 'I don't think I want any coffee,' Mrs. Armstrong said almost sullenly. She got up from her chair. 'Well,' she said darkly, 'just don't ever say I didn't warn you.' Mrs. Smith laughed, privately pleased that her visitor was leaving so delightfully soon. 'Living in a city sometimes makes you dwell on horrible things,' she said. 'I'm glad we'll be out in the country soon.' (86)

I suspect that Mrs. Smith in the end has a fairly clear idea of what her neighbour is trying to tell her, but that she chooses to ignore it as best as she can, because the possible truth is too hard to bear. She has finally found someone with whom to share her life, and has every intention of staying with him. She even goes to such lengths as to say that she looks forward to getting away to the country, making it sound like city life is the very basis for a preoccupation with unhealthy, depressing matters, while going to the country guarantees wholesome, clean living. I suspect that Mrs. Smith is aware of this argument being an oversimplification, and that city life can not be held responsible for people's fascination with crime. Talking like this is just a way in which Mrs. Smith can distance herself from the dreadful dimension her life suddenly has been given.

Mrs. Smith's iron-clad assurance of her husband's innocence does become tarnished during the neighbour's rather intense visit. When her husband comes home from work and asks what the women have been talking about, there is evidence that Mrs. Smith's former conviction has changed, since she is reluctant to answer him properly:

‘She’s one of those people who loves gory details of murders, and I almost thought I would never be able to drink my coffee, the way she was talking.’
‘Anything in particular?’ ‘The plot of some movie she’d seen, I think,’ Mrs. Smith said vaguely. ‘Is the lamb chop all right?’ (87)

If Mrs. Smith had been truly indifferent to the gossip, she probably would have told her husband the truth about the conversation. She might of course have thought that this really is a preposterous idea, and therefore there is no need for him to know about it, but because she lied about the topic of conversation and diverted his attention towards dinner, a seed of suspicion has been sown.

Realism and myth

There is one more significant point to the quotation “Is the lamb chop all right?” which I would like to address. In “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith”, the discrepancy between the details of daily life, such as asking one’s husband if his dinner is all right, and the disturbing mythology of the intertext of “Bluebeard”, is striking. The way in which Mrs. Smith’s neighbourhood, the grocery store and the other characters are described, emphasises a feeling of an everyday, ordinary way of life. When the “Bluebeard” motif is added, the everyday language becomes a way in which Mrs. Smith, predominantly, tries to distance herself from the suggested pattern of horrors that is emerging. She has been coaxed by the neighbour into applying the pattern of the “Bluebeard” myth for her own life, and becomes so mortified by the thought that it leads her into denial.

The faint echo of fairy-tale chance in this narrative, such as when Mrs. Smith wonders “how it could happen that the lives of two people might be wholly changed by a chance, by the combination of a lovely day and the sea air” (81), also pertains to the relationship between the reality of the narrative’s surface level, and the myth that is found on a symbolic level. Such chance meetings as these, on those lovely days filled with sea breeze, belong to the tales

that end with “happily ever after”. When placed in a version of “Bluebeard”, the tale known for beginning with marriage, ending with death, with lots of horror in between, such a meeting takes on a darker, more ominous hue.

One might of course assume that a woman who has come to doubt her husband’s good intentions for their life together will have second thoughts when it comes to spending time together, away from the prying eyes of neighbours. Not so for Mrs. Smith, she ““can’t wait to see”” (88) Mr. Smith’s country house, and she assures him that she does not ““mind a little discomfort; after all, there will be plenty of time to fix things the way we like them”” (88). This is yet another example of how everyday incidents and ways of expression are influenced by the implications of the intertext. What may appear to be a simple, straightforward statement about redecorating a house, is in this case something entirely different. I will argue that this is all a show, that her neighbour’s story is getting to her. Mrs. Smith is starting to suspect something dreadful might happen, and she is on the one hand trying to convince her husband that everything is exactly as it has been, while on the other desperately wishing and praying that it is all someone’s imagination. The only way she will know for sure is by going with him to his house in order to see what happens.

A great deal has now been said about the relationship between myth and reality in this narrative. There are discrepancies between what Mrs. Smith, in the beginning, thinks is going on in the neighbourhood and what is really happening. As soon as she is informed of everyone else’s suspicions, other incongruities emerge, when she, as the afternoon passes, desperately tries to block out her own doubts. She tries to cling on to the “real”, everyday world by asking whether his dinner is all right. But what about Mr. Smith himself, are there any discrepancies between how he is described and what the “Bluebeard” plot says? I would like to address the first time Mr. Smith and Helen Bertram, soon to be Mrs. Smith, met, because it leaves one with certain impressions that do not match the traditional Bluebeard

image. Mr. Smith opened a conversation with her, but in a very polite and shy manner, asking if she thought he was being too forward. After telling her about his late wife over dinner, and confessing to feeling lonely, he says: “‘You must be very lonely, too,’ [. . .] and gave her hand a quick, shy pat” (81). Having cared for her father, who is now dead, for most of her life, Helen is indeed also lonely. Due to her age, she seems to be getting a little desperate as well, which I will argue is the reason why she stayed to talk to him in the first place. Before long he proposes to her, but not like one would expect a traditional Bluebeard to do it: “Charles Smith, looking nervously down at the rice cookie by his teacup, had said, almost stammering, ‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever thought about . . . getting married, have you?’” (80). A person drinking tea with rice cookies, being nervous and shy, does not, at least at first glance, appear to be mass murderer material.

Curiosity – vice or virtue?

There is an echo in this story of a central feature in the traditional Bluebeard tale which has been the source of different interpretations, and which has already been discussed in this thesis, namely the notion of female curiosity. Mrs. Armstrong may be said to personify this trait, and this is especially clear when she asks Mrs. Smith if she has searched through her husband’s belongings. If one prefers the interpretation which holds that the wife of Bluebeard has passed judgment upon herself by being curious, one may view Mrs. Smith’s refusal to search through anything as a virtue. If one, on the other hand, prefers the interpretation that concentrates on curiosity as being a character trait that works to the bride’s advantage, since it causes her to find the truth and save her life, Mrs. Smith’s frame of mind becomes a vice and a weakness. These two different modes of interpretation are also discussed by Bacchilega, who uses the terms “The Bloody Key” motif and “The Forbidden Chamber” motif. “The Bloody Key” is the central theme if one sticks to the opinion that curiosity is a vice. There are

many interpretations of “Bluebeard” as a tale of female sexual curiosity, and of the subsequent betrayal of a husband’s trust. As Bacchilega dryly notes: “The result in some literary versions of ‘Bluebeard’ [. . .] is an explicit condemnation of the heroine’s curiosity, but total silence on the ethics of the husband’s serial murders” (Bacchilega 106). In contrast to this, in “The Forbidden Chamber” the heroine is redeemed, letting her inquisitive nature learn the truth and save herself. What is important here is to recognise “The Forbidden Chamber” as a motif describing a process of initiation, effecting a change either within the heroine herself or in her life.

The trait of having an inquisitive nature is, if one follows the “Forbidden Chamber” interpretation, connected to another personal characteristic, namely that of being an active agent in the plot. Within the “Bluebeard” myth, the bride who defeats him is the curious and active one, who finds the secret chamber and manages to take control of her own destiny and therefore is saved in the end. Being saved does not only mean survival, it also means getting back to the society one initially was removed from, but as a different and stronger person with a few lessons learned. To get back to society, one has to make contact with it, which is all-important to the notion of initiation. The point of initiation will be addressed in later paragraphs as a crucial feature in the interpretation of “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith: Version 1”.

Social dimensions

The social dimension of the tale of Mrs. Smith is clearly brought out in the conversation between her and Mrs. Armstrong. When the neighbour pulls out a newspaper clipping describing the murders, asking Mrs. Smith to look at it, or at least at the picture, Mrs. Smith reacts like someone who regards herself socially as well as morally superior to her guest: “Sensationalism, Mrs. Smith was thinking; how these people do thrive on it” (Jackson 84).

The use of the expression “these people” leaves little doubt about Mrs. Smith’s low regard for her neighbour, thus creating a distance between them. Mr. Smith later widens the gap by questioning whether they are in fact able to communicate at all: “I mean, what could someone like that have to say to *you*?” (87). The disdain for “lesser” individuals is palpable. But the definite hint towards Mrs. Smith’s conviction of her superiority comes in the following comment: “I do not have acquaintances who put their pictures into the newspapers” (84). We learn that newspapers and all other forms of mass communication is something that the Smiths agree on avoiding. We are not given any particular reason for this, and one path of interpretation may certainly lead to the conclusion that Mr. Smith really is the murderer, and that he has convinced his wife to stay away from mass media in order to keep her away from information about his evil deeds. But on the basis of their habit of setting themselves apart from their neighbours, it seems that the Smiths also feel that mass media is vulgar and common, and not suitable sources of information for people of their class and caliber.

The ambiguities do not stop there, however, because Mrs. Smith also thinks to herself that Mrs. Armstrong “is not at all the kind of acquaintance Mr. Smith would like me to have” (84). Is this Mrs. Smith’s own assumption, based perhaps on conversations with her husband where they have agreed upon which sort of people they would like as friends? Or perhaps it is another hint towards Mr. Smith’s murderous inclinations, trying desperately to control every aspect of his wife’s life – however short this life may prove to be – in order to avoid being revealed? I believe this is an eruption of a certain kind of wrong-headed middle-class decency, where people who are painfully aware that they do not belong to the upper echelons of society, tell themselves that if they only behave as if they are better than their peers, people will treat them as if they really are. In other words, socially, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Armstrong are different – because Mrs. Smith, and later on, her husband, *want* them to be. Mrs. Smith displays a complete inability to acknowledge her own disdain towards Mrs. Armstrong. She is

not capable of admitting to herself that she just does not like her neighbour, or at least she is not willing to, so she projects her feelings on to Mr. Smith, making him responsible for her desire to get rid of the neighbour as soon as possible. This way of insisting on removing oneself from the community is directly linked to the point concerning initiation, which will be dealt with later.

A striking aspect of Mrs. Smith's psychological habit of projecting, is that she does not limit it to her husband, she even uses his former wife as an alibi. Mrs. Smith asks herself: "[W]hat would dear Janet think, at such a person in her house?" (85). Mrs. Smith is obviously not able to take responsibility for her own feelings and opinions. She bases everything on what she imagines her absent husband and his deceased wife would think.

The invisible woman

The degree of self-effacement in this story is quite alarming. Even though Mrs. Smith is not entirely sure that her husband is not the serial murderer, she spends every waking moment trying to please him. This is partly due to an enormous sense of gratitude for being rescued from a life in solitude, and partly to a thwarted outlook on life that I will return to later. As to her gratitude, it even extends to Mr. Smith's former wife: "She remembered with some tenderness the first wife, the lost Janet, and again, as she had before during these past few days, she made a small promise to Janet that Mr. Smith should not be less happy in his second wife than he had been in his first" (81). Her wish to please becomes self-eradicating, especially so because Mrs. Smith does not appear to have a conscious idea of her own self. Her feelings and opinions are solely based upon what she believes other people, especially her husband, would deem appropriate.

Mrs. Smith apparently has no second thoughts about going with him to a place concealed from nosy neighbours, where anything might happen to her. She prefers to take her

chances with what kind of person her husband really is, rather than spending her life alone. Because of her total state of dependency, the question whether Mr. Smith really is Bluebeard, becomes almost irrelevant, in the sense that she can not be saved. According to the myth, there is a way in which to escape Bluebeard, but this requires courage, inquisitiveness and taking an active part in the operation to save yourself. Usually, this active part consists of maintaining contact with the outside world, in engaging someone from the society you left to come to your rescue. Whether Mrs. Smith will be killed by her husband or not may be thought of as irrelevant in “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith”. The question is beside the point, because either way she is doomed. She has no sense of self and does not know how to live alone. She has no contact with her immediate society. She will rather die than be lonely, which to me signals that she, in a manner of speaking, already is dead.

Initiation

When taking the point concerning the Smith’s snobbishness and insistence on ignoring newspapers and all other forms of mass media into consideration, combined with the notion of Mrs. Smith’s dependency and subsequent doom, I interpret this story as on one level being a thriller and a murder mystery, leaving the reader to decide on the identity of the killer. On a deeper level, it is clearly a comment on American society. The uncertainty concerning the time this story was written makes it hard to pinpoint it as belonging to any particular decade. It is nevertheless highly possible that it was most likely written either during World War II or during the early post-war years, times in which great social changes were taking place in the U.S. Mrs. Smith comes across as a disappearing breed. She may be economically well situated and perceive herself as belonging to a more refined social stratum than other characters in the story, but she is at the same time completely dependent upon her husband. Here I would like to re-introduce the notion that “Bluebeard” is a tale of initiation, in which

the curiosity of the heroine saves her and subsequently brings her back into contact with society. Bacchilega states that Bluebeard is a symbol of otherness and death, and the heroine saves herself by connecting to society and life. She also points out that:

‘Bluebeard’ and related ‘Forbidden Chamber’ tales [. . .] are therefore tales of initiation in which the protagonist successfully confronts death because she is bold and clever or because she has strong community ties. [. . .] Surviving requires clever deception and siding with her human allies, which again reinforces the social dimension of this initiation. In the face of death, she relies on her family, her sisters or brothers, and more broadly humankind, the community (to which the Bluebeard figure does not belong), to re-establish a link with life. (Bacchilega 110)

Mrs. Smith denies having any links to her society, which is her neighbourhood. She consciously creates a distance between herself and the community, thereby condemning herself. This is what the underlying myth of “Bluebeard” states. If you want to survive, you need to connect with your peers.

We already know about the Smiths’ reluctance towards mass media. These people are ensconced in their own little world, with little interest in politics, the state of affairs in the outside world, in short, all the mechanisms that affect their lives just as it affects everyone else’s. This leaves us with several possibilities when it comes to determining if there really is a Bluebeard here, and, in which case, where he is to be found. One alternative, and the obvious one, is to argue that Mr. Smith is the murderer, and that his wife will be brutally slaughtered within the next 24 hours. This may be the case if one chooses to interpret the surface level of the narrative, dealing only with the murder mystery.

A second option, if one is willing to consider a symbolic level, is to regard Mr. Smith as a Bluebeard in the sense that he plays an active part in keeping his wife uninformed, and that this is an example of the oppression of women, a “murder” of Mrs. Smith’s right to be a productive member of society. The possibility of this story being a description of female ignorance and a male desire to keep women ignorant, brings to mind Cheryl Renfroe’s article

on liminality in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber". Although Renfroe here deals with a different narrative, the basis of Carter's and Jackson's tales is the same, thus making the arguments relevant for "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith" as well. Unlike Carter's bride and the Eve of Genesis, Mrs. Smith does not succumb to curiosity. She does not choose to disobey the master of the house (or the garden). But the notion of initiation through knowledge is still very much present. In Mrs. Smith's case, initiation means stepping into society, gaining skills and a knowledge of how to get by in this world.

The problem with this kind of argument is, however, that Mrs. Smith is just as active in keeping herself ignorant. She does not resist her husband in any way, or display any interest in doing so. The third option is therefore to hold her accountable for her own shortcomings, thereby eliminating Mr. Smith as a possible candidate for the part of Bluebeard. I would argue that if there really is a Bluebeard here, it is not in the shape of a personified murderer, but in the force of change within a society, in progress.

Progress may be regarded as a destructive or a constructive force, depending on one's point of view. To those welcoming new eras and changes in life, progress is a benign force, clearing out old modes of thought, old customs and ways of life. To those desperately clinging on to the status quo, such changes will be perceived as devastating. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are, on the one hand, about to be left behind due to a lack of knowledge of and interest in their society. Mrs. Armstrong, on the other hand, may be nosy and vulgar, but at least she takes an active part in the world and in her small community. She is, to use Bacchilega's words, the "human ally" of Mrs. Smith, and an extraordinarily active one at that, seeking out her "charge" even before the need is expressed. Mrs. Smith, however, chooses to decline the offer of help, thereby denying herself the link to society and life. There is, however, a noteworthy sense of ambiguity in this argument as well. A substantial part of Mrs. Armstrong's strength is undoubtedly used on gossip and the never-ending search for exciting

news, and just as Mr. Smith may or may not be a murderer, Mrs. Armstrong may or may not be a blessing in a housedress. She might be nothing else than a tiresome busybody with nothing better to do than getting into other people's private business. She does, however, not fool herself into looking down upon her fellow man, nor does she have any wish to hide from the world. In this respect, she may be interpreted as a symbol of new and more democratic times.

Version 2

“Version 1” and “Version 2” are in several respects very similar. The basic features: the grocery store, the nosy neighbour, the rumours, are all there. The first major difference is that “Version 2” reads like a more developed tale, which may be a reason for assuming that it was written some time after “Version 1”, even though neither of them are dated. The second, and most significant difference, is that Mrs. Smith in this version is very much aware of everyone else's suspicions. In fact, she entertains the same notions as the others do. When taking the intertext of “Bluebeard” into consideration, “Version 2” might be said, on one level, to bear certain similarities to “Bluebeard's Egg”. The bride in “Version 2” expects that her husband will kill her, in other words, she expects that he is a Bluebeard. The bride in “Bluebeard's Egg”, who is very much aware of the myth, expects her husband to betray her, thereby fulfilling her needs for a Bluebeard.

Social differences

Unlike in “Version 1”, the class difference between Mrs. Smith and her neighbours is directly commented upon by the characters, and in such a manner that Mrs. Smith comes across as an entirely different type of person. According to the woman downstairs, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Smith

looks and carries herself like someone used to a more high-class style of living than both Mr. Smith and the rest of the neighborhood, and she states quite openly that Mr. and Mrs. Smith do not appear to be ““the types for each other at all”” (Jackson 94). This alone has obviously caused quite a stir over the week they have been living there, but the real upheavals did not occur before someone thought they recognized Mr. Smith from a picture in the paper, following an article on a serial killer. Mrs. Smith’s apparently affluent background combined with the faint possibility that her husband might be responsible for several heinous crimes, has led to considerable curiosity concerning their joint economy: ““New bride. Cheap apartment. You made a will in his favor? Insurance?” ‘Yes, but that is only natural -’ said Mrs. Smith” (95). She does argue against the suspicions towards her husband, but here there are in fact no hints towards Mrs. Smith feeling superior, in the way she is presented in the first version. This may be partly explained by the fact that Mrs. Smith in “Version 1” was unaware of the situation before being told about it by the neighbour, and thereby first being shocked and then perhaps offended as a secondary, protective reaction. Nevertheless, there is still quite a distance between the Mrs. Smith of the first version and the one in the second, who conducts a civil conversation with her neighbour, not revealing any animosity or snobbishness. This Mrs. Smith even admits to reading the papers, although she claims not to remember much about the murders. The reason for this is not an attempt to portray herself as disinterested in newspapers or public information, like the main character in the first version, but in order to disguise her own misgivings towards her husband. At first, during the conversation with Mrs. Jones, she tries to deny any knowledge of what is decidedly the hottest topic in the neighborhood:

‘I’ve noticed,’ Mrs. Smith said carefully, ‘that there’s a lot of unusual interest in us. I’ve never been on a honeymoon before, of course, so I can’t really tell whether it’s only that.’ She laughed weakly, but Mrs. Jones was not to be put off by sentiment. ‘I think you must know better than that,’ she said. ‘You’re not *that* wrapped up in your husband.’ ‘Well ... no,’ Mrs. Smith had to say. (94)

Mrs. Smith is forced to admit to having at least a sketchy knowledge of the matter, but still can not bear to reveal herself completely: “‘You won’t know for sure until . . .’ Mrs. Smith tried not to smile” (95). I will argue that she avoids smiling for two reasons, the first one being that smiling at such a gloomy subject would simply be considered bad manners. Secondly, she does not want Mrs. Jones to suspect her of having ulterior motives for staying with an alleged murderer, thereby causing more questions and more gossip. Mrs. Smith’s ulterior motives will be addressed later, but I will first deal with the dynamics of the gossip in this neighbourhood and Mrs Smith’s attitude towards it.

Rumours travel fast

It seems that in the life of people who do not have anything better to do than gossip about their neighbors, the distance from standing out in the community, to being married to a murderer, is fairly short. The neighbors live vicariously, so to speak, off the possible tragedy of Mrs. Smith:

Her slightest deviation from the normal, in the course of more than a week, was noted and passed from gossip to gossip, a faint paling of her cheeks became the subject of nervous speculation [. . .] these were what her neighbors lived on. Mrs. Smith had thought early in the week that a loud crash from her apartment would be the sweetest thing she could do for Mrs. Jones, but [. . .] Mrs. Jones could live as well on the most minute crumbs. (93)

Mrs. Smith as a person does not seem to interest her neighbours. The only thing worth discussing is her likely fate. This passage also reveals a very dark brand of humour, in which the assumed imminent victim of a ghastly crime enjoys playing a game with the minds of the people around her, leaving hints in the form of “crumbs” for them, like snacks, something for them to chew on amongst themselves. Jackson is accomplished in the art of creating suspense, and the early hints towards something being amiss are effective and slightly unsettling: “[B]ut still it would be a shame to have all that food in the kitchen, and let it go to waste, just rotting

there while ...” (90). In recounting this example of Mrs. Smith’s own thoughts, Jackson cleverly leaves the sentence hanging in mid-air, leaving our imagination to fill in the blanks. In the field of reception theory, Wolfgang Iser is the pioneer in theorising this particular type of co-operation between reader and text. In his article “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach”, he explores the relationship between text and reader, and how they inevitably affect each other. He states that “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (Iser 55). Iser stresses the point that no two readings are alike, therefore no reading can claim to have exhausted every possible alternative interpretation of a text.

The technique of leaving “gaps” is mirrored by Jackson’s protagonist Mrs. Smith, who when shopping uses exactly same technique in leaving “crumbs”, as it were, for her neighbours: “‘I’m going to get a pound of coffee,’ she said, smiling at him. ‘After all, I like coffee. I can probably drink up a pound before ...’ The anticipatory pause made her say quickly, ‘And I’ll want a quarter pound of butter, and I guess two lamb chops’” (Jackson 90). Here Jackson activates the readers’ imagination by leaving the sentence unfinished, and by letting her main character do the same to her neighbours.

Mrs. Smith is very much aware of the effect her presence has on people, and I will argue that she on one level actually enjoys the attention. She certainly manages to see the advantages:

One good thing, she was thinking about all this – I never have to *wait* anywhere. It’s as though everyone knew I was in a hurry to get small things done. And I suppose no one really wants me around for very long, not after they’ve had their good look at me and gotten something to talk about. (90)

Here Mrs. Smith appears to be emotionally very distant from the possible implications of her situation. Her thoughts considering the issue is described in a fashion that makes them appear very matter-of-factly, she calmly assumes that the only interest people have in her is as a source of excitement. There is little evidence of any emotional distress on the part of Mrs. Smith, except from at the very end of the story, which I will turn to later.

A satiric streak

Perhaps the most complex passage in the entire narrative occurs when Mrs. Smith is on her way home with her groceries. The passage not only deals with the dynamics of the relationship between Mrs. Smith and her neighbours, it also contains evidence that the narrator comments on the other characters, thereby making herself more visible. The narrator is not simply recounting incidents, she is active within the narrative in the sense that she interprets the actions and thoughts of various characters:

She was different in their eyes, she was marked; if the dreadful fact were not true (and they all hoped it was), she was in a position of such incredible, extreme embarrassment that their solicitude was even more deserved. If the dreadful fact *were* true (and they all hoped it was), they had none of them, the landlady, the grocer, the clerks, the druggist, lived in vain, gone through their days without the supreme excitement of being close to and yet secure from an unbearable situation. If the dreadful fact *were* true (and they all hoped it was), Mrs. Smith was, for them, a salvation and a heroine, a fragile, lovely creature whose preservation was in hands other than theirs. (91)

This passage stands out, mostly because it is the most notable instance in which the narrator is directly describing the thoughts of other characters than Mrs. Smith. This is made clear when we are told that Mrs. Smith realizes some of it “dimly”. What I mean by directly is that this is not a description of Mrs. Smith’s idea of what her neighbours are thinking; the narrator is, to some extent, keeping Mrs. Smith from a complete realization of her neighbours’ thoughts. The matter-of-factness of the style which is

used to characterize Mrs. Smith's state of mind elsewhere in the story is retained, but heightened by the hyperbole created by the repetitive "and they all hoped it was".

In "Version 1", the effect of the discrepancies between the text and the intertext enhances the ambiguity of the tale and produces an unsettling effect. In the passage quoted above, there is also a discrepancy to be found, between the everyday chore Mrs. Smith is doing, walking home with the groceries, and what she is thinking about, which is how long people are expecting her to live, and how much they are secretly hoping that it will not be long. This, combined with the "chant" of "and they all hoped it was", creates a biting satiric effect, commenting on an aspect of the personalities of the neighbours which displays their animal greed for entertainment and excitement. At the same time, this statement becomes a comment on human nature in general, on how the vast majority of us have these "darker" sides, parts of our personalities which feed off of seeing other people's misfortune. This is the reason why the scenario of the ghastly rumours not being true is described as making Mrs. Smith more worthy of their "solicitude" than she would be if he was actually going to kill her. Because of certain psychological mechanisms, the question is not whether extreme embarrassment is more damaging to Mrs. Smith than death would be, but how embarrassed these people would become on their own behalf, if the allegations towards Mr. Smith were proven wrong. Suddenly, the ugly aspects of their personality, the parts that secretly hoped it was true, would stand out in sharp relief, only matched by their disappointment. This is clearly a deeply ironic and satiric comment, because these people will, by their wagging tongues and fanciful minds, be the architects of their own embarrassment.

This psychological mechanism is also evident in the statement "the supreme excitement of being close to and yet secure from an unbearable situation". It is the same kind of reaction that makes us slow down at the site of a car crash, feeling the chill

down our backs when looking at other people's misfortune, secretly rejoicing because we have escaped yet again. This allows us to feel that we have experienced something important, something to talk about, while we in reality have been sheltered all along.

The entire quotation is given a religious tinge with the line that says "Mrs. Smith was, for them, a salvation and a heroine, a fragile, lovely creature whose preservation was in hands other than theirs". The neighbours are thinking of her almost as a saint, or a Jesus figure, someone to suffer the deed of the murderer in their stead. I read this as a description of the perhaps most egotistical human notion of all, which I choose to describe along the lines of "suffer in my stead and I will love you". As to who they deem responsible for Mrs. Smith's preservation, several options may prove valid. In order to pursue the religious theme, they might consider God as the ultimate saviour, a notion which, from the viewpoint of many a critic of religion, enables people to redeem themselves from any kind of personal responsibility, "putting the matter in the hands of God," as it were. The religious context also contains the likeness between Bluebeard and the God of the Old Testament, as well as Bluebeard's bride and Eve. Bluebeard and God are both severe punishers of women, at least according to those readings that concentrate on "The Forbidden Chamber", to use Bacchilega's term, as the central topic. In the reaction from Mrs. Smith's neighbours, there is a clear sense of expectation, they seem to take for granted that this woman will suffer a gruesome fate – a punishment. She is their sacrifice. Like Jesus, she must atone for everybody else's well being and chance of redemption, and, like Eve, she has brought it upon herself.

Another suggestion I would like to present is the idea that she is supposed to save herself, although how this will happen no one seems to have a clear idea of – except Mrs. Jones, whose only suggestion is for Mrs. Smith to stamp the floor if anything should happen.

If one considers the possibility that Mrs. Smith must save herself, a shocked outburst on the part of Mrs. Jones becomes a rather hilarious example of the limited scope of her mind. It puts into play a social mechanism which I will argue must have been significant during Jackson's lifetime, namely, the notion of the sinfulness of divorce, which may prove to be the death of Mrs. Smith: "I could run away from my husband," Mrs. Smith said. Mrs. Jones was surprised. "You can't run away from your *husband*," she said. "Not if it isn't true, you couldn't do that" (95). All of a sudden, Mrs. Smith's options are further complicated and limited by the expectations towards a good wife, which do not appear to change significantly even if her life is in danger. Here Jackson in an elegant and succinct way portrays the double bind in which this woman finds herself. Even though her husband is the one posing a threat to Mrs. Smith's life, her possibilities of leaving him are slim. She cannot just leave him for no apparent reason, but how is she supposed to prove anything? She cannot talk to him about it, and without any solid proof the authorities of the law are most likely not predisposed to let her divorce him. This certainly poses a paradox, because if Mrs. Smith is going to have to save herself, then the only way is to leave him.

Social awareness

I read the paradox posed by Mrs. Smith's predicament, and its circumstances, as a general comment on women's situation and rights in mid-20th century USA. Even though it was not unheard of to break out of a marriage, the reaction of Mrs. Jones demonstrates that it still was, for a great number of people, virtually unthinkable to actually do so. As I have stated in the introduction, both "Version 1" and "Version 2" are undated, so there is no way of knowing for sure when they were written. I do, however, suspect that at least the second version was written some time after World

War II. This is because I find that there is evidence in the text to support the claim that the social characteristics of American post-war society have influenced Jackson's writing.

During World War II, women were called to work by the American government, most of the able-bodied young men were at war overseas, and the country was in great need of every pair of hands available, especially in the various industries. "Rosie the Riveter" is a well known name for all those women heralded as heroines helping the allies win the war. But when the war was over, things changed. Paul S. Boyer states that: "The conservative mood, revealing a longing for stability after years of upheaval, recoiled against even moderate challenges to traditional gender roles" (Boyer 86). From being active workers outside the home, taking part in society in a new way, women were shunted off back into their homes. Boyer also points out that those who continued to work were stuck in traditional "women's jobs", such as secretaries and salespersons, due to "[d]iscriminatory hiring practices and subtle cultural pressures" (86). But perhaps the most important point here is Boyer's assertion that a lot of writers wrote within this framework, and affirmed these values, almost campaigning for women to stay at home, which was regarded as nature's intended order of life. Boyer mentions a few leading women's magazines at the time, among them the Woman's Home Companion. This was one of the many magazines which published Shirley Jackson's work. "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith", both versions, are obviously not among the stories from these magazines; they were not published until 1997. Nevertheless, in hindsight it is hard not to view both narratives, "Version 2" in particular, as a woman writer's reaction to this forced domestication, and perhaps also as a sort of therapeutic exercise in telling a story of how tragic the consequences may turn out to be for a woman like Mrs. Smith, who has absolutely no one to turn to but a shady husband. Based on Boyer's assertions about

the literary climate of the time, where authors in several instances supported the conservative mood, there might even be a possibility that Jackson deliberately withheld “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith” because of the restricting publication context. The narratives are highly ambiguous, and may have been judged by Jackson’s publishers as subversive and not fit for public consumption. The editors of the magazines aimed at housewives across the nation would most likely have been very reluctant to put a story like “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith” into one of their publications. Mid-century American women had jobs and the option to register for voting, but the emphasis still lay on the family, and especially on a woman’s duties within family life. I will argue that the fate of Mrs. Smith is Jackson’s way of commenting upon the result of teaching women that they are not allowed to think for themselves, but to take care of everyone else, ruining their minds in the process.

Submission

Mrs. Smith has spent the better part of her life living with her father, an existence which obviously has prepared her for complete submission:

[J]ust as in her whole life before she had not questioned the decisions of her father but had done quietly as she was told, so it was a relief to know that there now was someone again to decide for her, and that her life [. . .] was now clear as well.
(Jackson 91)

She is quite willing to accept her possible fate as the victim of a serial killer, she lets her neighbours fatten on the good gossip, all the while contemplating the clear direction which she imagines that her life has now taken. These are the unhealthy thought processes of someone who never made any decisions on her own, who has been raised to accept patriarchal supremacy, either of a father, or a husband. How thwarted her mind really is, is clearly shown in the passages where she makes plans for how much food to buy. It can not be too much in

case he murders her, so that nothing will go to waste. She also takes care of next week's rent, and tries desperately to finish all the coffee she has just bought, since Mr. Smith drinks very little coffee. This is certainly a dark variety of humor, a grotesquely satirical portrait of the ideal housewife as someone planning her shopping so that her own murder might leave as little mess and as few inconveniences as possible – even for her murderer. There is also a connection here to Bacchilega's statements in which she comments upon the tendency of early versions of "Bluebeard" to regard murder as a fitting punishment for the curious nature of the female heroine, while nothing is being said about the husband's acts of murder.

As already noted, Mrs. Smith has ulterior motives for staying with her husband, motives that she tries to hide by at first rejecting a knowledge of what all the rumours are about. She is compelled by her own twisted ideas about the duty of a good wife, combined with an unhealthy notion of inevitability. She feels like she is "being carried unresisting on the surface of a river which took her on inevitably into the sea" (91). For someone in this state of mind, fighting against fate is not an option, it does not matter what she does. Her death is pre-destined. What is truly frightening, is her inclination to think of the entire situation as the result of a natural state of affairs: "[S]he might have said – with a blush for a possible double meaning, that they, like all other married couples, were two halves of what was essentially one natural act" (91). The possible double meaning in the context of this marriage leads me to expect a triple meaning. The "natural act" can be interpreted as both marriage and sex, but the third possibility is murder. To a mind like Mrs. Smith's, confused by a lifetime of one-sided patriarchal dominance, the "natural act" might just as well signify some sort of husband's rightful claim to the life of his wife. She certainly does not protest against it. I see this ill-conceived idea of what is considered to be "natural" in the relationship between husband and wife as an example of how damaging intellectual inertia may prove to be. As shown in an earlier quotation, Mrs. Smith never questioned anything during her life with her father. Now

that he is gone, she is 38 years old and incapable of existing as a self-sufficient being, because she never learned how to. Someone has to tell her what to do and how to do it. To succumb to a suspected murderer thus becomes a perverted path of least resistance.

The missing chamber

Much has been said about Mrs. Smith's warped mind, but her husband's true nature has yet to be discussed. There is no doubt that the intertext of the "Bluebeard" story provides readers with a powerful role model for Mr. Smith, and while a few ambiguities concerning his character have been touched upon, a few important points still remain. One feature that is worth looking at is an uncertainty regarding the existence of a Bluebeard's secret chamber; in "Version 2" there is no mention of a house in the countryside. While in the grocery store, Mrs. Smith states that she may be going away for the weekend, but she does not mention anything about where she is going or whether her husband is going with her. She repeats the statement to Mrs. Jones, and there is a wonderful ambiguity in the phrase "I thought I might be going away" (93) as an answer to why her weekend shopping looks rather meagre. "To go away" is a well known euphemism for dying, which everyone at the grocer's and also Mrs. Jones recognize.

It seems likely that an alternative home for the Smiths really does exist, however, because the apartment is described as "so obviously only a temporary home for them both, a stopping-place" (93). Neither of them have bothered to unpack much, which on the one hand points to the possibility of their moving out soon, but on the other, there is a distinct possibility that Mrs. Smith does not bother because she suspects she will not live long enough for it to matter. By the same token, Mr. Smith has not unpacked much because if he kills her, he will need to get away from the neighbourhood rather quickly, and probably does not want to be encumbered by packing up again. There are no allusions towards any particular room in

their apartment, and if an equivalent to a secret chamber is not to be found, it creates a major difference between the text “Version 2” and its intertext “Bluebeard”. I will here re-introduce Iser and the notion of leaving the reader to participate in the process of creation by filling in the gaps him– or herself. The fact that there is no obvious secret chamber in “Version 2” does not mean that it is not a contemporary version of “Bluebeard”. It certainly provides further additions to the ever increasing number of ambiguities in the text, which, of course, leaves readers with even more gaps to fill, making us enable our “facult[ies] for establishing connections” (Iser 55). Mr. Smith may be a murderer with no secret chamber, he may have a chamber somewhere else, or he may not be a murderer at all. Interpretations, as well as gaps, are numerous.

Mrs. Bluebeard?

I brought up the notion of Mrs. Smith’s striking composure earlier, and stated that she does not express any emotional distress until the very end of the tale, when she thinks her misgivings have been verified. The following scene displays her certainty of the matter, as well as another of Jackson’s cunning ways of introducing ambiguities in order to confuse us, or set things in play:

‘Shall I start dinner?’ Mrs. Smith asked. ‘Would you like to rest for a while first?’ ‘I’m not hungry,’ he said. Now, for the first time, he seemed awkward, and Mrs. Smith thought quickly, I was right about the food for the weekend, I guessed right; he did not ask if she was hungry because – and each of them knew now that the other knew – it really did not matter. Mrs. Smith told herself it would ruin everything to say anything now, and she sat down on the couch next to her husband and said, ‘I’m a little tired, I think’. (Jackson 98-99)

The ambiguity comes into play through the use of the semicolon, where the narrator suddenly shifts from a first-person perspective, rendering Mrs. Smith’s thoughts, to a third-person perspective in letting the sentence after the semicolon continue with “he did not ask if she was

hungry”. Shifting the point of view in this fashion makes it look like the narrator suddenly has become omniscient and has revealed Mr. Smith as the murderer. I will argue, however, that the narrator is still referring to Mrs. Smith’s thoughts, the shift is a trick to make readers assume that everything is uncovered.

Seen in this light, it is no wonder why Mrs. Smith walks nervously about the place, repeatedly asking herself: ““Why does it take so long?”” (99). It takes so long because it might not happen at all, of which we get a solid hint in the very last two lines of the narrative: ““Well?” [Mrs. Smith said.] ‘I suppose so,’ Mr. Smith said, and got up wearily from the couch”(99). One obvious way of interpreting the “Well?” is as evidence of self-victimization, in which she is asking whether he is going to kill her, or at least give her some piece of irrefutable evidence that he is going to at some point. To make him get wearily up from the couch certainly does not evoke the image of a bloodthirsty murderer; it may even be taken as evidence that he is innocent.

There is, however, a problem with this argument. The word “well”, uttered as a question, does not mean anything in itself, it is one of those words which used alone as a question, relies entirely upon context to be understood correctly. Even though the readers may understand this “well” as a question of life or death, so to speak, there is in fact nothing which indicates that Mr. Smith is thinking along the same lines. I have already stated that the passage which says “each of them knew now that the other knew” is not a revelation of the “truth” from an omniscient narrator; it is a description of Mrs. Smith’s thoughts. Mr. Smith may understand the “well” as a completely different question, perhaps he thinks his wife is asking whether he intends to take her to the bedroom and consummate their marriage, and gets up wearily because right now he would rather just relax on the couch with the newspaper. Or he might think she is asking him to take out the garbage. Even if he *is* a murderer, her

question can be interpreted in several different ways; thereby his weariness can not be taken as solid evidence in any direction.

In my analysis of “Version 1”, I have noted that the question of whether Mr. Smith really is Bluebeard becomes almost irrelevant, because his wife is staying with him no matter what the consequences, she depends completely upon him for emotional sustenance, to enable her to feel like a complete and worthy human being. Subsequently, she already is dead. The second Mrs. Smith also has more than her fair share of personal issues, although the social and cultural background for this is more clearly expressed in the text. She is convinced that her husband is a murderer, and that her life, which has had no meaning or direction since her father died, finally has fallen into place by casting herself in the role of victim and source of excitement in the neighbourhood. Since she is willing to risk being murdered in order to find a purpose in her life, she is also already dead. Again, we see that whether or not Mr. Smith really is a murderer, really does not make all that much of a difference. If he is not, his wife may of course be spared the horrible experience of being murdered, but in both cases, I find myself asking the question if such a situation may be said to constitute a full life. This is perhaps the most chilling realisation of all, to recognize these two women as so completely dependent on other people, men, fathers and husbands, that they are unable and unwilling to face life on their own.

On a symbolic level, Bluebeard’s existence can not be questioned. In “Version 2”, he symbolises a hindrance to women’s active participation in society in mid-20th century America. In “Version 1”, I conclude that Bluebeard is the non-personified force of progress, which threatens to do away with both Mr. and Mrs. Smith, as a consequence of their lack of participation in the world. But the question now becomes: whose responsibility is it? I have already ascertained that Mrs. Smith is every bit as active in her withdrawal from society, in her seclusion, as her husband, thereby making it hard to blame the situation entirely upon him.

If one, however, allows an influence from the argument dealing with “Version 2”, where I state that Mrs. Smith’s problem is that she has never learned how to be self-sufficient, one may argue that Mrs. Smith allows this to happen without question because she has been raised that way, her independent thought has been stifled through generations of ignorance and patriarchal domination. The notion of ignorance versus knowledge brings back the connection to Cheryl Renfroe’s article, in which she emphasises the similarities between the interpretation of the “Bluebeard” myth which states that the curious bride who gains access to the forbidden chamber is to blame, and the Christian myth of the Garden of Eden, where Eve gave in to temptation and ate from the forbidden tree. In this way, the particulars of the fate of Mrs. Smith is linked not only to the patriarchally dominated mid-20th century America with its social structures, but her fate also echoes all the way back to the very origin of Judeo-Christian religion, incorporating Genesis and the account of the Fall.

Conclusion

Bluebeard and his wife are still very much alive, despite of a few centuries' vigorous attempts to condemn them to oblivion. They may be found in a castle of foam on the coast of France, in one of Toronto's affluent family homes, or in an apartment building in urban America. They are highly adaptable, and willingly lend themselves to your social context of choice. This is the key to their continued existence.

The work of Margaret Atwood does not offer easy ways out. Even though the intertext of "Bluebeard" is clearly referred to in both "Alien Territory" and "Bluebeard's Egg", these tales resist interpretations that favour simple dichotomies. In "Alien Territory", Bluebeard is equipped with a life story, transposing his mythical presence into our contemporary daily drudgery. There is a wonderful sense of humour in the description of him first as a frightened child, and then, as he grows up and finds himself a bachelor, when he has to learn to cook and clean and iron his shirts. In "Alien Territory", Bluebeard's secret chamber houses his deceased inner self, in the shape of a child. In this tale, male fear of bodies, both other men's and women's bodies, and fear of the world and of himself, is what threatens to destroy everything around him. These tendencies are just as harmful to both men and women, a point which makes the tale deviate from the myth of "Bluebeard". Furthermore, Atwood also offers hope in the end, by giving a hint towards redemption. If you verbalize your body, talk about it, you recognize it. Once your own body is acknowledged, thereby making it "real", you can verbalize and realise the body of your significant other. This is the way out of Bluebeard's destructive castle in "Alien Territory".

In "Bluebeard's Egg", Atwood explores the effect of presenting everything from Sally's point of view. Atwood leaves plenty of ambiguous hints in the text, clues that may point towards Ed being a Bluebeard figure. But there are also clues that may indicate that Sally is

imagining everything that happens. “Bluebeard’s Egg” contains features which make it deviate from the “Bluebeard” pattern, and especially poignant is the assigning of features that traditionally are ascribed to the Bluebeard character to both Sally and Ed. Sally is the active and aggressive protagonist, while Ed is to a large extent closed off, which may make him appear secretive. There is no clear-cut Bluebeard character in this tale, in fact, there are no clear-cut answers in “Bluebeard’s Egg”. If male fear is a central feature in “Alien Territory”, female fear, symbolized by Sally, is prominent in “Bluebeard’s Egg”. But whether her fear is justly founded, or it makes her draw ill-conceived conclusions, is up to anyone’s point of view. This is symbolised through the egg, which one day will hatch and reveal the truth about Sally and Ed’s marriage.

Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”, being the only story here which is not set in a contemporary environment, differs from the other tales in that it most definitely contains a Bluebeard. There is never any doubt as to what sort of person the Count is, or as to his intentions with this marriage. Carter has been accused of catering to male-biased writing, but, like Atwood, her work is not that easily summarized. With Carter, we get several examples of gender play, where traits traditionally seen as male are assigned to female characters, and vice versa. A lot has been said about the doubling that takes place in the traditional “Bluebeard”, where Bluebeard and his last wife mirror each other. Doubling is especially significant in Carter’s tale, where the Count and the bride’s mother act as each other’s mirrored characters. This is an example of how Carter’s work resists gender dichotomies, by mirroring the Count and the mother, as well as the bride and her new husband, the blind piano tuner. The concept of religion also figures prominently in the interpretation of this story. Certain key features from biblical stories are found here, especially in the juxtaposition of the bride with the Eve of Genesis and the Count with God. The mark of Cain is also a central feature, in that it is likened to the permanent mark upon the bride’s forehead, as a mark of her shame.

Jackson's stories display the greatest discrepancy between the text and the myth of the intertext. While the two short stories by Atwood explicitly mention both the tale "Bluebeard" and the character Bluebeard, there is not the slightest whisper of either the tale or its protagonists in either version of "The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith". Nevertheless, the fairy tale is present in the suspicions of a murderous husband. I have read these two tales as commentaries on society in America during the mid 20th century. In "Version 1", both Mr. and Mrs. Smith come off as snobbish people who look down upon their neighbours and have no interest in participating in the community. With the "Bluebeard" intertext taken into account, especially the notion that the bride saves herself by maintaining her ties to the community, I see the Smiths as representatives of an outmoded wrong-headed decency, which manifests itself as snobbishness. Bluebeard in this context becomes the force of change and progress, something which threatens not only Mrs. Smith, but her husband as well.

"Version 2" is the only version of "Bluebeard" in which the bride has married Bluebeard because she wants to be murdered. Whether Mr. Smith really is the murderer everyone suspects him of being, is left to the reader to decide, on the basis of highly ambiguous clues. What is not ambiguous, however, is the thwarted mindset of Mrs. Smith, who feels that her life has regained its purpose if she is on the course to being murdered. I have read this story as a truly dismal comment on women's rights in American society after World War II, where Mrs. Smith's logic is an exaggerated consequence of women not learning how to live without a patriarchal guide. Mrs. Smith herself sees this as a completely natural state of affairs, and approaches her possible fate with perfect composure. In this story, the matter-of-fact style in which everyday life is described, creates an unsettling effect because of its juxtaposition with the myth of the intertext. It moves the bloodthirsty mythological figure of Bluebeard from the realm of the fairy tale into our contemporary

society, making it clear that even though the world of fairy stories never was a safe place, we are no better off in our own world.

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