

# Fairy Tales in the Classroom<sup>1</sup>

— Fairy Tales by Angela Carter and *Sailormoon*

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In this paper I am going to discuss two things. Firstly two fairy tales by Angela Carter with my students' response, secondly, a popular cartoon in Japan, named *Sailormoon*. Slowly but surely, young women in Japan are changing. Carter's tales give confidence to them and *Sailormoon* reflects the situation.

What are fairy tales? I will only point out two important aspects of them here. First, although fairy tales are not very realistic, they are convincing in their own way. Secondly, they are "living" with time and people, so they naturally change according to the time and the people.

Attitudes which we consciously disapprove of in ourselves, ...need to find expression, and can in terms of art find richer, subtler expression in indirect ways, rather than in direct and simple communication. There are many things about ourselves that we can hardly know directly but can satisfactorily deal with indirectly. Symbolism is indirect knowledge, often the subtler and fuller, if less precise, for being so.<sup>2</sup>

As Derek Brewer states here, fairy tales depict dramas of the human psyche, often in a very symbolic way. They are not realistic on the surface, but convincing on a deeper level.

The passages below are also from *Symbolic Stories*.

...every telling of a traditional story is an implicit interpretation of it. Traditional stories are not sacred myths for which variation is in theory inadmissible. Every teller who knows his art will heighten or suppress, change localisations so as to make them more vivid to the current audience, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

[Good traditional stories] depend for full life on the contribution of a sympathetic audience which lends something of itself to the story, and receives something of earlier minds.<sup>4</sup>

They are not necessarily a fixed entity but living with time and people, so each recounting could be a different version.

Generally speaking, Angela Carter's fairy tales are written in such a way as to answer indirectly some of the naïve questions young women living in the late twentieth century would ask. Especially the brave characters of the two stories I am going to talk about will encourage them.

The first short story I deal with, "The Werewolf,"<sup>5</sup> a retelling of "Red Riding Hood," is not a very successful story. Although witches are briefly mentioned at the very beginning, they are soon left behind, or at least it seems so to us readers, so it is rather surprising to find the grandmother is the wolf and witch after all.

If the grandmother is a witch by birth, then the girl may also be a hereditary one, which would make it impossible for her to prosper. When the author says "The Devil is as real as you and I" in the beginning, "you" would be the reader and "I" the author. The reader is drawn strangely close to the story. But "I" on the second page could be read as the mother. The reader cannot be sure if she is keeping a safe

distance from the story or not. Thus, she loses the proper sense of moral judgment, and cannot help feeling uneasy.

The wolf appears rather violently, and Red Riding Hood quickly uses her father's knife without hesitation. There are no sweet words of temptation, the girl doesn't seem the type to be tempted even if there were. The girl is too determined and brave to attract the reader's sympathy. She is flat and simply good. Consequently the drama seems to be played out not by the girl but by the werewolf.

When I read this story in class two years ago, the students did like Red Riding Hood for her courage. At the same time, most of them felt very sorry for the werewolf and two of them actually thought of witch hunting, studied and reported on it in class.

In this particular story, the emphasis is not on Red Riding Hood but on the werewolf. That is quite clear when you observe the title of the story again, which is nothing but "Werewolf."

"The Bloody Chamber,"<sup>6</sup> a Carter version of "Bluebeard" on the other hand, is an example of her satisfactory stories. By satisfactory, I mean convincing the reader of what Carter is doing in her story.

Before I deal with "The Bloody Chamber," I will briefly introduce *Blaubart — Wenn einer vernichtet, was er liebt* (Bluebeard — Why does he kill his love?) by Helmut Barz.<sup>7</sup>

According to Barz, the story of "Bluebeard" embodies what civilisation has done to the human mind. The wife stands for what is repressed in every community and also in every man and woman. Even the wife herself is not paying enough attention to the mind in herself, especially to a particular part of it called femininity, Barz says.

The solution Barz offers is that Bluebeard should lead his wife to the chamber, show her the room, ask her to understand and share his hideous secret, the core of his identity. Though I understand and

appreciate what he says, I think it is very difficult to do in fact.

Bluebeard leads his bride to open the door very effectively by setting a taboo not to, and giving her the key to the room at the same time. Still you cannot absolutely deny at least 1% of the possibility that very deeply in his heart he might desperately wish his bride to follow his instruction faithfully this time at last. That is, Bluebeard has two totally contradictory wishes for his bride: to defy him, and to be obedient. It is, according to de Beauvoir, exactly what a man always demands from his girl friend and wife: to be completely familiar and to be totally unknown and exciting. To be fair, I had better hastily add that women do demand the same from men.

Why is the story about this bride and not one of his successful murders? Because "Bluebeard" is the story about a man who is drawing his own death without realising it: he cannot help attracting his love dangerously near to his chamber, and yet he cannot stand the presence of a woman who has seen all of him. So he tries to control her thoroughly by killing her. In this primitive, rough world, to kill someone is to have a possibility to be killed in revenge. He is bringing about his own death in this way.

There is also another possibility. Bluebeard himself might have wished to die as a liberation from his own being. Yes, he is living quite happily undergoing ecstasy by killing his wives, one by one. At the same time, however, he might have been unconsciously disgusted with himself. It is clearer in "The Bloody Chamber" than in the original, especially when you read it together with other stories in the book. Actually you will meet a beautiful vampire who abhors being one in "The Lady of the House of Love."

A fairy tale has many, many layers of rich meanings, and each telling could clearly illuminate some of them. This is exactly what is happening in "The Bloody Chamber."

To return to the original: this story is about the attraction of death for Bluebeard as well as for the bride: for the former, death of the women he loves, and that of his own; for the latter, that of her predecessors, her own, and finally her husband's death.

This is also a story about growing pains. It tells us that we cannot grow up without coming dangerously close to others' secrets, threatening others, being driven to the brink of psychological, and sometimes even virtual death. We cannot grow up without severely tasting our own mortality. The story tells us there is no other way.

When "Bluebeard" is viewed in terms of a drama in a young woman's mind, then husband-killing by her brothers is not a rejection of him but a synthesizing of him into herself. In other words, the animus image in her is developing from a very primitive one into the next stage, although the actual image is not suggested at all. The image of a grown-up woman, which the girl should aim for, is also lacking. I don't mean to suggest it is a flaw. "Bluebeard" the original is a very symbolic and deep story as it stands.

When "The Bloody Chamber" is investigated in comparison with the traditional story, however, you will notice some significant differences. The brave mother, who knew her daughter's danger by intuition, is the most remarkable of all. The very moment the daughter's husband's sword was about to cut her neck, her mother arrived to save her.

On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages in the hills north of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head....

...I can only bless the — what shall I call it? — the maternal telepathy that sent my mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after I had called her, that night. I never heard you cry before, she said, by

way of explanation. Not when you were happy. And who ever cried because of gold bath taps? (P. 40.)

Now the daughter has come to a new understanding of her mother as an ideal image of a mature woman. You might find the mother too strong for the story to be sensible, but you will understand that she definitely needs to be very powerful to assert herself against Bluebeard, the enormously forceful, negative aspect of civilisation, especially when you think about it in the whole long history of the suppression of women.

My students enjoyed reading this story more than "The Werewolf." Although it is much longer and more difficult than the latter, it was easier for them to sympathize with the heroine, and fewer students sympathized with Bluebeard.

Now I will conclude briefly. There are many things missing from the original in the Carter versions. Most of the students felt sorry for the werewolf, and a few felt sorry even for Bluebeard. Probably it is partly because they feel guilty in denying the traditional female figure by admiring daring women.

Still, there are some good points in them. When people read the parody and retellings of fairy tales knowing the original thoroughly, they would naturally compare them and pay attention to the difference. Thus, Carter's tales invite the reader to pay fresh attention to the rich meaning of the original through the tension caused in the reader's mind. Carter's tales have this effect in common with every good recounting of the fairy tale.

Brave Red Riding Hood and the brave mother — they are not just waiting for rescue or for Prince Charming but daringly shape their own future, cutting the wolf's paw and saving her daughter by shooting

Bluebeard. To offer such images of women — that is what Carter is doing here. And in fact these images greatly encourage young women. Greek and Roman myths are abundant in active woman images, and so are Japanese myths. But young women in Japan nowadays don't read them any more and are suffering from a lack of appropriate models. They pretend to follow the traditional image of womanhood, mainly because they don't know any other, while strongly questioning if the only choice is to be a dependent woman. Some of them actually suffer from nervous breakdown, anorexic nervosa, and so on. Sometimes there are more serious cases among young women in Japan which lead them even to commit suicide.

Back to Angela Carter: though I admit that the Carter version of the fairy tales cannot be called perfect, when you think about the context in which they are set as I mentioned before, you will clearly understand how significant the stories could be to readers in general, and especially to young women.

Now it's time to leave the classroom and turn our attention to a brighter side of life. I'll make an account of *Sailormoon*.

*Sailormoon* could be seen as a fairy tale in modern Japan. As C.G. Jung repeatedly argues, the subculture of a country precisely reflects the unconscious of the people of that time, and whatever has found expression in this subculture in its turn influence the people.

“Sailor” means a school uniform and also a girl in it. It's a funny name, I know. But in Japan, if you ask any girl from three to sixteen, “Do you know *Sailormoon*?” then she will answer, “Yes, of course,” delightedly. Her name in ordinary life in Japanese is Tsukino Usagi, a rabbit in the moon. In daily life, as is expected, she is just an ordinary girl, rather stupid, but amiable and sympathetic. To be just like anyone else is one of the most highly esteemed values in any Japanese society

from political parties to nursery schools.

Just because the restriction to be average is so strong, all the Japanese love, almost indulge in “henshin” and “henso,” transformation and disguise respectively. From Mitokoumon, a disguised ex-vice shogun to Ultra-Man, a kind of Superman and Himitsu-no-Akkochan, a cartoon for girls, Japanese, regardless of sex and age, are obsessed by “henshin” and “henso.”

To return to *Sailormoon*: the transformed heroine, Sailormoon, could be very brave and fortunately not so stupid any longer. Her good point — to be sympathetic, when pushed to her limit, can produce an ultimate weapon and source of huge energy, called a phantom silver crystal. The Japanese cartoon heroine very often offers herself to save her friend’s life. Because of this self-sacrificing love, both the heroine and her friend, without exception, are miraculously saved beyond reason. Since this has happened so often, recently, as soon as such a crisis occurs, I always can foresee with certainty that the heroine and her friend in danger would be perfectly all right.

Why is she so popular among young girls in Japan? It is partly because she is safely within the traditional stereotype in her ordinary self, which makes her easily acceptable to the reader. As it is a national consensus that she is an ordinary girl, now the reader feels free to set about an adventure with Sailormoon, the transformed heroine. The transformed heroine reflects the reader’s sense of her secretive, almost unbelievably wonderful self lurking very deeply in herself, waiting for the opportunity to come into the world, which might never come.

Sailormoon was the Princess of the moon in her former reincarnation, in love with the Prince of the earth, named Endymion. She meets him reincarnated and is naturally attracted by him. The fact that this is a destined love makes that love acceptable to the young girls.

Sailormoon doesn’t even refrain from killing enemies when it is

necessary. She fights the most powerful of the enemy of human beings, evil itself. Her action is firmly based on the very Japanese creed of love, friendship and sympathy. The story is rather well organised, and also has a big scale covering the fate of the whole world and humanity, past, present and future. She is not just feminine but rather daringly sexy for a girl of fourteen in Japan. I have to confess that I found it unnecessarily sexy and dubious when I first saw the animation on television. I don't know if you have already noticed it or not, but the main difference in her costumes before and after transformation is the length of the skirt. A little bit daring but not too much — that's the reason why her sexiness is accepted and loved as a fulfilment of the girls' wish to be grown-up women. A slim, ideal woman's body and a pure girl's mind — that is the combination most young girls in Japan like to have.

That the heroine is not alone but has colleagues is also a new element, I mean, except in sports cartoons. As in fairy tales and folk tales, the plurality could be interpreted as indicating immaturity of the heroine's mind, but any way she has to cooperate with other girls overcoming conflict. It would also be useful for young girls as a model, as young people in Japan now are very often afraid of conflict too much and poor at having ordinary relationships with their friends.

When you look at boys' cartoon magazines on the other hand, you will find an aestheticism of violence there. Once some of them were rather philosophical and deep, but not now.

The difference between these cartoons picturing beauty of violence and *Sailormoon* clearly reflects the difference between young men and women in general in Japan. The young Japanese man on the one hand is spoilt more and more by the mother who spends plenty of time on him because her husband is too busy. The young woman, on the other hand, is doubtful about the traditional role of the woman as the only

choice, has rather cool eyes and doesn't dream about marriage any more. One of my students once described marriage as retirement!

Now I will conclude briefly returning to *Sailormoon*. Although *Sailormoon* is safely within the stereotype of the woman in many senses, she is also a brave girl fighting with the enemy of human beings. She encourages Japanese girls very much and the girls heartily applaud her. The fact that she is very popular indicates that girls and young women in Japan want to change and are changing. *Sailormoon* reflects and Carter helps the change. Just because Japan is still a strongly male-dominated society, women are in a privileged position. Because they are not cogs in the machine in Japan Cooperation, women can afford to be doubtful of the ready-made values of male society and modern culture. So, I am looking forward to seeing what will become of the girls who enjoyed *Sailormoon* when I see them in the classroom.

#### Notes

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2. Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1980) 8.
3. Brewer 4.
4. Brewer 6.
5. Angela Carter, "The Werewolf," *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmonds-

worth: Penguin, 1979).

6. Angela Carter, "The Bloody Chamber," *The Bloody Chamber*.
7. Helmut Barz, *Blaubart — Wenn einer vernichtet, was er liebt*, trans. Michiyoshi Hayashi (Tokyo: Shinyosha, 1992).