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Gothic Subversions of Romance and Domesticity: An Analysis of Female Entrapment Within Marriage in *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber'.

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Table of Contents:

Acknowledgments. Page 4.

Abstract. Page 5.

Introduction. Page 6-8.

Literature Review. Page 8-10.

Intertwining the Genres: Definitions. Page 10-12.

Chapter 1: Absent Mothers. Page 12-16.

Chapter 2: Rewriting the 'Bluebeard' Myth. Page 17-22.

Chapter 3: 'Do you think the dead come back and haunt the living?' Page 22-25.

Conclusion. Page 25-26.

Bibliography. Page 27-28.

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Abstract.

This dissertation explores how *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier and 'The Bloody Chamber' by Angela Carter subvert traditional representations of romance and domesticity. They do this through the Gothic mode revealing the psychological and social entrapment of women within patriarchal structures. Focusing on themes of secrecy, power, marriage, and female oppression, this study argues that both texts rework familiar Gothic and fairy tale tropes to critique the illusion of romantic fulfilment and expose the dangers embedded within the domestic sphere. While *Rebecca* exposes the realities within a marriage by centring on a heroine trapped in the shadow of her husband's past, 'The Bloody Chamber' unravels the violence underlying fairy tale endings, using Gothic elements to foreground female vulnerability and resistance.

This dissertation is broken into three chapters, the first examines the absent mother trope and the resulting isolation of female protagonists. The second explores the influence of the 'Bluebeard' tale as a narrative device used to critique the dangers hidden within domestic and romantic intimacy. The last chapter analyses the Gothic setting as a manifestation of social and psychological imprisonment. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how both authors use Gothic conventions not to replicate but to challenge dominant cultural narratives about gender, romance, and domestic life.

Introduction.

Gothic literature and fairy tales have often been used to explore cultural anxieties surrounding gender, domesticity, and power. Fairy tales portray the home as a sanctuary and marriage as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's life however the Gothic has provided writers with a way to challenge these ideals, revealing the darker realties. This is clear in both Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'. This dissertation argues that du Maurier and Carter use the Gothic mode to subvert traditional fairy tale structures not to uphold romantic and domestic ideals, but to expose the violence, entrapment, and disillusionment hidden beneath them. Through their portrayal of isolated heroines with no maternal guidance, corrupted versions of romance, and threatening domestic spaces, both authors destabilise the fantasy of romantic fulfilment and domestic bliss.

Written in 1938 *Rebecca* is one of du Maurier's best-selling novels. The novel instantly became a best seller and was praised for its atmosphere, plot, and characters. As Auba Llompart Pons identifies 'criticism of *Rebecca* is divided into those who read it as a Gothic love story, ... and those who identify the novel as a reworking of the Bluebeard tale.'[1] Some read the novel as a romance, where love ultimately triumphs over fear. This interpretation aligns with how *Rebecca* was originally marketed as an 'exquisite love story with a brilliantly created atmosphere and suspense ... in short, as a gothic romance.'[2] However, recently more critical readings recognise *Rebecca* as a subversive Gothic narrative, more closely aligned with the 'Bluebeard' myth. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, 1979, is a collection of short stories, this dissertation focuses specifically on the title story 'The Bloody Chamber'. Carter takes inspiration from traditional fairy tales to expose the concealed gender inequalities. As Andrew Smith notes, 'her rewriting of folk tales ... represents an explicit attempt to make visible the concealed gender narratives to the tales collected.'[3] Smith also argues that Gothic itself should not be seen as a form that reflects cultural debates but one that 'reworks, develops, and challenges them.'[4] Both authors use the Gothic to subvert and question the cultural debates of their time through their work.

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[1] Auba Llompart Pons, "Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca"," *Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 38, no. 1 (2013): 70.
[2] Sally Beauman, "Introduction," in *Rebecca,* Daphne du Maurier (London: Virago, 2003), V.
[3] Andrew Smith ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 8.
[4] Ibid.,

This dissertation will first attempt to define the Gothic tradition, a genre which has been difficult to outline. Eva Figes notes that as Gothic fiction developed it became 'an imaginative vehicle for feminism, since it provided a radical alternative to the daylight reality of conformity and acceptance, offering a dark world of the psyche in which women were the imprisoned victims off men.'[5] The Gothic offered a space where women's experiences of confinement and helplessness under male dominated structures could be both dramatized and challenged. Defining the Gothic mode will help to show how du Maurier and Carter rework the genre's conventions. Following this, the dissertation will move to the tropes of fairy tales, and their reinforcement of gender norms and value placed upon marriage. Carter herself notes the marginalisation of women's storytelling when she said that fairy tales are 'worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it.'[6] Carter is aware of the unfairness and uses 'The Bloody Chamber' to restore significance to the stories women have told, and to further use them as a means of social critique. While fairy tales often conclude with marriage, *Rebecca* unsettles this idea by focusing on the reality of marriage rather than ending the narrative with it. Through the Gothic and fairy tales, both authors reveal the supressed stories of female experience.

The first chapter explores the absent mother trope. In most Gothic and fairy tale narratives, the absence of a mother figure often leaves the young female protagonist vulnerable. In *Rebecca*, the narrator's lack of maternal guidance leaves her in the care of the arrogant Mrs Van Hopper then heightens her dependence on Maxim. However, Carter subverts this idea by having the protagonist's mother be the one to save her. Seda Arikan identifies how Carter 'started to decode the latent meanings in texts narrated by ruling sexist male ideology and to retell some earlier writings from the female point of view.'[7] Carter's re-vison of the mother figure creates a feminist alternative to traditional haplessness. Chapter two then explores the influence of Charles Perrault's fairy tale 'Bluebeard.' Du Maurier uses the west wing as a forbidden space to resemble Bluebeard's chamber, whereas Carter similarly includes a hidden chamber. *Rebecca* demonstrates a more ambiguous critique of 'Bluebeard', where the narrator is caught in a web of lies yet in the end still loves her Bluebeardian figure. Anne Williams in her book, *Art of Darkness*, questions 'what if 'Bluebeard' had been narrated by Bluebeard's wife?'[8] Carter does this by giving voice and agency to the narrator, disturbing the idea of traditional male dominance. Finally the third chapter will analyse the role of

[5] Eva Figes, *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Writers to 1850* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), 57.
[6] Carter page 77 1990. The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book. New York: Pantheon Books.
[7] Seda Arikan, "Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber: A Feminist Stylistic Approach," *The Journal of International Social Sciences* 26, no. 2 (2016): 118.
[8] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 47.

setting in constructing a Gothic atmosphere. Manderley and the Marquis' castle are not just physical structures but active agents of psychological turmoil and oppression. This chapter will explore how the houses embody violence and the haunting elements that entrap the heroines. Overall, this dissertation aims to demonstrates how *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber' radically reimagine traditional romantic and domestic ideals. Instead of reinforcing myths of happy endings and domestic bliss, the authors offer narratives in which agency, self-knowledge, and survival emerge.

Literature Review.

When analysing *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber', it is important to consider their classification within the subgenre of the Female Gothic. This term was first introduced by Ellen Moers in her seminal 1976 work *Literary Women*, where she defined it as 'the work that woman writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic.'[9] For Moers, the Female Gothic was not merely a thematic or stylistic variation of the genre, but a way through which women could express their dissatisfaction with patriarchal society. This was often done through metaphorical narratives of imprisonment, madness, and rebellion. Her idea of the Female Gothic shows how domestic confinement, psychological entrapment, and sexual repression became central to Gothic fiction written by women. This offered a unique way through which women could critique the limitations placed upon them. Moers says that in Gothic writings 'fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace ... with one definite auctorial intent: to scare.'[10] The emphasis on fantasy and the strange allows women writers to explore fears, power dynamics, and desires that might be limited in more realistic literary forms. The Gothic is not used to inspire deep philosophical reflection as tragedy might, 'but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.'[11] Ultimately, the Female Gothic becomes a site of embodied resistance creating texts that not only symbolise women's oppression but force the reader to feel it.

Moers made an important contribution to the idea of Female Gothic, yet her definition was foundational. Williams developed a more rigorous structural framework in her book *Art of Darkness.* Williams critiques Moers' lack of theoretical precision and instead draws on psychoanalytical theory and myth to distinguish between what she terms 'male' and 'female' Gothic. Williams says the Male Gothic follows the Oedipal model which is centred on action, transgression,

[9] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 90.
[10] Ibid.,
[11] Ibid.,

and punishment, whereas the Female Gothic mirrors the myth of the Psyche, focusing on a heroine 'making her way in an essentially patriarchal social order' often within a domestic setting that is haunted by the past.[12] Williams' framework helped to shape my ideas on how both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber' use secrecy and space to portray the heroine's social and psychological entrapment. In both texts a young woman enters a powerful, male dominated space, Manderley in *Rebecca* and the Marquis' castle in 'The Bloody Chamber', where history and danger are hidden by a romantic illusion. Therefore, like many Gothic settings, these homes become more than physical structures, as Williams says the Gothic structure is 'haunted by "history" — the events of its own development.'[13] Manderley is instilled with the lingering presence of Rebecca, the preserved west wing symbolises the hold she still exerts of Maxim and the household while also psychologically imprisoning the narrator. Similarly, the Marquis' castle is haunted by his former wives and his instruments of torture. The Bloody Chamber itself is the physical manifestation of his past crimes. Williams helps to prove these homes are not sites of safety or romantic fulfilment, but physical embodiments of the oppressive systems the narrators must confront or escape.

Jack Zipes' *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* discusses how fairy tales promote ideals of domesticity and female obedience. He shows how fairy tales often end with marriage, leaving unexamined the realties that follow, thus reinforcing the illusion of romantic fulfilment. Zipes says that 'it became vital to bring about socialization through fairy tales and the internalization of specific values and notions of gender' suggesting that classical fairy tales operated as tools of control.[14] Young women were taught that passivity and submission would lead to marriage and happiness. Zipes maintains that fairy tales, particularly from Perrault onward, became an easy way to enforce patriarchal standards constructing the ideal 'femme civilisée' (civilised woman).[15] This woman was to be 'beautiful, polite, graceful, industrious, and properly groomed and knows how to control herself at all times.'[16] Zipes' analysis of the 'Bluebeard' myth informs this dissertation's reading of Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'. The protagonist's trajectory from innocence to independence unravels the idea of the obedient bride, confronting what Zipes identifies as the fairy tale's implicit endorsement of female docility. He acknowledges how fairy tales suggest that 'marriage is the ultimate reward for a good girl's behavior.'[17] In both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber', this idea is shown to be not only misleading but dangerous. Zipes notes 'the contrived

[12] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 161.
[13] Ibid., 45.
[14] Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.
[15] Ibid., 40.
[16] Ibid., 40-41.
[17] Ibid., 54.

happy endings of standardized fairy tales are delusional and misleading,' an idea which is prevalent in both texts.[18] By showing the after math of the anticipated happy ending, marriage, the texts deliberately destabilise the romantic fantasy promised by conventional fairy tales.

Intertwining the Genres:

The interplay between the Gothic genre and fairy tales serves as an interesting and powerful means of exploring female entrapment specifically within marriage and a domestic setting. Certain fairy tales have historically reinforced traditional gender roles, portraying heroines as passive and promising a happy ending. Whereas Gothic fiction destabilises these conventions illustrating love as dangerous, intense, and potentially destructive. Du Maurier uses the uncertainty and suspense of Gothic fiction to reveal the anxieties surrounding female identity within a patriarchal marriage. Carter explicitly takes inspiration from fairy tale structures to expose misogyny inherent in the traditional tales, infusing them with a modern, feminist perspective. Moreover, both authors use the Gothic space to subvert traditional notions of the home and the fairy tale castle. These spaces are typically associated with safety and security yet through the Gothic genre these familiar structures are transformed into places of threat and violence.

Gothic: A Definition.

In *the Routledge Companion to Gothic* the Gothic is defined as 'a form that escapes anything but the loosest of definitions.'[19] The Gothic genre is an elusive one that resists being confined to a fixed definition. Certain physical motifs like Smith describes: 'representations of ruins, castles, monasteries, and forms of monstrosity, and images of insanity, transgression, the supernatural, and excess, all typically characterise the form'; however, there has not been a clear critical agreement on a definition.[20] Fundamentally the Gothic is concerned with themes of isolation, evil, transgression, and fear which are often explored through the settings and psychological instability. The first novel described as Gothic is *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. As Serena Trowbridge points out the novel 'provides the original for many hallmarks of the genre, such as the castle, family, ghosts, a hero or heroine in a difficult situation, a preoccupation with history and hidden identities.'[21] Both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber' draw on these traditions, incorporating key Gothic tropes like isolation and castles that are inspired by Walpole. Moreover, the authors show how the genre's

[18] Ibid., XIII.
[19] Smith ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, 29.
[20] Ibid., 4.
[21] Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 10.

preoccupation with entrapment and darkness extends beyond physical spaces and into the psychological.

Fairy Tales: A Definition.

Not only are *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber' classed as Gothic, but they also share similar tropes with the fairy tale tradition. Steven Jones offers four of these fairy tale tropes:

> Fairytales depict magical or marvellous events or phenomena as a valid part of a human experience.
>
> The confronting and resolving of a problem, frequently by the undertaking of a quest, [is] essential to a fairy tale.
>
> This happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre, it may be regarded as a third definitional feature.
>
> A fourth quality of the fairytale is that the audience is encouraged to identify strongly with the central protagonist, who is presented in an unambiguous way.[22]

While no outright magic is mentioned in the stories both authors create an atmosphere where the past haunts the present in an almost supernatural way. Both texts also centre on heroines who must confront and uncover hidden truths about their husbands which resembles a fairy tale quest. Arguably both texts have happy endings. The narrator in *Rebecca* is utterly devoted to Maxim, longing for nothing but him to love her which she receives. By the end of the novel she is living the life she wanted with no rival for affection. In 'The Bloody Chamber' the protagonist survives death and finds a new sense of freedom living with her mother and Jean-Yves who represents a form of real love. Although heterosexual love is included in the story Carter bases the happy ending on female empowerment not romantic love. Lastly both texts provide young and innocent female heroines who invite strong reader identifications, yet they are far more psychologically complex than a traditional fairy tale heroine. They evoke a more complex range of emotions, moving beyond a simplistic focus on romantic love.

[22] Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9-17.

Unlike the Gothic, fairy tales have historically reinforced societal norms, especially those concerning gender roles, romantic fulfilment, and morality. Zipes argues that as:

> Society became more regulated ... the pressures placed on children to conform to role models became more severe. In keeping with rigid social standards that denounced open forms of sexual behavior, table manners, dress, and natural functioning as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilized'.[23]

Zipes explains that as society became more structured fairy tales served as didactic tools to reinforce societal norms, essentially teaching children to suppress certain instincts and conform to gendered roles. However, du Maurier and Carter use the Gothic to subvert these traditional fairy tale tropes, transforming what should be a romantic love story into a harrowing reality.

Chapter one: Absent Mothers

This chapter will explore the absent mother trope in *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber', to demonstrate how the authors re-purpose fairy tale elements to expose the patriarchal structures that restrict women's autonomy within marriage. Fairy tales have long reinforced passive and obedient heroines whose fates are determined by the men that save or marry them, positioning marriage as a women's ultimate reward. Alternatively, Gothic fiction introduces themes of fear, and confinement dismantling the illusion of a perfect romance. By intertwining these conflicting genres, du Maurier and Carter reveal how love and marriage can be sites of power, control, and violence. The Gothic's trope of entrapment within a domestic setting serves as the perfect vehicle for this exploration. Using the absent mother trope and the blending of the genres both authors interrogate traditional narratives of romance to expose the dangers.

At the heart of the texts is the Gothic revelation that marriage is not always a site of love and security, but often one of control and power. In her book, *From the Beast to the Blonde,* Marina Warner identifies that:

> Fairy tales offered gratifications that were already, at the age of eleven, considered feminine: dreams of love as well as the sweets of quick and capital revenge; they became part of the

[23] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 38.

> same private world of growing up female as the treasure drawer in which I hoarded special pictures and tokens.[24]

Warner reflects on how fairy tales that are identified as feminine shaped her understanding of girlhood. These stories were not just entertainment but part of a bigger cultural framework that reinforced gendered stereotypes. The 'dreams of love' point to the romantic ideals found in fairy tales, which teach young girls that love and marriage should be at the centre of their life goals.[25] Fairy tales may provide pleasure, but they also act as a form of social conditioning for young girls. This is evident in 'Cinderella', which follows a girl who is mistreated by her stepfamily and goes on to marry the prince. There are countless versions of the story, but I am referring to the Brothers Grimm's version. Cinderella's mother dies in the opening sentence and reminds her daughter to remain pious and good. Cinderella is not encouraged to be strong or clever but to remain patient and submissive, suggesting that is where her virtue lies. Another important trait often associated with female protagonists in fairy takes is beauty, which is seen in 'Cinderella'. Anna Wynn identifies that traditional fairy tales usually depict 'heroines as passive, with no real power or agency, whose greatest attribute is their beauty, as opposed to villainous women – evil stepmothers and old witches – who ... are active and have power, something these stories teach girls to avoid.'[26] The stories imply that a beautiful girl is destined for a happy ending, while power and female independence is associated with villainous or unattractive women, portraying them as something to be feared or condemned.

The opening line of 'Cinderella' establishes the absence of maternal protection, leaving the young girl to navigate the world alone. Warner observes how 'the absence of the mother from the tale is often declared at the start, without explanation, as if none were required.'[27] This recurring omission is odd, considering that mothers are stereotypically viewed as nurturing and devoted figures who prioritise their children's well-being over everything. Warner justifies this by suggesting that 'the absent mother can be read literally as ... a feature of the family before our modern era, when death in childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality.'[28] Although, the absence of mothers in fairy tales also has a greater narrative purpose, it leaves the female protagonists vulnerable and exposed to external influences.

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[24] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), XIV.
[25] Ibid.,
[26] Anna Patricia Wynn, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and the (Fe)Male Gaze in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*," *Eger Journal of English Studies* 19, no.1 (2019): 78.
[27] Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 210.
[28] Ibid., 213.

Similarly, in Gothic fiction the mother is also often absent. Ruth Anolik states:

> All Gothic women are threatened, no woman is in greater peril in the world of the Gothic than is the mother. The typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned ... the mothers of most Gothic heroines are dead long before the readers meet the daughters.[29]

This idea is prevalent in other Gothic literature like *The Castle of Otranto*, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Just as fairy tales frequently begin with the death of the mother Gothic fiction amplifies this theme, using an absence of a mother to heighten the heroine's isolation. Anolik states that 'critics note that the figure of the mother exerts social control and order, providing the resistance to deviance that is beneficial to society but detrimental to narrative.'[30] Mothers represent stability and enforce social rules therefore they help maintain an ordered society. Consequently, the absence of a mother allows the heroine to make mistakes and face struggles alone creating drama and tension which ultimately makes for a more engaging narrative.

Rebecca mirrors this by providing no mention of the narrator's mother, instead placing her in the hands of Mrs Van Hopper. Rather than offering wisdom and comfort Mrs Van Hopper views the narrator as beneath her and is condescending, and spiteful. The narrator describes her as a 'snob' and says, 'gossip was the breath of life to her.'[31] Like Cinderella's cruel stepmother, Mrs Van Hopper controls and belittles the narrator. The narrator says she 'would feel like a whipping boy who must bear his master's pains.'[32] A 'whipping boy' historically referred to a servant who was punished in place of a noble child indicating the narrator sees herself as expendable, existing only to be dismissed, criticised, and used for convenience.[33] The narrator remains controlled by Mrs Van Hopper until Maxim 'recuses' her. Although this rescue is arguably an illusion, she moves from one controlling relationship to the next with Maxim who treats her as a child. When asking the narrator to marry him Maxim explains 'instead of being companion to Mrs Van Hopper you become mine.'[34] This shows a transactional shift in ownership instead of a romantic marriage proposal. This highlights the imminent power imbalance to be expected in their marriage while also reflecting Gothic themes of entrapment and control. Anolik identifies that marriage does not 'afford a safe

[29] Ruth Anolik, "The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode," *Modern Language Studies* 33, no.1 (2003): 25.
[30] Ibid., 28 Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago Press, 2015), 12-13.
[31] Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Virago Press, 2015), 12-13.
[32] Ibid., 12.
[33] Ibid.,
[34] Ibid., 59.

haven to Gothic women ... wives are frequently imprisoned by their husbands.'[35] Marriage may save the heroine in traditional fairy tales like 'Cinderella' but that is rarely the case in Gothic fiction. Until the narrator discovers Maxim's secret she is confined to a role of submission and insecurity. She obsesses over Maxim's former wife, yet he provides little reassurance and comfort as a husband should. Mrs Van Hopper offers the narrator no guidance on marriage, dismissing her decision with 'to be perfectly frank, my dear, I simply can't see you doing it' and adding, 'personally I think you are making a big mistake—one you will bitterly regret.'[36] Her reaction may stem from jealousy over the narrator's new found status as it is known she is obsessed with wealth. Alternatively, her response may simply reveal genuine disdain as she has such little regard for the narrator that she cannot imagine her succeeding in marriage. Either way, Mrs Van Hopper's reaction reinforces the narrator's lack of guidance and support, leaving her ill-prepared for the complexities of her new life at Manderley.

Carter radically changes the absent mother trope by transforming her into the protagonist's saviour. Just like du Maurier's protagonist Carter's begins as a traditional fairy tale heroine, young, naïve, and newly wed to a wealthy and mysterious older man. When her fate does not follow the expected trajectory of a fairy tale it is her mother who saves her. 'The Bloody Chamber' is a version of Perrault's fairy tale 'Bluebeard'. In 'Bluebeard', the heroine is rescued by her brothers: 'the two brothers pursued so closely, that they overtook him before he could get to the steps of the porch, when they ran their swords through his body, and left him dead.'[37] However, in Carter's version the 'indomitable' mother is the one to save the heroine.[38] The narrator recalls her mother's past, noting her bravery as a woman who was able to shoot 'a man-eating tiger with her own hand' and 'outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates.'[39] This description is a striking contrast to the absent mothers in fairy tales and in *Rebecca*. Carter's decision to create a mother who is an active force of female defiance and protection subverts the fairy tale model, replacing male authority with female strength. Moreover, as Wynn identifies

> The fact that another character introduced by Carter— Jean-Yves, the (blind) piano tuner— is also present in this scene yet is not the one to save the heroine is crucial, it emphasises the

[35] Anolik, "The Missing Mother," 25.
[36] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 66; Ibid.,
[37] Joseph Southall, *The Story of Bluebeard* (London: Pook Press, 2015) 8.
[38] Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), 1.
[39] Ibid., 2; Ibid.,

> outdated nature of notions such as women's dependence on men to save them and suggests the alternative of women helping each other.[40]

Carter is defiantly rejecting the stereotypes placed around women and is emphasising the power of female agency and solidarity over the passive dependence on men. Carter does not even allow for the new love interest to save the heroines life – her feminist writing allows the mother to receive all credit and illustrates the strong bond between mother and daughter.

When the narrator is to be married the mother asks, 'are you sure you love him?' to which the narrator responds, 'I'm sure I want to marry him.'[41] The narrator then acknowledges how the mother 'sighed, as if it was with reluctance that she might at last banish the spectre of poverty from its habitual place at our meagre table.'[42] This exchange highlights the mother's displeasure of the marriage, as she understands her daughter does not really love the Marquis. However, due to her financial situation she feels powerless to intervene, understanding she cannot give her daughter a better life. Wynn observes that 'the heroine grew up without a father but had a strong mother figure as well as a loving nurse ... [which] emphasises the importance of women supporting each other.'[43] The protagonist recognises this support when she is in the Bloody Chamber, stating 'my mother's spirit drove me on.'[44] Carter consistently reinforces the theme of female empowerment, allowing it to be a central force in the story. Unlike the absent mother in *Rebecca* and traditional fairy tales, the mother in 'The Bloody Chamber' demonstrates concern for her daughter's well-being. The mother intervenes to save her daughter from the Gothic horrors of marriage.

In both stories, the absence or subversion of the mother figure is crucial in shaping the heroine's vulnerability and resistance. While du Maurier uses maternal absence to highlight the narrator's isolation and naivety within marriage and her new home, Carter reclaims the mother figure as a source of strength and salvation. Both authors reveal that the loss or distortion of maternal guidance leaves young women exposed to patriarchal controls and entrapment, making the mother's role central to the heroine's struggle for agency and survival.

[40] Wynn, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and the (Fe)Male Gaze," 80.
[41] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 2.
[42] Ibid.,
[43] Wynn, "Motherhood, Sexuality, and the (Fe)Male Gaze," 80.
[44] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 26.

Chapter two: Rewriting the 'Bluebeard' Myth.

Perrault's 1697 French fairy tale, 'Bluebeard' influenced both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber'. 'Bluebeard' tells the story of a wealthy man with a blue beard who marries a young, unnamed woman and forbids her from opening the door to a specific chamber in his castle. When she disobeys, she discovers the bodies of his previous wives. Bluebeard nearly kills her, but her brothers intervene, resulting in his death. With no heirs, the wife inherits his fortune and marries again for love. This story has long served as a cautionary tale about female obedience and curiosity. Zipes explains the lessons in 'Bluebeard': 'the heroine is beautiful and well-bred but too curious ... the moral explains that it is a sin for a woman to be curious and imaginative and that women must exercise self-control.'[45] This chapter will explore how du Maurier and Carter illustrate female curiosity as a source of power that can be both damaging and freeing. Both texts use the Gothic to transform marriage from a romantic ideal into a space of entrapment, where male authority manifests through secrecy and coercion. By engaging with 'Bluebeard' in different ways, du Maurier and Carter critique the traditional dynamics of heterosexual marriage, revealing how it often functions as a site of manipulation, dependency, and, in its most extreme form, violence.

The notion of female curiosity being dangerous is a central theme in *Rebecca*, explored through the narrator's obsession with her husband's past. In 'Bluebeard' the wife enters a marriage unknowing of her husband's true nature; she passes all authority of her life to a man she barely knows. This dynamic is paralleled in *Rebecca*, where Maxim exerts power over the narrator not just through wealth and status but through the ability to control the narrative of his past. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's curiosity is shaped by her insecurity which fuels her desire to learn more about Maxim's first wife Rebecca. Unlike the protagonist in 'The Bloody Chamber', who actively seeks knowledge, the narrator in *Rebecca* searches for the truth in a more hesitant and secretive way. She eavesdrops on conversations, obsesses over strange things like Rebecca's handwriting, and relies on fragments of information provided by other characters. The narrator is initially obedient and passive, confirming to the 'well-bred' heroine archetype despite her deep curiosity about Rebecca. Within a patriarchal marriage a woman's curiosity, especially about her husband's past, was seen as something that must be controlled. It is the discovery of Rebecca's body that forces Maxim to confess to her murder and open up to the narrator. As Heta Pyrhönen observes 'this scene departs from the intertext, for du Maurier's Bluebeard himself opens the door to his forbidden chamber by

[45] Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion,* 40.

telling his secret to the second wife.'[46] Unlike in 'Bluebeard', where the wife's curiosity leads her to a gruesome revelation, here, it is Maxim himself who reveals the truth, though whether this confession is a result of love or necessity remains uncertain. Thus, the narrator's curiosity is both destructive and revelatory. It fuels her insecurity and mental turmoil, yet it also leads her to the truth.

By choosing to confide in the narrator, Maxim gains the ability to manipulate the narrative and present Rebecca as the villain. Due to the novel's first-person perspective, it's crucial to remember that the audience is limited to the narrator's understanding, which is shaped entirely by Maxim's account of Rebecca. As Pons questions, 'what if Maxim is the one who is lying, and Rebecca was as good as her reputation held her to be, with his jealousy being the true motive for her murder?'[47] This uncertainty leaves room for doubt, suggesting that Maxim's version of events may not be the absolute truth, yet the narrator accepts this version of events therefore by force so does the reader. Following his confession Maxim expresses his love for the narrator and kisses her in a way she notes as unfamiliar: 'he had not kissed me like this before.'[48] Maxim may be manipulating her, using affection as a means of control, knowing that is what she wants. Affection is a reward for her silence. Despite this newfound intimacy their relationship remains unequal, defined by power and dependency. Pyrhönen highlights that 'many interpreters have noticed the unsatisfactory nature of the heterosexual union and have pointed out that the confession changes the husband's and the wife's roles, for he becomes infantilised.'[49] The narrator, who was previously described as a 'unsatisfactory child', now assumes a position of power, while Maxim is rendered dependant.[50] The narrator observes that 'he stared at me ... like a puzzled child.'[51] Maxim, once the authoritative figure, is now subjected to the narrator's control as she possesses information that could ruin his reputation, mirroring his former dynamic with Rebecca. The shift in power highlights du Maurier's subversion of 'Bluebeard': the women in *Rebecca*, unlike their fairy tale counterparts, possess the ability to dismantle their husband's reputation. While 'Bluebeard' punishes female disobedience as a moral failing, *Rebecca* reverses this dynamic, positioning Maxim, the man, as the submissive figure. Interestingly, Maxim demonises Rebecca for threatening him yet admires the narrator for keeping his secret safe. Perhaps this is because Maxim knows the narrator will be a devoted wife, he knows her love for him, whereas he could never control Rebecca. Within their marriage she dictated

[46] Heta Pyrhönen, "Bluebeard's Accomplice: "Rebecca" as a Masochistic Fantasy," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 38, no. 3 (2005): 153.
[47] Pons, "Patriarchal Hauntings", 71.
[48] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 300.
[49] Pyrhönen, "Bluebeard's Accomplice," 153.
[50] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 50.
[51] Ibid., 402.

the terms of their relationship, living exactly as she pleased. Maxim says 'our marriage was a farce ... She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, ... Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal.'[52] Evidently Maxim despised Rebecca yet remained married to her just to keep up appearances; he says it was 'the gossip, the publicity I dreaded.'[53] Upon discovering Maxim's crime the narrator is not horrified but feels triumphant as she relishes in the knowledge that Maxim never truly loved Rebecca, liberating her from the jealously and insecurity that previously consumed her. The narrator does not act on it or question his actions, perhaps because her deep love for Maxim blinds her to any wrongdoing. Moreover, her intense insecurity makes her complicit, willing to accept any outcome that removes Rebecca from their lives. Through the narrator's transformation from passive to assertive du Maurier challenges the traditional 'Bluebeard' narrative, replacing the fairy tale's message of female obedience with an exploration of how knowledge and curiosity may be damaging yet can become a source of power and liberation within a marriage.

In 'The Bloody Chamber' Carter portrays female curiosity as a virtue and highlights its significance in her short story. The story is a version of Perrault's 'Bluebeard'; however, Carter makes it clear that *The Bloody Chamber* is a collection of 'new stories, not retellings.'[54] She uses 'The Bloody Chamber' to expose the misogyny inherent in the original tale. One interpretation of 'Bluebeard' is Helen Simpson's. She states that:

> Perrault drew the moral that female curiosity leads to retribution, though in the France of his time, where death in childbirth was commonplace and four-fifths of the resultant widowers remarried, the bloody chamber might surely have been seen as the womb.[55]

Perrault's opinion reflected broader patriarchal ideas of his time – women should remain obedient and not seek knowledge or independence. Jan de Bruyn supports this as she says 'learning in women, like their wit, [was] dangerous' in the seventeenth century.[56] Moreover, since most widowed men at the time quickly remarried, women were seen as replaceable, like Bluebeard's wives, who are discarded and replaced in a cycle of death and remarriage. 'Bluebeard' may symbolise both the danger and mystery of female reproduction and sexuality. Women were expected to bear children, yet in doing so they risk death. Whereas Simpson recognises 'in Carter's

[52] Ibid., 304.
[53] Ibid., 310.
[54] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, VII.
[55] Ibid., XIII.
[56] Jan de Bruyn, "The Ideal Lady and the Rise of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century England," *Mosaic* 17, no. 1 (1984): 20.

twentieth-century version, the menace is located not in the perils of childbirth, but in the darker side of heterosexuality, in sadomasochism and the idea of fatal passion.'[57] Carter's story shifts the focus away from childbirth and uses the chamber to highlight the broader dangers of male control in relationships. She explores how desire and violence become intertwined under patriarchal marriages, transforming the focus from biological fate to gendered power dynamics. To do this Carter mixes the original fairy tale with the Gothic genre as 'Gothic fictions presented different, more exciting, worlds in which heroines in particular could encounter not only frightening violence but also adventurous freedom.'[58] The Gothic space allows Carter's heroine to be curious and ultimately disobey and defeat her husband.

Just like du Maurier's narrator Carter's also marries someone with a greater social status than her. Nicholas Ruddick points out that:

> What Carter sees clearly is that 'Bluebeard' is about a husband and wife who embody the stark imbalance of sexual power in traditional marriage. Carter emphasizes the antagonist's massive social weight that allows him to bear down upon his wives as remorselessly as gravity.[59]

The Marquis uses his authority to control his wife, ensuring she does as he pleases. Yet his decision to give her all the keys even the one to the chamber seems contradictory if his true intention is to keep his secret hidden. Ruddick offers an explanation: 'Bluebeard wants her to transgress his interdiction so that he can kill her, for what is unnatural about him ... is that he is a pervert who gains sexual satisfaction from killing his wives rather than sleeping with them.'[60] This sadistic fetish is symbolised by the 'choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat' he gifts his young wife.[61] Marriage here becomes a death trap rather than a sanctuary, with the Marquis planning his wife's death. He parades her around in the necklace which 'prefigures (her) end', refusing to let her remove it despite it 'growing very uncomfortable.' [62] The Marquis finds pleasure in his dominance, anticipating that his wife's curiosity will compel her to find the chamber. However, Carter subverts the traditional punishment of female curiosity by allowing her protagonist not only to survive but to be empowered through her discovery. Saved by maternal

[57] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, xiii.
[58] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.
[59] Nicholas Ruddick, "Resisting the Temptation to Correct Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"," *the Fantastic in the Arts* 15, no. 4 (2004): 353.
[60] Ibid., 348.
[61] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 6.
[62] Ibid., 36; Ibid., 15.

instincts and intuition, the narrator's curiosity becomes a source of liberation rather than a downfall, revealing the Marquis's true nature and enabling her escape from control.

Interestingly both du Maurier and Carter chose to have an unnamed female narrator just like Perrault's. The absence of a name further reinforces the women's loss of autonomy within marriage. Ruddick identifies that:

> The namelessness of the wife emphasizes the ugly truth that once a woman has sworn the marriage vow to a monster like Bluebeard, she loses her identity and is reduced to a chattel (a body) that he can dispose of as he wishes.[63]

Marriage functions as a mechanism for female entrapment, reducing wives to possessions rather than individuals. In 'Bluebeard', the wife's anonymity emphasises her interchangeability as she is just another women in the cycle, defined only by her husband's status. Similarly, in *Rebecca*, the narrator's lack of a name signifies not only her subordinate position within marriage but also her deep insecurity and fixation on her predecessor. Harriet Linkin describes the narrator's journey, writing:

> The protagonist's stay at Manderley is a time of transformation: of envying the first wife whom she imagines as perfect, of wishing to make herself just as perfect, of discovering the supposed imperfections of the first wife ... and finally, of learning how to become the perfect bourgeois wife by way of contrast.[64]

The memory of Rebecca overshadows the narrator to the extent that she loses all sense of self; when Mrs Danvers calls her, she instinctively replies, 'I'm afraid you have made a mistake, ... Mrs de Winter has been dead for over a year.'[65] It is only when Maxim confesses that he never loved Rebecca that the narrator begins to assert her own identity, declaring, 'I am Mrs de Winter now.' [66] Yet even in this moment of apparent self-realisation, she still defines herself only by Maxim's name, not her own. This highlights how she never truly claims a personal identity as before anything else a woman is a man's wife, not an individual. However, this a turning point for the narrator, as she

[63] Ruddick, "Resisting the Temptation to Correct Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"," 349.
[64] Harriet Linkin, "The Deceptively Strategic Narrator of "Rebecca"," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 46, no. 2 (2016): 232.
[65] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 95.
[66] Ibid., 326.

finally says 'I knew then that I was no longer afraid of Rebecca ... she could not hurt me' indicating she has finally begun to overcome her insecurities that once consumed her. [67]

In 'The Bloody Chamber' the narrator also has no name, serving as both a symbol of her objectification and of shared female experience. By denying her a name, Carter illustrates how many women are silenced or stripped of individual identity within marriage. The narrator's anonymity allows her struggle and ultimate empowerment to speak for all women, rather than just herself. This theme gains further significance when considering the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976, which was implemented to 'amend the law relating to matrimonial injunction; to provide the police with powers of arrest for the breach of injunction in cases of domestic violence.'[68] Introduced a few years prior to the publication of *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979, this act reflects a growing recognition of how marriage can be site of coercion and harm. Carter's decision to depict a nameless narrator, trapped in a violent and controlling marriage, may have been influenced by this shift in legal advancements. By showcasing the narrator's eventual resistance and survival, Carter rejects 'Bluebeard' pointing to a brighter future for entrapped women. Moreover, her namelessness reflects the way the Marquis, like Bluebeard, view women as interchangeable objects of innocence. Her identity is irrelevant to the Marquis beyond her role as his newest wife.

The influence of the Bluebeard tale is unmistakable, providing a framework in which du Maurier and Carter can expose the misogyny in the original tale and the truth about romantic and domestic ideals. The significance of the unnamed narrators in all three stories highlights the erasure of female identity within patriarchal structures. By rewriting and reimagining the 'Bluebeard' narrative, both authors offer a critique of traditional roles, encouraging a reassertion of female autonomy within oppressive systems.

Chapter three: 'Do you think the dead come back and haunt the living?'

This chapter will explore how the Gothic setting functions as a crucial element in both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber', shaping the protagonist's experiences and reinforcing themes of repression and entrapment. Willaims observes that 'the characteristic Gothic edifice is haunted by its engendering' suggesting that a Gothic building is often haunted by its own history and the events

[67] Ibid., 319.
[68] "Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976," Legislation.gov.uk, 2024, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1976/50/enacted?view=plain.

that took place there.[69] Initially, both protagonists view their husbands' homes with admiration and anticipation, perceiving them as symbols of romance, and status. However, this idealised perception soon unravels as the homes reveal their eery elements. In *Rebecca*, the lingering presence of the first wife plagues the west wing of Manderley, transforming it into a shrine of memory and repression. Similarly, in 'The Bloody Chamber', the castle is haunted by the literal and symbolic remnants of the Marquis's previous wives, whose deaths expose the violence concealed beneath the surface of domestic luxury. Du Maurier and Carter use the Gothic to destabilise the traditional fairy tale notion of the home as a safe space. Instead their settings become sites of unease, entrapment and secrecy, disrupting the expected happy ending.

Before Manderley, Maxim's estate, is introduced directly it is described to have an almost mythical quality. Mrs Van Hopper describes it as a 'fairyland' and says she has been told it 'looks perfectly enchanting,' establishing the estate as more than just a setting – it becomes a character in its own right. [70] The narrator is also captivated by this idyllic vision, repeating '(Maxim) wanted to show me Manderley.'[71] This reflects both her eagerness and anxiety about her new life. At this point, the narrator arguably views her marriage as the conclusion to her very own fairy tale, with Manderley symbolising the happy ending. However, as Alison Light, in her book *Forever England,* notes the novel subverts this tradition as 'the rest of the action takes place after marriage, after what traditionally constitutes the happy ending.'[72] Upon arriving at Manderley, the narrator quickly realises that it is not the romantic sanctuary she has imagined. Rather than offering comfort, the house is cold, oppressive, and filled with the lingering presence of Maxim's first wife. Manderley, is haunted by its own history. Williams writes, 'the ghosts — whether real or imaginary —derive from the past passions, past deeds, past crimes of the family identified with its structure. The psychic as well as the physical space of the castle bears its marks.'[73] Manderley transforms into a living archive of memories, secrets, and unresolved trauma. In *Rebecca*, ghosts do not take the form of supernatural apparitions, instead manifest symbolically through the enduring influence of Rebecca. When Mrs Danvers tells the narrator 'I feel her everywhere. You do too, don't you?' it becomes clear that Rebecca's presence is not merely a product of the narrator's insecurity and paranoia, her presence is shared.[74] Manderley thus functions as a Gothic space in which the boundaries between past and present are blurred, leaving the narrator not just alienated from

[69] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 47.
[70] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 15; Ibid., 16.
[71] Ibid., 59.
[72] Alison Light, *Forever England: Femineity, Literature and Conservatism Between Wars* (Oxon: Routledge, 1991), 9.
[73] Ibid., 45.
[74] Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 194.

those around her, but from her own supposed home. The house rejects her presence, a sentiment reinforced by Mrs Danvers' devotion to keeping Rebecca's memory alive through the west wing – 'the room was fully furnished, as though in use.'[75] Ultimately, the silence of the house, the watchful eyes of the servants, and the memory of Rebecca create a claustrophobic environment in which the narrator is trapped.

Like the narrator in *Rebecca*, the heroine in 'The Bloody Chamber' has an almost fantastical perception of the Maquis' castle describing it as 'that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made of foam, that legendary habitation in which he had been born.'[76] The words 'fairy' and 'legendary' highlight her youthful naivety while also revealing her expectations of a fairy tale like romance.[77] But, this illusion is quickly dismantled when the narrator is confronted by the unsettling opulence of the Marquis' bedroom:

> There lay the grand, hereditary matrimonial bed, itself the size, almost, of my little room at home, with the gargoyles carved on its surfaces of ebony, vermilion lacquer, gold leaf, and its white gauze curtains, billowing in the sea breeze.[78]

The sharp juxtaposition between the expected 'fairy castle' and the grotesque 'gargoyles' depicts the downfall of her romantic expectations, unveiling the castle's sinister reality. Emily Steiner states that in Gothic architecture gargoyles often served 'an apotropaic function,' designed to ward off evil spirits, however, the gargoyles carved into the Marquis' bed introduce a sinister twist.[79] Rather than offering protection the figures contribute to the eery atmosphere and foreshadow the violence and horror to come. Their position on the bed shows that even the most intimate space are sites of danger and discomfort.

The sense of entrapment within the castle is evoked not only through its oppressive physical architecture but also through the haunting atmosphere and the lingering presence of the Marquis' past wives. Though the previous wives are physically absent, the brutality of their deaths invades the space, transforming the castle into a chilling embodiment of female torment and entrapment. This disturbing idea becomes brutally real when the narrator finds the chamber. She finds 'a metal figure, hinged at the side, which [she] knew to be spiked on the inside and to have the name: the

[75] Ibid., 185.
[76] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 2.
[77] Ibid.; Ibid.,
[78] Ibid., 10.
[79] Elizabeth den Hartog, "On the Meaning of Gargoyles," *Bulletin Du Centre d'Études Médiévales d'Auxerre* 13, no. 1 (2023): 4.

Iron Maiden. Absolute darkness. And, about [her], the instruments of mutilation.'[80] The Iron Maiden, a medieval torture device, stands as a grotesque reminder of the Marquis' sadism and the silencing of his wives, who have been reduced to victims of violence. The 'instruments of mutilation' that surround her do not only signify physical torture but symbolise the broader violation of female autonomy.[81]

The narrator then sees 'the opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen ... I touched her... he had embalmed her. On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers.'[82] This moment is saturated with Gothic symbolism offering a chilling reflection on power, and the illusion of romantic idealism. The Marquis' decision to preserve his wife's naked body like a relic is deeply disturbing. Even in death she is denied the dignity of decay or release; instead, she is frozen eternally trapped in her husbands 'stark torture chamber.'[83] This preservation of her body is not an act of mourning but of control, she is a trophy to commemorate the Marquis' dominance.

In both *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber', the domestic setting is filled with Gothic tropes, creating a powerful sense of entrapment. The authors dismantle the traditional fairy tale notion of the home as a site of safety, reconstructing it as a space of violence and repression. The physical architecture alongside the haunting presence of the dead mirrors the physical entrapment of the narrators. These Gothic spaces do not only contain horror, but they also create it by displaying the disturbing realties that lay behind the façade of romance.

Conclusion.

To conclude, this dissertation has explored how *Rebecca* and 'The Bloody Chamber' use Gothic conventions to subvert traditional notions of romance, and domesticity. Through the analysis of three central themes it has been demonstrated that both texts unsettle idyllic conceptions of love and the home by revealing the violence, psychological entrapment, and repression that often lay beneath them. *Rebecca* critiques the romantic fantasy of marriage by presenting a relationship grounded in power imbalances and secrecy. Rather than providing the happy ending typically found in fairy tales, du Maurier reveals the unsettling realities that often follow, exposing the enduring trauma of life within a patriarchal structure, symbolised by Manderley. Similarly, 'The Bloody Chamber' dismantles the fairy tale ideal of romantic rescue, replacing it with maternal

[80] Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 26.
[81] Ibid.,
[82] Ibid., 27.
[83] Ibid., 26.

intervention and female autonomy. The Gothic setting in both texts functions not only as an atmospheric background but as a space that reflects the protagonists' inner turmoil and the broader societal anxieties surrounding female agency. By transforming the home, a site stereotypically associated with femineity and safety, into a place of danger and imprisonment, both authors highlight the suffocating effects of patriarchal control. Overall, this dissertation has argued that the Gothic mode provides a powerful framework through which the authors challenge traditional fairy tale ideas of romance and domesticity, exposing the dark realties.

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