Feeling Blue:

Nostalgia and Gender in Contemporary Anglophone Retellings of the Bluebeard Fairy Tale

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Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to show the advantage of further discussion on nostalgia in relation to retellings of fairy tales. I claim that employing Svetlana Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia as framework will result in a more complex and nuanced discussion on what makes retellings of fairy tale more or less progressive. By looking at retellings of Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” by Donald Barthelme, Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, Helen Oyeyemi, and John Updike, I will look at how they utilise nostalgia to explore gender issues. It is my assessment that retellings which lean towards a more reflective nostalgia manage to better examine gender issues in a progressive way. The retellings leaning towards restorative nostalgia tend to get stuck in the past, trying to restore a romanticised image/event/time. I will explore how retellings which utilise reflective rather than restorative nostalgia examine issues such as sexual politics and the normalisation of patriarchal discourse in a way that resonates for readers today. They use the nostalgia to create a dialogue between the past and present, emphasising history’s tendency to repeat itself. Through this dialectic, they emphasise the unnatural construction of gender and reveal a naturalisation of violence towards women.
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Introduction

I’m interested in myths – though I’m much more interested in folklore – just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree.

Angela Carter, Notes from the Frontline

The Bluebeard Fairy Tale

The story of Bluebeard and his wives exists in many variants. The most well-known is Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard” from 1697. In Perrault’s fairy tale, Bluebeard’s new wife receives the keys to the castle before Bluebeard leaves on a business trip. She is told she can open any door and locked closets that she wants, except for one room. When Bluebeard is away, the young wife is filled with curiosity and opens the door. She finds the floor covered in blood and the dead bodies of Bluebeard’s former wives. Shocked and terrified, she drops the key in the pool of blood. She tries to wash it off, but it just keeps reappearing. When Bluebeard surprisingly comes home early from his trip, he asks the wife to present the key. When he sees the blood, he immediately knows that she has opened the door and sentences her to death. Asking if she can have some time to pray before, the wife delays the execution just in time for her brothers to come riding in, since she knew they had planned to come visit her that very day. With Bluebeard dead, she inherits the estate and later marries a worthy gentleman.

The Grimm brothers’ “The Robber Bridegroom” (1857) and “Fitcher’s Bird” (1857), the English fairy tale “Mr. Fox” (1890), and the Norwegian folktale “The Hen in is Tripping in the Mountain” (Høna tripper i berget) (1852) are just some of the versions of the fairy tale about the husband (or in the Norwegian case, a troll) and his dead wives. Bluebeard’s appearance may differ from version to version, as well as the way the heroine opens the chamber and discovers its content. In some versions she cleverly outwits Bluebeard herself, but usually she needs the help of her family, often male relatives, to help her escape. Most versions tend to focus on the wife’s disobedience instead of Bluebeard’s crimes. Whether it is a key, an egg, or a rose, the item dropped on the bloody floor of the chamber has often been read as a sign of disobedience. Perrault’s version is written as a cautionary tale, warning
young girls of the dangers of female curiosity. According to Maria Tatar, it “is the inquisitive
instinct of the wife rather than the homicidal impulses of the husband” that is at stake in the
story (Secrets 21).

However, not all the versions of the fairy tale have the same emphasis on condemning
female curiosity as Perrault. For instance, in the English version “Mr. Fox,” the heroine
combines her curiosity with her intellect in order to save her own life (Bacchilega 106-107).
In this version, Lady Mary travels to her fiancée’s castle to see for herself what it was like
before they would get married. After finding his bloody chamber, she has to hide as her soon-
to-be husband comes home dragging with him a young girl. She hides behind a casket, and
the next day at the wedding feast she outwits Bluebeard by telling the story to all the guests
and providing a hand and ring as proof. According to Cristina Bacchilega, the initiation and
the use of the knowledge gained from entering the forbidden chamber is just as important
as the part concerning female disobedience. Instead of condemning the heroine for her curiosity,
“Mr. Fox” salutes her for her courage and cleverness. Similarly, in the Grimm’s “Fitcher’s
Bird,” the heroine cleverly outwits Bluebeard and manages to trick him into carrying the
basket containing her sisters back to their family. During the wedding party, the heroine
disguises herself as a bird and walks right past Bluebeard on her way out. Bacchilega claims
that these heroines are shown using the knowledge from the chamber in order to reveal
Bluebeard’s true nature (108-109).

The story of Bluebeard and his wives is a storyline which keeps getting repeated,
“perpetually revitalized by writers and artists who take up the theme of intimacy, showing
how the desire for disclosure is always also hemmed in by the need for concealment” (Tatar
Secrets 7). Ever since the 1960s, a lot of fairy tales have been rewritten or adapted with a
feminist agenda (Joosen 5). The Bluebeard story offers a way to address issues of romance
and marriage as well as issues of sexuality and domestic violence (Tatar Secrets 110).
According to Bacchilega, “exploring the rich and varied tradition of ‘Bluebeard’ is an
important step toward feminist reading of the tale and its contemporary revisions” (107).
Bluebeard has a rich and varied storyline, so rewritings of the tale draw on a tradition of
multiplicity and doubling. Several rewritings of the Bluebeard fairy tale use Perrault’s version
as a basis as it is the most well-known version, but probably also because it explicitly
condemns female curiosity. The image of the bloody key has become a central theme in many
of the interpretations and retellings of the story (106). The feminist rewritings of the tales take
advantage of the nostalgia embedded in it to create a dialogue between the past and the
present. Through that dialectic, they can update the themes of the fairy tale in a way that relates to contemporary readers while also emphasising a continuity.

Writers from Charles Dickens to Margaret Atwood have written their own version of the fairy tale. Dickens based his version on a story his nanny used to tell to frighten him as a child (Hermansson Bluebeard 117). He introduces Captain Murderer as an offshoot of the Bluebeard family who bakes his wives in pies to eat. Béla Bartók wrote an opera called Bluebeard’s Castle which premiered in 1911, and Oscar nominated Edward Dmytryk directed a movie, Bluebeard in 1972, starring Richard Burton. Also, writers like Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme, and John Updike have done rewritings of the tale. Both Vonnegut and Barthelme present Bluebeard as an artist, whereas Atwood presents him as a heart-surgeon. Contemporary Bluebeard has evolved from the fairy tales where he was often depicted as a wealthy aristocrat or a sorcerer to fit in with today’s society. Maybe no longer as obvious as a suitor with blue beard, but often, not always as I will come back to in chapter two, just as deadly.

Tatar argues that the Bluebeard storyline of the monstrous man with a secret is one of those storylines that everyone has heard in some ways or another (Secrets 11). Every culture has some form of it. Writers have used it repeatedly. Even Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre features Bluebeard’s secret chamber, literally containing Rochester’s former wife. Though not everyone recognises Bluebeard from the fairy tale, it is actually a common to mistake him for a pirate (Blackbeard’s distant cousin perhaps?), everyone has heard the story in some form or other (Hermansson Bluebeard 21).

The story has seemed to have held special interest for feminist writers, both in terms of revisions and criticism. With writers like Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Eudora Welty, and Anne Thackeray Ritchie all having written their own version of the story. According to Rose Lovell-Smith, “women have re-told ‘Bluebeard’ in ways that run counter to the contemporary scholarly moralistic silencing of the uneasiness generated by this tale type” (Rose Lovell-Smith in Hermansson xviii). In an examination on why women have been drawn to rewrite the Bluebeard story, Cheryl Walker concluded that the forbidden room represents different things for the wife and husband (xviii). For the wife, the room represents a history of violence towards women.

While using Perrault’s “Bluebeard” as a master narrative, a lot of feminist revisions have drawn on these other versions to portray female characters who are clever, cunning, and active. The revisions utilise the intertextuality already embedded in the tradition of the story
to explore issues of sexual politics, female empowerment, and martial issues in modern relationships.

As I mentioned, a lot of well-known writers have done their version of the fairy tale, and this dark and grotesque story seems to be of special interest for women. To understand why this is, it is perhaps important to first understand how the fairy tale itself offers a good framework for addressing gender issues. To start at the beginning, collectors like Perrault and the brothers Grimm collected fairy tales by going from town to town listening to people’s stories. As fairy tales up until then were performed orally, countless versions of each tale would develop. The collectors edited all these versions together, publishing written versions. To borrow Maria Tatar’s words:

rather than a single, stable literary text in which even the finest points of detail may function as bearers of significance, we have an infinite number of corrupt ‘texts,’ spoken and written, each representing one version of a single tale type, and an imperfect version at that. (*Hard Facts* 42)

There is an intertextuality embedded in the fairy tales, offering a play on multiplicity and ambiguity. As small things change from version to version, the fairy tale does not offer up any stable interpretations. One story’s truth will be discarded by the next.

Though it was usually women who told and remembered the stories, the collectors and editors of the written versions were men (Haase 29). Instead of focusing on Bluebeard’s multiple crimes, the edited versions would instead emphasise the heroine’s single transgression (Tatar *Hard Facts* 161). They turned the story about a serial killer into a story condemning female curiosity, showing “a striking lack of congruity between the actual crime and its (near) punishment” in the Bluebeard fairy tale (163). Tatar suggests that this emphasis has to do with the prohibition/violation function which serves as fundamental plot sequences in a lot of fairy tales (165). The function of this binary makes it very easy for the editors of the tale to create it into a cautionary tale. Much like Eve in the Garden of Eden (a much used parallel to the Bluebeard fairy tale), Bluebeard’s wife became a victim of the male discourse. Casie E. Hermansson argues that the Bluebeard story has a predisposition for narrating self-reflexivity, therefore making it a good story to use as an “intertextual mirror” (*Bluebeard* xviii). For women, rewriting the Bluebeard story have been a way of criticising the repetition of glossed-over history; it has been a way to offer up alternative paths and perspectives emphasising change; critique the tradition of silencing women; as well as demystifying patriarchal power, giving voice to the silenced wife and using the storyline to show patterns of
domestic abuse and punishment towards women (xviii-xix). What the feminist revisionists of the tale are doing then, is to try take the story back. They break the story down to its core and build it up again, this time with the focus on Bluebeard’s crimes.

Another aspect that makes the fairy tale attractive is nostalgia. There is a lot of nostalgia embedded in the fairy tale that I argue should not be overlooked. The fairy tale genre is directed at children, so there is automatically a nostalgia embedded in the tales creating links between adulthood and childhood, present and past. It is also a genre which tends to romanticise the past: *Once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away…* It is intended to make its audience escape their own present and create a longing for a different time. A time and place where things were better, and the possibility of magic existed.

As a fairy tale which touches upon a lot of feminist issues such as violence, sexuality, and blame, the Bluebeard fairy tale thus works well as a framework today to take up the same issues, but with a modern twist. The storyline is both known and unknown. Though many have heard the story in some form or other, it’s title and storyline is not as recognisable as fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White. Though it is not as well-known as some other fairy tales, it is still a story which people keep coming back to. According to Tatar, one of the reasons for its continued survival is the story’s ability to fascinate. It stages “anxieties and desires that are foreign yet also fascination to those on the threshold of becoming adults” (14). Its storyline presents a good structure for addressing relationship issues and domestic violence, but also of critiquing issues of discourse and narration. There is a lot of multiplicity embedded in the story which makes it a good platform to address issues of representation and power, both in literature and in relation to contemporary society.

**Feminist Fairy Tale Scholarship**

Feminist fairy tale scholarship emerged during the 1970s, catalysed by the debate between Alison Lurie and Marica R. Lieberman. While Lurie argued that a lot of fairy tales portrayed strong female characters which any feminist should approve of, Lieberman disagreed, arguing that as well as being wrong in her argument, it was beside the point as it is the Disney popularised fairy tales which affects young children, not obscure unknown fairy tales (Haase 15). The debate between Lurie and Lieberman of the portrayal of female characters in fairy tales and their effect on young women furthered more thinking and research on the topic. According to Donald Haase, the debate initiated critical thinking about women’s role in the fairy tale and linked fairy tale studies to the field of women studies (41). Feminist theorists
like Andrea Dworkin used fairy tales to criticise a patriarchal tendency and stereotypical gender roles portraying women as overly passive, and how classic fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White “train women to be rape victims” (17). The only women active in fairy tales seemed to be villains or wicked stepmothers.

In an article on feminist fairy tale scholarship, Haase examines how the research has demonstrated how patriarchal values are deeply rooted in classical fairy tales (27). The research has deepened our understanding of the editorial and cultural process behind the representation of women, in large due to the fairy tales being collected by male editors. Though originally a female artform, the fairy tales’ bad reputation has a lot to do with the collections being gathered and edited by men as well as the more modern Disney versions. Several less famous fairy tales show more diversity in their portrayal of female characters. This diversity is also something that Haase argues has been focused on in feminist fairy tale scholarship, in the search for narratives and characters that resisted the classical stereotype (27).

This multiplicity and range of voices and narratives lurking behind the classical fairy tale and its stereotypes is something that feminist revisionists use in their fairy tale retellings. A lot of feminist revisions of fairy tales employ these lesser known versions of the fairy tales to comment and critique the patriarchal discourse and both past and present portrayals of gender roles. In writing feminist revisions of fairy tales, women writers are taking back their power as storytellers. Haase points out that women were usually the tellers of fairy tales and in a way, the male fairy tale collectors usurped the female art of storytelling when editing their anthologies (29). As Haase puts it, “the fairy tale becomes a coded text in which the female voice, despite the attempt by men to control it, not only continues to speak, but speaks a secret, subversive language” (29). This idea that women writers were not only taking back control of the art of storytelling, but also spoke to each other in a secret language again gave reasons for feminist scholars to research the significance of fairy tales for women.

Haase refers to the rewriting and scholarship of feminist fairy tales as a “conscious feminist project of mythic proportion” (Haase 33). According to Huang Mei, feminist rewritings of fairy tales are “[t]rying to tailor their female experience and sensibility to the inherited narrative paradigm, they end up by retailoring the paradigm itself and parading their Otherness. And it is this entangled verbal wrestling that gives texts by women their special power and vitality” (Huang qtd. in Haase 33). The fairy tale is both a struggle between cultural and individual desires. According to Haase, it is important to be attentive to this
struggle when interpreting either classical or revisions of fairy tales (40). Women writers usually implement this ambivalence in their texts when approaching the fairy tale genre, playing on the multiplicity and intertextuality already embedded in the original fairy tales.

**Nostalgia as Framework**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines nostalgia as an “acute longing for familiar surroundings, esp. regarded as a medical condition; homesickness” and as a “sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past.” The term was originally coined by Johannes Hofer in 1688 as way to refer to homesickness experienced by Swiss mercenary soldiers and was associated with a physical disease until late nineteenth century (J. L. Wilson 21-22). Today, the word is associated with “an emotion of wistful longing for the past (22). In literary criticism, the term has often been used dismissively, and according to Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, nostalgia “has been viewed as the conceptual opposite of progress, against which it is negatively viewed as reactionary, sentimental or melancholic. It has been seen as a defeatist retreat from the present, and evidence of loss of faith in the future” (919). Nostalgics have been seen as people who are stuck in the past, unable to move forward along with the rest of the world.

For some feminist critics such as bell hooks and Gayle Greene, nostalgia as a concept glorifies a past which degrades women and tends to overlook the struggles that women have fought to get to the place we are today. These critics tend to contrast memories and nostalgia, seeing memory as personal and nostalgia as institutional (Su 2). bell hooks, for instance, argues that the studies of memories clashes with nostalgia and calls for a “politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering serves to illuminate and transform the present” (hooks qtd. in Su 2). Gayle Greene describes nostalgia as “not only a longing to return home; it is also a longing to return to the state of things in which woman keeps the home and in which she awaits, like Penelope, the return of her wandering Odysseus” (Greene 296). She contrasts nostalgia with remembering, seeing nostalgia as a forgetful way of looking back at the past (298). While memory allows you to create a link between the past and future, helps you look back to the past and transform, she argues that nostalgia uncritically accepts an edited rewriting of the past, brushing over unpleasant details in order to celebrate something lost (297-98). As an opposite to remembering, Greene argues that nostalgia is especially hurtful.
for contemporary feminism as “forgetting is a major obstacle to change” and because it is so
important to remember the struggle for women’s rights and the costs (298). Nostalgia is a
gateway to a “collective amnesia” which “wipes out all memory of the struggles of the past”
(298). Although Greene is of course correct in her arguments on the importance of
remembering, it is my opinion that her view of nostalgia as a concept is lacking nuance.

Since Greene published her article, there has been renewed interest in nostalgia as a
concept. In her scholarly research on nostalgia, The Future of Nostalgia (2001), Svetlana
Boym distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia and reflective
nostalgia. Boym claims that nostalgia allows for a play with the past and the present, having
the two reflect on each other, self-consciously, but not necessarily portraying something that
once was (55). Through nostalgia, one can reflect on the past while at the same time pointing
to the future. Boym’s concept of restorative nostalgia is somewhat linked to Greene’s way of
thinking of nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia is trying to rebuild a lost past, focusing on
what it sees as the truth and authority (41), “reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments
of memory and temporalizes space” (49). Reflective nostalgia is not trying to rebuild a lost
home, but instead “[r]eflection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis”
(49). It is not about trying to recover something, but more a reflection on history and the
passage of time, a way of looking at how past, present, and future is connected.

Janelle L. Wilson refers to nostalgia as a “bittersweet emotion” (158). There is a lot of
misconceptions linked to the term, associating it with loss and stagnation. Boym explains that
the negative connotations to the word started to appear by the end of the nineteenth century
(16). This was a time when both the public and the private spheres were undergoing a
compartmentalisation, and a word linked with the past and looking back did not go together
with ideas of progress and future.

According to Boym, restorative nostalgics do not see themselves as nostalgic, but are
under the impression that they are concerned with truth (41). They dislike the signs of
historical time, the ruins and cracks, and wish to gloss over the evidence of time gone by in an
attempt “to restore a sense of the sacred believed to be missing from the modern world” (45).
Their project is about restoring the past to its former glory, recreating the authenticity of the
past. Boym claims that they are not driven by “the sentiment of distance and longing” (44) but
by an anxiety towards “those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and
present” (45). Their search for truth is triggered by those who question the wholeness of their
restored history.
J. L. Wilson asserts that this the desire for authenticity comes from feeling distant or lost resulting from a process of fragmentation (58). In regaining that which is lost, J. L. Wilson argues comes from a wish to make our existence more credible. In this desire for authenticity, “there is a tendency for individuals to rediscover former selves and to make sense of their present while reconstructing their past” (82). There is a belief that somewhere in the past is the answers to who you are in the present. In accordance with popular conceptions of nostalgia, this can cause a person to fail to live in the present as to much time is spent looking to the past. Restorative nostalgia can restrain the self and the nostalgic can get stuck in the past (157). The past they wish to recreate is often idyllic, but it remains unattainable (58).

However, both Boym and J. L. Wilson demonstrate that a more reflective type of nostalgia allows for an interaction with the past, drawing back and forth between past and present in a way that does not stop you from living the present. Through reflective nostalgia, the past can open up “a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development” (Boym 50). The past can be used to rediscover lost perspectives. 

Boym’s concept of reflective nostalgia allows for a way to use nostalgia in a way that does not result in further oppression. Those sceptical towards nostalgia tend to insist on the difference between nostalgia and memory, but reflective nostalgia combines the two. Reflective nostalgia emphasises nostalgia’s ability to remember rather than to overshadow. As argued by McDermott, “[r]ather than attempting to restore the past, critical or reflective nostalgia uses the past to unsettle the present” (403). Boym asserts that nostalgia does not necessarily always look back, it can also be used to look forward (xvi). Our fantasies of the past are determined by the needs we have in the present.

Boym argues that reflective nostalgia reveals that longing and critical thinking do not necessarily oppose each other (49-50). She claims that nostalgia can function as a link between the collective and the individual memory. Because “[u]nreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. Yet the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition” (xvi), it is important to also have a framework that addresses this nostalgia. Sinead McDermott asserts that we need nostalgia when talking about memories (405-406). Nostalgia is not only about longing for something that was, but also a longing for something that could have been. We can use nostalgia to critically think about these longings and create links between the individual and the collective memory. It is not about erasing or denying the past, but to see how the different version of the past is
connected to our present. As McDermott argues, reflective nostalgia also gives us a way to critically discuss the “memory gaps” (404). It allows us to see the past as “a cluster of memories” (405) instead of a single line that leads directly to the present.

James Young distinguishes between collective memories and collected memories: “[r]eliance only on collective memory can be said to suffocate realities characterized by difference, discontinuity, and heterogeneity, while an appreciation for collected memories invites discordant voices to be heard” (J. L. Wilson 49-50). The collective memories reside within societal structure while collected memories belong to the individual. The distinction brings focus to how memories are used and constructed. People’s collected memories might oppose society’s collective memory, but it does not make them any less authentic, quite the contrary: “the past is as uncertain as the present. We decide, in our interactions with others, as per the needs of the present, how we will recreate the past” (52). Nostalgia, then, offers a way of critiquing the collective memory by focusing on the collected ones. By distinguishing between different kinds of nostalgia, nostalgia can be used as framework to address issues related to the construction of the past. Opposing collective and collected memories is a helpful device in questioning the discourse. In seeing the differences in collected memories as opposed to collective, one can question who it is that decides what we remember.

Boym claims that although nostalgia can be used to create connections between people, it can very easily turn into the thing that divides us:

Nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding. (Boym xv)

The dangers of nostalgia, just like critics such as Greene warns against, is that it is very easy to “confuse the actual home and the imaginary one (Boym xvi), and that in the search for the home it is tempting to let go of critical thinking and instead just focus on emotional connections brought on by the nostalgic memories of the past. However, as Boym asserts, nostalgia is not opposed to critical thinking. Combining nostalgia and critical thinking allows us to long reflectively. Instead of trying to repair an imaginary home in the past, nostalgia can be used to fix what is broken in the present.

Retellings of fairy tales will automatically involve nostalgia to some degree due to the fairy tale’s nature. Fairy tales bring back both memories of a collective past as well as
memories of our own childhood. Because of its tendency to romanticise the past and its emphasis on constructed past events, nostalgia as a concept and literary device has been looked at with scepticism. Using nostalgia, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as well as have an awareness of how our view of the past is often influenced to such an extent that the past we remember is not a mirror of the past that existed.

The aim of this thesis is to show the advantage of further discussion on nostalgia in relation to retellings of fairy tales. I contend that Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia provides a framework which can be used to assess retellings of fairy tales, in this case the Bluebeard fairy tale. It is my assessment that this will add more complexity to the debate, a way of discussing what it is that makes some retellings more progressive than others. Where restorative nostalgia focuses on the “reestablishment of stasis,” reflective nostalgia is about flexibility. It is about understanding that underneath the dominant narrative exists countless other narratives. Reflective nostalgia is not about finding the one true narrative, but it is about acknowledging the existence of them all. In this thesis, I will examine how Carter, Oates, and Oyeyemi use nostalgia differently than Barthelme and Updike. Retellings which contains more reflective nostalgia tends to be more progressive than the retellings which mainly use restorative nostalgia. Because nostalgia is so linked to the fairy tale as a genre, and because nostalgia has been criticised for overlooking gender issues, I argue that this distinction is especially useful when looking at retellings of fairy tales. I will be referring to discourse in a Foucauldian sense, arguing that fairy tales carry certain internalised expectations stemming from the patriarchal system which place women in the object position. The dominant patriarchal discourse is something I argue that Barthelme and Updike repeat in their retellings, while Carter, Oates, and Oyeyemi try to reveal its presence and power.

**Corpus-Selection Criteria**

multitude meant that I had a lot of options and possible directions to explore when I was choosing works to look at for my thesis.

For this thesis, I have chosen to look at “The Bloody Chamber” (1979) by Angela Carter, “Blue-bearded Lover” (1987) by Joyce Carol Oates, “Bluebeard” (1988) by Donald Barthelme, “George and Vivian” (1995) by John Updike, and Mr. Fox (2011) by Helen Oyeyemi. I wanted to primarily look at short stories with the exception of Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox, which is a choice I will address shortly. Carter was to me an obvious choice when looking at contemporary feminist retellings of fairy tale. Her work has received a lot of criticism, and her adaptation of the Bluebeard fairy tale is one of the more famous ones when it comes to contemporary retellings. I also considered doing Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg” (1983) but chose instead “Blue-bearded Lover” by Oates. I found it interesting how Oates’s retelling has received so little criticism in comparison to Carter and Atwood. I also thought it would be interesting to compare and contrast Carter’s and Oates’s depictions of female sexuality.

There is a lot of criticism on Carter’s work, both on “The Bloody Chamber” and on all her other retellings of fairy tales. She has been extensively studied and praised while at the same time been criticised for either not breaking enough taboos or converted beloved fairy tales into stories of sex and violence (Simpson viii-ix). I wanted to find another retelling of Bluebeard which also pushes boundaries of our way of thinking about gender and sex. I thought Carter and Oates would go well together in a chapter as both explore female characters who transgress stereotypes. Oates’s heroine matches the sexual content and mixed feelings of disgust and interest which Carter so excellently plays with in her retellings.

In my research, I found that it was mostly the female authors of retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale that has been focused on in criticism, and it got me wondering whether female and male authors have different approaches to the fairy tales. I chose to do an analysis of Barthelme and Updike in chapter two, as two male writers of the same retelling. Both written approximately in the same time period as Carter and Oates, Updike’s version a few years later than the others. Dickens’s “Captain Murderer” (1860) could also have been an interesting choice, one of Dickens’s lesser known stories, but I wanted to look at more contemporary versions. Vonnegut’s Bluebeard (1987) could also be a good choice here, as one of the more well-known versions of the story, but for a better comparison, I wanted to look at short stories in both chapter one and two.
The ending of Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” is so ridiculous that I could not forget his version after reading it. His retelling both interested and annoyed me, and it was not until I started looking at it with the concept of reflective versus restorative nostalgia in mind that I managed to put my finger on why his story made me feel that way. I also thought it would be interesting to include Updike in my thesis, especially as a contrast to writers like Carter and Oates because he is known for writing in a very patriarchal discourse. That can help explain why feminist critics interested in retellings of fairy tale have not chosen to criticise his version of Bluebeard. The lack of criticism of his story made it even more interesting to look at: why is it not analysed by feminist critics? And is it as bad as the critics assume?

I chose to look at the whole of Updike’s short story “George and Vivian” and not just part two titled “Bluebeard in Ireland.” I noticed in my research that most critics who referred to Updike’s retelling, mainly focused on part two of the short story. In Kate Bernheimer’s collection of new fairy tales, My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me, it is also only the part titled “Bluebeard in Ireland” which is included. I chose to include part one, “Aperto, Chiuso” as well because I felt that it described how the relationship between the couple worked. It also included some bits about George’s view on history which explained his feelings of displacement later in “Bluebeard in Ireland.”

Mr. Fox first caught my attention when I read it for a class at the University of Oslo during my bachelor’s degree. Oyeyemi’s novel was what first introduced me to the Bluebeard fairy tale, and her novel is also the reason why I chose the Bluebeard fairy tale as topic for my thesis. Though I considered not including it in my thesis since, as a novel, it is both structurally and narratively different from the other works that I chose, I decided on giving it a whole chapter of its own because it to me stands as a perfect example of what a retelling of the Bluebeard fairy tale is possible of.

I did consider looking at Atwood’s The Robber Bride (1993) as an alternative novel to Mr. Fox. Atwood’s work is more critically acknowledged than Oyeyemi, and her retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale are more known than Mr. Fox. However, I decided that the narrative structure of Oyeyemi’s novel might be interesting and more fitting for my thesis as several of the chapters could function as short stories. The chapters can be read together as a novel, but also as individual stories separate from the whole, much like all the versions and retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale. Published in 2011, Mr. Fox also provides an opportunity to see if there is a progression from when Carter wrote in the late 1970s and till today, and see if the approach to the story is still the same.
Chapter summaries

The order of the chapters is mainly chronological, though that was not the only factor in my choosing to order them that way. I wanted to first look at Carter and Oates as they, especially Carter, represent a more critically acclaimed way of retelling the Bluebeard fairy tale. For chapter two, I thought it would be interesting to compare them to Barthelme and Updike and see where the two approaches to the fairy tale differs. I end with the chapter on *Mr. Fox*, published more recently than the others. To end with the analysis of *Mr. Fox*, I think makes sense both in terms of chronology and content, as it being one novel instead of two short stories differs from the former chapters.

The first chapter will explore how Angela Carter and Joyce Carol Oates’s retellings are characterised by reflective nostalgia. Through their retellings they are not trying to recreate a moment of truth or reconstruct something as it was. Instead they use nostalgia to create a dialogue between past and present, and to tell a story which has previously been neglected by the dominant discourse. They update the theme of Perrault’s “Bluebeard” to resonate with contemporary readers while also playing on the dialectic between the original tale and their retelling to emphasise issues which consistently keep resurfacing.

In the second chapter, I will focus on restorative nostalgia as a contrast to reflective nostalgia. The chapter will look at the retellings by John Updike and Donald Barthelme and see how their versions differ from Carter and Oates’s. I will explore how they, as white men who write in a patriarchal discourse, use nostalgia in a different way from Carter and Oates. While Carter and Oates are interrogating notions of truth, Updike and Barthelme are more concerned with loss of identity and the feeling of displacement. They long and wish for the restoration of a particular time when things seemed easier. Their retellings end up repeating the same patriarchal values of Perrault’s fairy tale. Instead of suggesting a way of breaking away from the endless cycle of repetition, they fall into the same patterns and repetitions of the past.

In the third chapter, I will explore how reflective nostalgia can be used to critique normalised violence towards women. Oyeyemi’s take on the Bluebeard story differs from the others in this thesis, not only in its narrative form, but also in its intertextual use of the Bluebeard story line. Oyeyemi’s novel critique the way women are killed off in literature as an “easy way out,” and reflects on how normalised violence in fiction impacts our thinking of violence in real life. Through the use of reflective nostalgia, Oyeyemi explores the constant threat of violence towards women, which does not only exist between the covers of books.
1 Discourse of Female Sexuality in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover”

Simply to be female is to be without volition, identity.

Joyce Carol Oates, “In Olden Times, When Wishing
Was Having… Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales.”

In this chapter, I want to show how nostalgia used as framework creates a way of discussing what it is about Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” (1979) and Joyce Carol Oates’s1 “Blue-bearded Lover” (1987) that makes them progressive. Both retellings utilise nostalgia in way that establish a dialogue between the past and present. Both Carter and Oates use their retellings to speak back to the original storyline. The dialogue between past and present emphasise how patriarchal structures and values are repeated over time. Their retellings stress the aspects of the original fairy tales where the heroines are given agency, while criticising a tendency in history to blame women for men’s crimes. In my analysis of “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover” I aim to show how Svetlana Boym’s notion or reflective nostalgia presents itself in these retellings. In using nostalgia more reflectively than restoratively, Carter and Oates mediate “on history and passage of time,” using the “shattered fragments of memory” to temporalise space (Boym 49). It allows them to interact with the past in a way that does not limit them in a search for an authentic recreation, but instead is about accepting the multiple versions of history.

This chapter is structured in four parts. My aim is to show how these four ways of interacting with the past is part of what makes these two retellings progressive. In the first part of the chapter I will look at how Carter and Oates utilise the original fairy tales in their retellings to reflect on sexual politics in way that resonates for contemporary readers. By creating a dialogue between the original fairy tale and their retellings, they question how women continuously have been blamed for man’s wrongdoings. In their interaction with the

1 References to Oates are to her short story “Blue-bearded Lover” unless otherwise specified.
original fairy tales they emphasise the tendency to purposely put women in positions where they have no choice but to do “wrong.”

Second, I will explore how Carter and Oates criticise this objectification of women by emphasising female agency. In this emphasis, they also reveal a double standard which judge women by higher standards and different expectations than men. They use the original fairy tale to show how this double standard is evident in the discourse today as well. By creating characters who push the boundaries of gender and gender roles, they reveal the unnatural construction of gender and society’s expectations.

Third, I will discuss how their questioning of gender push back against the dominant discourse. Through characters which transcend the stereotype, both Carter and Oates attack the discourse which forces women into object position and punishes them for agency. They use nostalgia to highlight how this discourse keep recreating the past and forces women into stereotypical roles as a means of survival. They deconstruct the original fairy tale by stressing the ways in which its discourse forces girls into disturbing situations.

Lastly, I will look at how reflective nostalgia can help analyse and detect patterns and reoccurrences. When we stop discussing change, history will inevitably return to status quo. By emphasising this repetition through the dialogue between past and present, Carter and Oates are able to force the narrative in a new direction. What happens when their female characters transgress their supposed roles and stand in the way or repetition? They allow themselves to imagine a different future, not one based on an imaginary past, but one acknowledging that there exists more than one truth.

Before I will start on the analysis of “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover,” I first want to briefly sketch out some feminist debates and developments which I will refer to in this chapter as well as in the rest of the thesis. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists attacked sexual depictions of women, deeming the images degrading and objectifying (Hatton and Trautner 66). The 1970s also catalysed the “images of women” debate which emphasised literature’s ability to provide good role models who embodied a positive sense of femininity (Moi 46). Readers should be presented fictional characters they could relate to. As Toril Moi points out, second-wave feminism had a strong normative aspect, emphasising how things should be portrayed (47). Carter published “The Bloody Chamber” in 1979, just when third-wave feminists were starting to react to the essentialism of earlier feminism. Instead of focusing on how women should be, they emphasised the variety of women (Parker 150). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s sexualised images of women
became more common, and for many they represented liberation, standing as a contrast to the image of the 70s housewife (Hatton and Trautner 67).

Today, we talk about post-feminism, a concept which means different things for different people. In this thesis, I use the concept to refer to the dis-identification young women have to feminism today, implying that things have changed and thus making feminism irrelevant (McRobbie “Beyond Post-Feminism” 180). A better term might be “choice feminism,” implying that we now consider everything that women do to be feminist (Hatton and Trautner 74). Under the sense that equality is achieved, young women are voluntarily letting the discourse define them, emphasising their own choice to be sexualised.

Simultaneously with the rise of “choice feminism,” we have the last years been witness to a development of “righting feminism” (Farris and Rottenberg). Where feminists politically have tended to be on the left-wing, Farris and Rottenberg argue that we in contemporary United Kingdom see a move towards the right (6). This move along with the new post-feminist attitude, have led to a change in focus. The shift has led to a focus away from equality and justice, and instead emphasising happiness and responsibility (6). The f-word appears to have gotten a bad reputation. We witness a disassociation from radical manhating feminists. Young feminists today focus more on living content and carefree. But as Hatton and Trautner suggest, these feminist choices might not be as individual as they seem (74). They argue that there is a force hiding behind them that we need to identify, shaping and constraining our choices (74). With the rise of movements like #metoo, it becomes evident that there is still a discourse favouring and defending white patriarchal values.

1.1 Retell to Rethink

Carter and Oates experiment with the fairy tale genre and the short story form. They play with the rules and expectations of the genres and their content, and intertwine the fairy tale with reality and the past with the present. Their retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale question our expectations towards female sexuality and gender roles. According to Dani Cavallaro, Carter intertwines fantasy and reality in a way which forces us to see how reality is shadowed by the fantasies we create (6). Through her experimentation, Carter uses the short story form to rethink our expectations of gender. By returning to the “murky roots” of the fairy tales, her retellings of various fairy tales use the darkness as allegory for “societal evils,” creating
autonomous tales which draw on the original spirit of fairy tales (15). “The Bloody Chamber” stands as a stark contrast to the more sanitised and romanticised fairy tale versions we are accustomed with today.

One of the things which Carter experiments with is mimicking aspects from the Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” According to Bacchilega, Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” mimics aspects from the original Bluebeard fairy tale in a way that makes them resonate with contemporary women today (129). The story reflects upon sexual politics and critiques the way that female sexuality is portrayed and how it is often used as a way of shaming women. As I will return to in chapter three of this thesis, there is resemblance between the #metoo-movement and the moral of Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” Just as the morality trope in the original fairy tale blames women for revealing men’s indiscretions, women who speak up against sexual harassment are being blamed for ruining men’s lives, men who just wanted to have a bit of fun. As will be discussed in relation to Helen Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox, women are often portrayed as being complicit in their own victimisations. Bacchilega argues that the ending of “The Bloody Chamber” is disturbing precisely because it reminds of this (129). Carter’s use of doubling reminds the reader of how often characteristics that make a female character strong can also be used against her. Even though Carter presents agency, voice, and mother-daughter relationships as vehicles for change, Bacchilega claims that Carter still makes us aware of how easily they can assume contradicting values in different contexts (129).

Carter merges the old together with the new, playing with our knowledge and expectations towards the original fairy tales. She utilises the relationship between past and present and suggests a continuity from then till now. By playing on the strange and the familiar she creates an uncanny feeling. We almost know this story, yet it surprises us. This is a fairy tale, but it is not. When the heroine is awakened “by the insistent shrilling of the telephone” (Carter 14), we are reminded of the fact that this is not a fairy tale. Hence, we should not expect our heroine to get a happy ending as this is not a sanitised Disney version. Carter almost allows us to forget, but never completely. By using doubling and playing with the binary oppositions already embedded in the tale, Carter’s story unsettles Perrault’s version of the fairy tale. Just as her mother stares Bluebeard right in the eye and paralyses him just before he is about to kill the heroine, Carter’s story is confronting the Bluebeard fairy tale and unsettling its repeating discourse.

Both Carter and Oates use the darkness originally embedded in the fairy tale genre. While today’s perception of fairy tales is associated with the overly happy and colourful
Disney versions, “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover” convey more of the original darkness and cruelty. Though Carter at sometimes appears to be conforming to the romantic notions associated with modern fairy tales, Cavallaro points out how she never lets us forget that her story is just fiction (15). All the “reparative resolutions” (15) that Carter offers up in her story are only possible because the author allows for them to happen. While a telepathic mother heroically saving her daughter from having her head chopped off by her grotesque husband works in literature, this is not something that is likely to happen outside the covers of a book. Such consolatory options are not available in real life.

The emphasis in Perrault’s “Bluebeard” is on the dangers of female curiosity, not on the cruel punishments of women. Violence towards women is buried and forgotten, allowing it to happen again and again: “how could I have failed, even in the world of prim bohemia in which I lived, to have heard hints of his world?” (Carter 11). In the Castle of Murder, history repeats itself, and while Bluebeard’s crimes are continuously overlooked, his heroines are again and again reminded of how they brought their fates down upon themselves. Both Carter and Oates use Perrault’s “Bluebeard” as a model for their narrative structure, but they also draw on the other versions of the fairy tale. As pointed out by Andrew Teverson (216), Carter has taken the title of her retelling from the English version of the fairy tale where Bluebeard’s chamber is referred to as the Bloody Chamber: “so at last he went on dragging the young lady up the stairs into the Bloody Chamber” (Jacobs 186). As I mentioned in the introduction, “Mr. Fox” is considered one of the more feminist versions of the Bluebeard fairy tale as the heroine is granted slightly more autonomy than in other versions. The heroine’s subjectivity and agency in “Mr. Fox” is something that both Carter and Oates implement in their retellings. Teverson suggests that the spirit of Lady Mary from “Mr. Fox” lurks in the background of Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” (217). Perhaps ironically, or as “a utopian suggestion,” it works as a reminder of what women in fairy tales potentially can be like (217). Through the title of Carter’s retelling, the reader gets a clue that this is more than just a modernised version of Perrault’s fairy tale. According to Teverson, Carter uses her retelling to show us how fairy tales can be used to empower women (211).

Whereas Carter’s heroine is not that much more active than some of her fairy tale counterparts, and she is rescued by her mother in the end, Oates’s heroine saves herself. The ending of “Blue-bearded Lover” plays on the endings of the Disney fairy tales and ends with the promise of children: “[a]nd I will be bearing his child soon. The first of his many children” (Oates 392). Oates’s “happy fairy tale ending” however, has a sinister spin to it.
Here, the promise of a child is the result of the heroine’s cynical and cunning manipulation. Perhaps even more disturbing than the ending of “The Bloody Chamber,” “Blue-bearded Lover” leaves the reader slightly disgusted. Suggesting a new future for the “happy” couple, the transformation is not as fulfilling.

“Blue-bearded Lover” constructs an alternative discourse. The heroine intentionally leaves the door unopened, thus “winning” over her husband. Whereas the heroine in the original fairy tales and in retellings such as Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” is blamed for her own part in her victimisation and for going against her husband’s orders and opening up the chamber, Oates’s story puts focus on how the discourse of the story offers no right path for the heroine to take. She will be criticised whether or not she opens the door, either if it is for being too naïve and too passive, or for being too cunning and active.

Carter and Oates contrast their retellings with the original fairy tales. By putting the versions up against each other, they deconstruct the discourse of the old fairy tale. Their characters are not supposed to be female role models. When posited against their passive counterparts they reveal the strains on the way the discourse describes and views women. According to Merja Makinen, the violence in “The Bloody Chamber” is used as a feminist strategy to further emphasise the contrast between the different heroines (5). Carter’s heroine does not stand on her own, but together with her passive counterparts. This is also what Oates does by having a female heroine that is in complete contrast to the original heroines, and who completely violates the rules of the original story.

1.2 The Construction of Woman

Neither Carter’s nor Oates’s characters are doing gender the way we have learned to expect. This makes us question the construction of gender and why it is that we react when someone is not doing their gender according to the construction. Both retellings emphasise a continuity of a description of women that have become normalised. Carter and Oates are stretching the boundaries of that description, putting focus on how this discourse is damaging in the way that it restricts women to its binaries, where they are either passively accepting violence or actively desire it. Either way, the discourse tells them that they are complicit in the violence towards them. The link between the past and present suggests that this is something that has been going on through time. An issue that has been repeatedly overlooked.
Both Carter and Oates write female characters who push the boundaries and expand the definition of woman. Their characters might not always be admirable, but they refuse to be defined by their own gender. Their characters question how we look at gender, and how women have very little wriggle room in the expectations towards them. According to Makinen, “The Bloody Chamber” questions the cultural construct of femininity (6). It uses doubling and binaries to place itself in a position where it both reinforces and explodes the patriarchal values of Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” A lot of the critique towards Carter and Oates bears resemblance to the “images of women” debate that went on in the 1970s. Though that particular debate is over, and most critics today agree that such a view is limited, when it comes to the ideas concerning feminist fiction and what it means to be a feminist in today’s political climate, I would argue that we can still see some elements resembling that debate shimmer through in today’s feminist criticism. The “images of women” debate was concerned with how female characters were presented in fiction and the importance of portraying admirable characters and good role models. Though it is a finished and outdated debate, some of the criticism towards Carter and Oates feature certain elements which focus on how their characters are portrayed, and how they behave in a way that most women would not relate to.

In her article on the new maternalism developing in the United Kingdom, Angela McRobbie looks at how there is an increasing pressure for working-class mothers to both look and act as middle-class (“Feminism, the Family” 125). In the last years there have been a lot of upper-class women and celebrities coming out as feminists who has set a new standard for balancing work and motherhood while looking good doing it. Consequently, there has been a growing focus on how to be a good mother, with the popular press fuelling the debate, by negatively stereotyping single mothers (126). While there is increasing pressure on working-class mothers, welfare and support for single mothers are decreasing (125). At the same time motherhood has become increasingly glamorised through social media. Women are supposed to balance their careers and families. Whereas feminists in the 1960s and 1970s worked hard to give women equal access to economic independency, the cut in welfare programs along with the pressure of being a good mother again makes it hard for women not to depend on a second income. Money is needed in order to be able to uphold the new standard of womanhood. With the pressure of being a good mother there is a return to traditional gender roles where women are expected to step back from work if it affects their role as a mother. If welfare is cut, we are then in danger, as McRobbie argues, of returning to a situation where women are forced to stay in potentially destructive marriages (124).
While we do enjoy the benefits of having equal access to education and careers as men, women are simultaneously under the expectation of having to balance that career-life with family life. Additionally, women are expected to present themselves in a certain way, too sexy and you are not taken seriously enough, too boring and you will be overlooked. The same “righting of feminism” (Farris and Rottenberg 5) which led to the cuts in welfare has also changed the feminist terminology. While feminists used to be focused on equal rights and social justice, today’s feminist vocabulary is more about happiness and responsibility (6). The new progressive feminist goal is to be able to balance a successful career with family life. A goal which is unobtainable for many and which constricts women again into traditional gender patterns where family should come first and work second. A goal easier obtained with the help of a spouse who can earn the money.

Oates contends that the feminist critics of the twentieth century have been facing a paradox:

The paradox with which feminist critics or sympathizers must contend to is this: that revolutionary advances in literature often fail to transcend deeply conservative and stereotypical images of women, as if, in a sense, the nineteenth century were eerily superimposed upon even the most inventive literary ‘visions’ of the twentieth century. (“Images of women” 7-8)

Oates suggests that even in modern times, our most celebrated writers still present their women through “the lens of sexist imaginations” (“Images” 7-8). Even now, the discourse is being ruled by a male elite, meaning that morals and values presented in texts are linked to masculinity and its way of seeing the world. These “lenses” give men more freedom than women to explore and develop their individual characters without judgment. Oates’s statement that modernism and popular culture still seem to have strong prejudices to what it means to be female (“Images” 11), resonates in “Blue-bearded Lover.” Both Carter and Oates use their retellings to remind the reader of how social roles and gender are constructed through discourse. An issue that, according to Oates, is not acknowledged enough in popular culture (“Images” 13).

Oates tries to subvert the traditional model of the fairy tale. She criticises the way women are presented in stories in general, trying to deconstruct the fictional definition of woman. She finds that women are viewed and judged more as mythologised creatures instead of as individuals (“In Olden Times” 102). The image of woman that is presented is not real.
Women yearn for more than marriage and material comforts. Her heroine figures as counter-image to the fairy tale heroine, someone who will not sit idly by waiting for her prince charming or her brothers to come and rescue her.

Both Carter and Oates critique the double standard holding women by higher standards than men. Carter’s and Oates’s heroines stand as stark contrasts to the “expected woman” which repeats itself in literature and in other parts of popular culture and mass media. Female characters are more often assigned a type rather than a personality. Female characters who move out of their type thus draw a lot of attention and is something which repeatedly stirs up debate. When characters do gender differently than expected, it reveals the double standard when women cannot get away with doing the same things as a man.

While a lot of critics have focused on “good” female characters and happy endings, Brenda Daly contends that these types of characters work better as good propaganda than they do as good art. Daly argues that Oates’s female characters act as agents of change in the way that they both bear witness to and take part in violence. Instead of crumbling by their experiences, they acquire power through their narration. On the other hand, it is precisely because characters such as Carter’s and Oates’s heroines push boundaries that they show how both women and men are trapped in “destructive gender roles and plots” (Daly). Daly also comments that a lot of the critique of Oates’s sexual descriptions is linked to her being a female writer, and that such explicit writing is often considered to belong in the territory of man.

Robin Ann Sheets claims that there are two types of women found in fairy tales: the good woman who is the victim, and the bad woman who must be destroyed (649). The good princess will eventually turn into the wicked queen, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously argue in their analysis of Snow White in “The Queen’s Looking Glass” (1984). When Snow White becomes queen, “she must now embark on that life of ‘significant action’ which, for a woman, is defined as a witch’s life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural” (42). Carter’s and Oates’s heroines do not fit into any of Sheet’s categories. They are neither completely good nor bad but try their best in the situation that they are in to find agency in a discourse that tries to passivate them. In contrast to fairy tale heroines, they do not rely on male family members in the end. Oates's heroine uses the only powers the discourse has given her, her sexuality, and Carter’s heroine, though she gets some support from the blind piano tuner, is saved by her fierce mother. Kathleen E. B. Manley uses the term “woman in process” (80) to describe how Carter’s heroine finds and explores her own subject position.
Instead of focusing on the heroine’s failures, Manley suggests a reading that sees past the portrayal of the heroine as a passive and female victim and focuses instead on the fluidity in her identity. She is not only a type but is in the process of claiming her own identity.

Carter alerts us to the way that things are constructed, and she asks us to consider why they are constructed that way, or “why they are at all” (Cavallaro 6). She tries to show us how we learn to accept fabrications as truth once we have heard them enough times. Cavallaro argues that Carter’s goal is to change the way people take certain things for granted and just consent to the way things are with no thoughts as to why they are that way in the first place (6). According to Cavallaro, Carter is trying to show us how little it takes to deconstruct these untruths and to show us that behind their thin façade there exists another choice.

Carter and Oates use unorthodox female characters to make us question and consider the way gender is constructed. Especially the character of the mother in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” is created as this mythical female warrior who “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 2). At the end of the story, the mother comes riding in on a horse to save her daughter seconds before she is about to get her head chopped off. As stated by Oates: “[a] ridiculous ending, perhaps, but no more ridiculous than any other fairy-tale ending, the feminist Carter seems to be saying. And why not, for once, feminist wishfulfillment?” (“In Olden Times” 106). According to Sheets, Carter has equipped the mother with both male and female symbols, making her powerful enough to serve as both mother and father (653).

Carter is playing on the different versions of the fairy tales, using them intertextually in her stories to accentuate the span with which women are seen doing gender. While men’s crimes are forgotten and overlooked, we remember the morals from the fairy tale emphasising good, female behaviour: “Oh, madame! I thought all these were old wives’ tales, chattering of fools, spooks to scare bad children into good behaviour! Yet how could you know, a stranger, that the old name for this place is the Castle of Murder?” (Carter 32). A woman being good is therefore seen as a woman doing gender correctly, in contrast a woman who behaves “badly” will be seen as disrupting gender.

Carter’s Bluebeard tries to change his new wife into his own image. He does this through the use of clothes and the ruby choker, but also through sex. He seeks to corrupt her, to take away her innocence. Cavallaro refers to the “reification of the female body” (15) and argues that the woman both literally and metaphorically is placed in an unsettling object
position. The female body is viewed with both fascination and revulsion, made into this hybrid, composite thing which is traded around as if it was a rare piece of merchandise. The marquis is attracted to the protagonist’s innocence, but at the same time her innocence is something that he seeks to take away from her. He has made himself an image of how he wants her to be, and now he wants to destroy that image of her, perhaps to prove to himself that he is in control and that she is his creation: “[b]ut he would not let me take off my ruby choker, although it was growing very uncomfortable, nor fasten up my descending hair, the sign of a virginity so recently ruptured that still remained a wounded presence between us” (Carter 15). He watches his creation, the choker and her messy hair both physically and symbolically showing his power over her. As soon as the transformation symbolised by the heroine entering the chamber and receiving the bloody mark on her forehead is complete, he discards with her.

Bluebeard is attracted to the heroine’s innocence: “I was seventeen and knew nothing of the world” (Carter 4). Her innocence is symbolised by her white muslin dress and pale white complexion. This also symbolises her passivity. The label “innocent” suggest that there is something she has not done, while her paleness suggests that she has stayed indoors, passively waiting. Later, as he takes her to bed, he swaps her white dress for a ruby choker, marking the transformation. Carter explores this binary between her heroine’s white innocence and her darker side forced on her by her husband. She plays with the space in between these two opposites, allowing her heroine to move back and forth exploring her own Self.

It seems Bluebeard finds pleasure in taking away the heroine’s innocence: “[y]our thin white face, chérie; he said, as if he saw it for the first time. Your thin white face, with its promise of debauchery only a connoisseur could detect” (17). He chose her because he wanted to give himself a challenge or to prove to himself that everyone is as “bad” as him. Everyone has the potential for corruption, even the innocent, pale little musical angels. Once he has forced that part of her out, managed to change her, both sexually as well as making her enter the chamber of her own free will, he will kill her. From a larger perspective, this tells the story of how girls are forced to play irreconcilable roles that do not go together. They must choose between life or death, but choosing life means becoming monstrous, turning themselves into the wicked queen. The role that is expected of the heroine, is also what in the end threatens to kill her.
Oates refers to the different gender expectations as a “curious puritanism at work” (“Images of Women” 26) which judges women for trying to usurp freedoms that are traditionally reserved for the male sex. It is this puritanism which reasons that Bluebeard’s murders are not a crime, but a necessary sacrifice. Both Carter’s and Oates’s heroines stir up feelings of disgust and revulsion simply by doing gender “wrong” and thus challenging the male discourse. Their depictions of, perhaps a bit hyperbolic, female sexuality draws focus on the different expectations we have about male and female sexuality. Their retellings do not just question the gender roles presented in fairy tales, but also question how contemporary society think of gender. By pushing boundaries, they reveal thoughts and expectations towards both gender and feminist writing.

1.3 Changing the Discourse

Both Carter’s and Oates’s retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale comment on the portrayal of women in fairy tales. They attack the stereotypical way of depicting women as well as a discourse which subjects women to passivity. As mentioned, Teverson has argued that “The Bloody Chamber” shows us how fairy tales also can be used to empower women (211). Through her several retellings of fairy tales, Carter urges her readers to look past the depiction of women as passive and instead focus on where they are given some agency. As argued by Cavallaro, Carter’s female characters “transcend the stereotype of the passive woman who is powerless to achieve freedom not only because of her subjection to an exploitative and selfish patriarch but also – and more ominously – because of her lack of imagination” (126). They transcend the expectations of passivity, refusing to follow the rules of the discourse.

In order for Carter’s heroine to find her own subjectivity, Manley asserts that she has to see herself the way that others see her (73). Carter uses mirrors to both literally and figuratively show us how the heroine realises how she is perceived by others. Manley argues that the mirrors “reinforce her in-process situation by indicating her wish to see herself as innocent and yet capable of recognizing the Marquis’s wish to dictate her story” (73). By seeing herself reflected in the mirrors, the heroine sees herself as the girl Bluebeard wants her to be: “[t]he young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades, for travelling, madame, or walking” (Carter 10). She sees herself in the context of all the other brides before her, she is no longer her own Self,
but one of many. Bluebeard has created her into an image of sameness. When she arrives at his castle, the clothes she wears are not her own. As he strips off her clothes, which he has bought for her, she sees how her own individuality and personality is stripped off along with the clothes: “[a]nd when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together …” (11). She sees how her Self is about to disappear, leaving only his image of her behind.

While Carter’s heroine does not do much to avoid her fate as Bluebeard’s next victim, there is not much for her to actually do in the story. Though she is mostly portrayed as a passive character, she does not really do anything that is not expected of her as a woman: “since it was second nature to me, there was nowhere to go but the music room and soon I settled down at my piano” (12). In fact, she is desperately trying to find a way to occupy her time, within the story’s limitations: “what should I do now, how shall I pass the long, sea-lit hours until my husband beds me?”, “[y]et there still remained one whole hour to dinner and the whole, unimaginable desert of the rest of the evening” (12, 21). The discourse restricts her to the stereotypical feminine activities such as playing the piano and ordering dinner. It does not allow her to do anything that actively transgresses that boundary. When she does move out of that restriction, she is sentenced to death short after. Carter suggests that we need to change the way we speak about gender. While women are often blamed for putting themselves in dangerous positions, it is in fact the discourse which gives them no other choice.

Though Carter’s heroine wants to become more active, her options are limited. As a married woman she becomes even more restricted and every choice she has is linked to the household: “[a] maid had dealt with the furs. Henceforth, a maid would deal with anything” (10). The practical aspects in her new life as a married woman consist merely of telling the servants to do what they already know that they have to do: “[u]ntil that moment, I had not given a single thought to the practical aspects of marriage with a great house, great wealth, great man” (16). In other words, the tasks that she is assigned are meaningless. The housekeeper in Bluebeard’s castle makes it clear that she does not have any real power or control over the way things are run. In her “marriage with a great house,” Carter portrays the heroine as trapped both physically within the boundaries of the house, but also trapped by its conventions and restrictions. Even before her husband comes home and condemns her for her
behaviour, we see how the female housekeeper in the house is visibly dismayed at her. The
discourse is ready to blame her as soon as she steps out of the gender expectations.

The heroine in Oates’s “Blue-bearded Lover” challenges the discourse by doing
exactly what it tells her to do. In refusing to open up the chamber, the heroine is taking
control of both the narrative and of her husband. By “succumbing” to “his wishes,” she is in
full control. As so many women before her, she uses her sexuality and steers the story in a
different direction. In contrast to the heroine in “The Bloody Chamber,” this heroine takes her
fate in her own hands. It is not mentioned exactly how she knows what hides behind
Bluebeard’s locked door, but her knowing, seen from a broad perspective, indicates that she
has learned from all the other wives’ mistakes, and is now breaking the cycle: “[d]id I not
know that my lover’s previous brides had been brought to this house to die?” (Oates 391). She
refuses to let Bluebeard’s secret end her, and instead uses it to her advantage: “the forbidden
room remained locked […] And he declared with great passion that I was now truly his wife;
and that he loved me above all women” (391). She takes control of the discourse through
cunning manipulation. Like the heroines in “Mr. Fox,” “The Robber Bridegroom,” and
“Fitcher’s Bird,” she uses her knowledge to outwit Bluebeard.

Oates’s heroine is cold and calculating. She is not someone you look up to, and neither
is she supposed to be: “‘Blue-bearded Lover’ is a cautionary tale of its own, a tragic little
fable, from which the reader should recoil with a shudder – ‘Thank God I am not like that. I
would never compromise with evil!’” (Oates Afterword 392). The heroine is pushing the
boundaries to force through change. We are not supposed to follow her example. She is
compromising herself so that we will not have to.

Both Carter and Oates use sex in a disturbing way, which as previously mentioned,
brings their retellings closer to the original fairy tales orally told in the past rather than the
romantic Disney versions circulating today. Though it might be disturbing, it emphasises the
continuity of violence towards women as well as the lack of language to discuss said violence.
Returning to the debate catalysed by Lurie and Lieberman, they put focus on how the
romanticising of fairy tales is dangerous because it overlooks patterns of female restriction
and violence. Instead, Carter and Oates use their fairy tale retellings to nostalgically reflect on
the continuity of the past. Using a story that has survived for centuries they can implement its
narrative to express how this continuity of violence towards women has been neglected.

Critics such as Patricia Duncker and Avis Lewallen have asserted that Carter’s sexual
descriptions borders on pornography, showing women as ““masochistically eager for the
corruption of sexuality” (Duncker 233). They argue that Carter’s use of the fairy tale form is like writing “within the strait-jacket” because it as a form is so embedded in the patriarchal structures (227). Carter’s attempts to deconstruct the story therefore backfire, and instead of breaking it down she ends up reinforcing the same patriarchal values. Lewallen takes Duncker’s argument further and argues that Carter’s sexual themes to be more disturbing than progressive, viewing the story as simply a question of “fuck or be fucked” (Lewallen 147).

Duncker’s and Lewallen’s arguments are starting to get old, and though many critics today still find “The Bloody Chamber” disturbing, there is a consensus that it is more progressive. Though she also finds it disturbing, Makinen argues that critics such as Duncker and Lewallen fail to see past the sexist binary oppositions (4). Makinen contends that Carter’s use of sexuality is exploding the binaries of male and female sexuality. It is important to acknowledge that women also can, and have the right, to choose to be perverse. That perversity is not something only reserved for the male sex. Denying women that right is equal to sending them back to the restraints of the Victorian idea of woman (9).

More recently, Alyson Miller has argued that although contemporary depictions of female sexuality have become more adventurous, the complexity of the issue has intensified. In her article on “posh porn,” Miller asserts that there has been an increased tendency to link the problem of representation to a problem with women (380). She refers to posh porn as “a growing collection of works aimed specifically at addressing the sexual exploits of women, with its largely female-authored protagonists seeming to challenge radically male-centred economies of desire” (368). Because of the way that female sexuality in literature is critiqued in addition with the number of works, especially recently which address it, Miller contends that it points to an unease about female sexuality which posh porn is trying to address. Posh porn and works like “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover” “raise questions about the shape of female desire, confronting taboos about the body, the nature of sexual violence, and female agency” (380). While social norms tend to excuse male sexual behaviour, women are judged by different standards. As Miller argues, this makes the task of representing female sexuality in a way that defies patriarchal structures almost impossible.

Carter plays with the notions presented in traditional fairy tales. She creates an eerily uncanny feeling by hinting to the traditional fairy tales’ unease at how quickly the girl marries the prince before they get to know each other:
And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

The next day, we were married. (Carter 6)

There is no romance involved, no fairy tale dance, just the “potentiality of corruption” (6). The sudden jump to marriage emphasised by the beginning of a new paragraph, insinuates how fast the fairy tale princess and prince marries each other after their first meeting. Bluebeard’s hold of her, symbolised by the tight ruby choker around her neck, foreshadowing her fate as the next dead wife. It symbolises a feeling of no escape. The girl marries the prince without knowing who he is. With just that simple yes, her place in his story is set and her role is defined. Yet, as Helen Simpson asserts in her introduction to The Bloody Chamber, though the heroine in “The Bloody Chamber” appears as an innocent virgin destined for sacrifice, the story does not end with her death. As the story develops, she manages to take more control. Though she in the end needed her mother to come and rescue her, she does start to take control of her own narrative in small ways, small changes that beg for a critique of the discourse.

As the narrator of the story, the heroine puts the gaze on herself. The use of a first-person narrator lets us know that she will survive long enough for her to tell her own story. The story is a recollection of her own past, and she is not afraid to portray herself in a less positive light. She is questioning her own actions and feelings, acknowledging that she did not always do what she should have done. The protagonist creates a dialogue between her past and present Self. The story is told retrospectively, thus enabling the heroine to look back at her own actions and question them in light of her present knowledge and the story’s outcome. She is not only allowing herself to be portrayed unpolished, but she is also putting her own actions up for debate. According to Heather A. Hillsburg, reflective nostalgia makes this kind of shifting between past and present possible as it rebels against the modern notion of linear time (3). It builds on a complex narrative which seeks out to find the forgotten details in order to present an even grander narrative (3). The dialectic which follows creates a conversation between past and present and thus brings unpleasant details of the narrative to the forefront (3). Reflective nostalgia is not about finding the one true story, but about finding all the fragments which together create different narratives. Carter’s heroine is thus able to question her own narrative without having that interfere with her mission. As there is no one true story, all stories can be questioned, even her own.
Oates’s heroine uses the same dialectic to create a conversation between the present and the future. By directly addressing her own future, she tells us what it is going to look like: “[a]nd I will be bearing his child soon. The first of many children” (392). As Boym contends: “[n]ostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective” (xvi). The way we look at the past has a direct impact on the way we plan for our future. In many ways, reflective nostalgia is about understanding how our idea of the past is constructed by both collective and personal memories. To realise that it is not a static narrative, but always changing depending on the perspective.

What a lot of critics have found disturbing in “The Bloody Chamber” is the way that the heroine reacts to Bluebeard’s sexual assaults: “I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it” (Carter 14-15). Sheets argues that this shows us how the heroine takes pleasure in Bluebeard’s sexual objectification of her. Though it is disturbing, Sheets suggests that this type of masochism might actually have helped the heroine to endure the courtship to some extent, help her envision some sort of future. Meaning that the critique she receives is for doing what she needed to in order to survive. Then what is seen as a weakness is in fact also her strength.

There have been a lot of discussions amongst the critics of “The Bloody Chamber” on its portrayal of female sexuality. Makinen argues that both the strengths and the dangers of Carter’s texts lie in “a much more aggressive subversiveness and a much more active eroticism” (3). Her texts feature female characters who deal with physical abuse but who manages to reach for their sexuality and fight back. Women who are both troubled and empowered by their own violence (3). According to Sheets, Carter has herself said that she felt that there was a latent content of sexual violence in the traditional stories and that she therefore draws on that in her retellings (642). Lucie Armitt argues that it is not only Carter’s characters that allows for a new reading of female sexuality, but also the way that the different stories in The Bloody Chamber are “(inter)textual metamorphoses of both the fairy-tale and each other” (89). Though Carter’s story foregrounds violence and abuse, Makinen asserts that it is also “mocking and exploding the constructive cultural stereotypes and in celebrating the sheer ability of the female protagonist to survive, unscathed by the sexist ideologies” (3). Though the narrative in “The Bloody Chamber” may foreground violence and abuse, Makinen (3) argues that the narrative itself actively engages the reader in a feminist deconstruction of the old tales by its rewriting of the Bluebeard story (3).
Kari E. Lokke argues that Carter’s use of sexuality, in all its brutality, reveals “both the difficulty and the absolute necessity of a feminist redefinition of sexual pleasure and desire” (11). Carter is attacking the stereotypes in a way that creates discomfort. While some critics find her depictions liberating, others find it too disturbing. Carter’s heroine attacks the discourse by fighting back against the stereotype. “The Bloody Chamber” questions where we draw the line. Though Carter has been accused by critics like Lewallen and Duncker of being too pornographic and thus reinforcing patriarchal values, it is worth noting that the story does not actually present a way of becoming a sexual rebel. As Sheets asserts, the pornography presented subjects the heroine to harm (642). The sex is a means of survival, but it does not represent liberation: “[n]o I was not afraid of him; but of myself […] I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet – might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them?” (Carter 17). She feels how close she is to losing herself, to be swept up by the “potentiality of corruption” (6).

Carter published “The Bloody Chamber” in 1979. Sexualised images of women were heavily on the agenda in the 1960s and 1970s when second-wave feminists made them their target of their political activism (Hatton and Trautner 66-67). In the 1980s and 1990s, sexualised images of women started to circulate as a contrast to the iconic housewife and post-war images of women (67). Though critics like Duncker strongly criticised the increasing objectification of women, sexuality was by many used as a liberating expression of one’s identity, linked to ideas of “choice, ‘girl power’, and empowerment” (67). Today, in the era of choice-feminism, women are celebrating feminism and their right to choose to portray as sex-objects or housewife. While a lot of women see it as their own choice to sexualise themselves, others argue that the sexualisation of women is just another way of managing their power, especially for women in traditionally male-dominated spheres (66-67). Though the women “choose” to present themselves sexually, they do so in a culture where their individual freedom to be sexualised objects coincides with success. As Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner found in their examination of representation of sexuality in popular media, even if women choose themselves to be objectified, behind this choice lie social forces which both shape and constrain our individual choices, making it into less of an individual choice and more of a societal expectation (74).

In the spirit of “choice-feminism,” there is today a disavowal for the need of feminism. As Angela McRobbie asserts in her article “Beyond Post-Feminism,” there has been an increasing disidentification with feminism among young women (180). There is a general
perception of things having changed, and consequently, making feminism irrelevant (180). McRobbie argues that this acceptance of the status quo has resulted in a new form of entrapment where women are under the sense that they have achieved equality (180). At the same time, a new feminism has developed which encourages individualisation through acceptance, docility, and sexual objectification. In a different article on the subject, McRobbie claims that this disavowal brings with it a renewal of patriarchal norms which are overshadowed by the “high-visibility tropes of freedom” (“Top Girls?” 720). Though the emphasis has changed from what women cannot do to what they can do (721) it is perhaps more correct to say that it is an emphasis on what women should do.

Oates’s heroine might be read as a choice-feminist, choosing to take advantage of her own sexuality in order to get ahead. Even though she insists that this is a thought-out choice, it still does not sit right with us as readers. The choice does not appear as liberating as watching sexualised images of pop singers and movie starts on the covers of magazines. Though she chooses to use her sexuality to conquer her husband, the other choice she has is death. Her choice then, is not really much of a choice at all.

1.4 Breaking Repetition

The increasing emphasis on “choice feminism” has led to underlying issues being sidelined instead of discussed and interrogated (McRobbie “Beyond Post-Feminism” 181). The new way of talking about, or rather not talking about, feminism is slowly leading towards a reinstatement of the same gender regime which earlier feminist movements fought hard against. The new discourse frames women as “particular malleable or even ‘docile subject,’” (181) emphasising the binary between the modern and hip young feminist and the remnants of the man-hating-second-wave older generation.

Oates describes the mood in Carter’s short stories as “defiant self-dramatization” (“In Olden Times” 107). She argues that Carter’s female characters have managed to free themselves from the strings of their original fairy tales. They have managed to transcend their passivity and expected roles. She describes them as “perverse creations who define themselves against their seemingly prescribed fates” (107). They not only survive, but they conquer their own fates. In the introduction to The Bloody Chamber, Simpson asserts that Carter’s stories “are fired by the conviction that human nature is not immutable” (xii). Carter
shows us that humans are capable of change. We all have the power to transcend our destinies.

There is a pattern and reoccurrence of passive women in literature. It is important, according to Lorna Sage, to not mistake this pattern as evidence for a universal history of passive women (55). When it comes to gender representation, it is easy to mistakenly see literature as mirroring reality. Even though the fairy tale genre has had a lot of issues concerning the representation of women, it is still possible to enjoy them without having to undo them completely. As Sage contends, one might simply need to take a longer detour. Carter’s retellings manage to look past gender politics and use the genre to offer women a way to “take flight” (55). Fairy tales have always come in many versions and once upon a time people knew that the characters were not supposed to represent people in general. Sage argues that Carter is playing with the fairy tales’ legacy of the perfect woman, returning to the old consensus that the stories are about more than mirroring reality.

In “The Bloody Chamber” we see how the heroine is not only restricted by her husband, but also by the female housekeeper. This is a contrast to the brothers Grimm’s version, “The Robber Bridegroom,” where the housekeeper plays a key part in the heroine’s escape:

This is a den of murders. You think you’re a bride about to be married, but the only wedding you’ll celebrate is one with death. Look over here! I had to heat up this big pot of water for them. When you get into their hands, they’ll show no mercy and will chop you into pieces, cook, you, and eat you, for they are cannibals. You’re lost unless I take pity on you and try to save you. (Grimm and Grimm 180-181)

In “The Bloody Chamber” however, the housekeeper does absolutely nothing to warn the heroine of the danger she is in: “[n]ow her thin lips offered me a proud little smile. She would be my ally as long as I was his. And with that, I must be content” (9). While the old lady in the Grimm’s version is willing to help the heroine, the woman in “The Bloody Chamber” is cold and detached. Seeing Bluebeard killing his wives over and over again, for all the centuries that he has been killing, has made her immune. There is no longer any fight left in her. She just lets history run its course. Instead of helping the heroine escape her fate, she has given in to the discourse.

The housekeeper in “The Bloody Chamber” is also constricted to her role as a housekeeper. And seeing history being repeated again and again, it is no wonder she does not dare to go against Bluebeard. Just as the heroine is trapped in her position as Bluebeard’s
wife, the housekeeper is also defined by her position as housekeeper (Cavallaro 120). Carter questions to what degree characters are simply passive victims who are determined solely by their gender and class, or if they to some degree have the ability to impact. Even Bluebeard is trapped in the endless repetition of the discourse. He is stuck in his “Castle of Murder” repeatedly killing his wives for all time: “I felt there emanate from him, at that moment, a stench of absolute despair, rank and ghastly, as if the lilies that surrounded him had all at once begun to fester” (Carter 35). Bluebeard is anchored to the past, unable to move forward, destined to be alone.

It is this endless repetition of history that Carter and Oates are trying to break with their retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Carter uses mirrors to show how the heroine is created into Bluebeard’s image of woman. The mirrors also signify that this is something that has happened again and again, not just to this particular heroine: “[a] dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside” (Carter 14). Within a phallocentric culture, Carter links her heroine to every woman. In this moment, the unnamed heroine is not just one, but embodies all women. The moment creates a link between past and present. From here, the heroine can either start on her quest to find herself, or she can let herself be swallowed up by the discourse and lose herself completely. If she does not do anything, she will become one of the dozen brides she sees reflected in the mirrors. Remain nameless, become just another one of the nameless corpses in Bluebeard’s chamber.

Carter creates links between the past and the present by using telephones and the stock market as images of modern society contrasted to the fairy tale tropes. She emphasises books associated with male abuse of power, tracing a line of abuse through history (Sheets 645). By focusing on the historical and consistent abuse of power by men through history, Carter is emphasising that this is not something that just belongs to the murky old fairy tales, and that it is not something that only happened in the past. Men have, and still do, restricted women, confining them to a position as an object.

The discourse strives to keep woman in the object position. On her quest to find her subjectivity, Bluebeard’s wife is doomed to fail: “‘I only did what he knew I would.’ / ‘Like Eve’ he said” (Carter 38). Though she is only doing what she is told, she is still the one blamed. The Marquis’ “great-grandfather’s ceremonial sword” (36), the stories in the books, the fairy tales, all point to the fact that the killing of women at the Castle of Murder has been
going on for generations and will be going on for generations to come unless something changes. And nothing seems to be done to change it.

While Carter is exploding the narrative of the original fairy tale, Oates mocks the story by never letting the chamber be opened. Oates’s heroine knows very well what is in Bluebeard’s chamber and she refuses to let him gain power over her by unlocking the door. She will not let the narrative go in that direction. She is fully aware that Bluebeard wants her to open the door while he is away, and she wears the key around her neck: “I have slipped the golden key into my bosom, to wear against my heart, as a token of my lover’s trust in me” (Oates 391). The key is no longer a symbol for female disobedience and sin. She has turned it into a symbol of her power over Bluebeard.

Oates’s heroine takes matters into her own hands and takes control over both the narrative and her own destiny. Though she is critiquing the male discourse, she is also critiquing women for just letting it happen and not taking action. “When we walked together he held my hand unnaturally high, at the level of his chest, as no man had done before him. In this way he made his claim” (390), men have been allowed to make their unnatural claim on women long enough. The heroine knows exactly what has happened to his previous wives, but she does not feel sorry for them. “[d]id I not know that my lover’s previous brides had been brought to this house to die? – that they had failed him, one by one, and had deserved their fate?” (391). She is tired of idly waiting by and hoping that things will change. She is tired of women enabling a discourse which puts them in the object position. “Through the opened windows the invisible stars exert their power. But if it is a power that is known, are the stars invisible” (391). By now we know what is going on. We cannot keep ignoring the problem and hope it will go away by itself.

“Blue-bearded Lover” breaks the cycle of repetition by never opening the chamber. Usually, it is the heroine’s fate to disobey her husband and unlock the door: “[w]hy may I not enter it? I asked, for I saw that he expected it of me, and he said, kissing my brow, Because I have forbidden it” (Oates 391). However, in this story that never happens. The heroine refuses to move into his narrative. Instead she lures him into hers. Oates has removed the one static element which has persisted from version to version. What happens when the chamber is never opened? When the heroine never opens the chamber, she forces the narrative to change. It throws the narrative in a new direction, allowing it to finally move forward. When the cycle of repetition is broken the story can move forward towards the future. Oates has looked back not to recreate a moment in the past, but to suggest a direction: “[o]ne is nostalgic not for the
past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future” (Boym 351). Nostalgia is about allowing oneself to dream of futures that might not have an anchor to the past, but which are nevertheless connected to it.

As I will discuss further in chapter two, Bluebeard is facing an identity crisis in contemporary literature. Mary Kathryn Grant asserts that Oates’s writing forces man to come to face his own mortality (62). She argues that the “ambiance of violence” (61) which Oates creates in her texts, exposes a fear that persistently threatens underneath the surface. There is a fear of destruction followed by a need to establish order. As a character, Bluebeard is on the verge of being forgotten by the masses. He no longer has the authority that he used to have and is even mistaken for a pirate. These feminist revisions are questioning his relevance and suggest that there is a need to change things up. He just does not know where his place is in this new future that Carter and Oates suggest. If the unborn child in “Blue-bearded Lover” is the key to female survival, it is interesting to consider what that means in terms of Bluebeard’s survival?

1.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to show how Carter’s and Oates’s retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale utilise the nostalgia embedded in the original tale to reflect upon contemporary issues. They do not just update the fairy tale theme in way which makes it resonate with contemporary audiences, but they take advantage of the link between past and present to try to create an awareness of how the discourse tends to repeat the same patriarchal values of the original tale. Both Carter and Oates portray female characters who transgress traditional gender expectations. By pushing the boundaries, they reveal their unnatural constructions. The dialectic between the past and present emphasise the continuity. It is not something which only happens in fairy tales, but also something we find reoccurring in today’s political climate.

The nostalgia in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover” does not contain any longing for a restoration of the past. To the contrary, the nostalgia in the two retellings longs for change. The retellings are not presented as a restoration of Perrault’s fairy tale, but utilises the emotions connected to the tale to show a pattern of reoccurrence in literature presenting women as passive. The discourse restricts women to their stereotypical gender
roles and punishes them when they transgress. Carter’s and Oates’s female character are not dependent on male relatives to save them from a gruesome situation their transgressions have put them in. They survive because of their transgressions and refusal to do gender “correctly.”
2 Continued Repetition in “Bluebeard” and “George and Vivian”

A man’s quarrel with Woman is his quarrel with himself – with those “despised” and muted elements in his personality which he cannot freely acknowledge because they challenge his sense of masculine supremacy and control.

Joyce Carol Oates, “At Least I Have Made a Woman of Her”: Images of Women in Twentieth-Century Literature

In this chapter, I ask what it is about Donald Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” (1988) and John Updike’s “George and Vivian” (1995) that makes them less progressive than Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and Joyce Carol Oates’s “Blue-bearded Lover.” Is there a different approach to the original fairy tale which does not work as well? Or are there issues which they fail to address properly? As a framework, nostalgia applies us with specific elements to look for in the texts to create arguments as to why and how a text is progressive or not. In this chapter I will point out how the elements of nostalgia in Barthelme’s and Updike’s Bluebeard-retellings are leaning more towards restorative rather than reflective. Looking at what makes these specific elements restorative will make it easier to argue for or against the progressiveness of the texts. Instead of simply assuming that Barthelme’s and Updike’s texts will be less progressive than Carter’s and Oates’s, it is my assessment that using nostalgia as framework provides a way of arguing how the former differ from the latter.

In this chapter I will explore how Barthelme’s and Updike’s use of nostalgia only lead them to a repetition of the same patriarchal values embedded in Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” while Carter’s and Oates’s use of nostalgia suggest forward thinking. Boym’s terminology of the different types of nostalgia allows this difference to be analysed thoroughly. Previously, there has been a tendency to dismiss any notions of nostalgia as non-progressive instead of discussing what it is about the nostalgia that makes the texts not work. While I in chapter one set out to explore how reflective nostalgia and progression complement each other, this chapter will examine the contrast between reflective and restorative nostalgia and see how restorative nostalgia easily loses itself in its exploration of the past.
There are specifically two elements in Barthelme’s and Updike’s retellings which I argue show how their use of nostalgia is more restorative than reflective, and which therefore suggest repetition rather than change. First, both Barthelme and Updike have made their heroines unsympathetic and with no agency of their own. The heroines are more reminiscent of the stepmothers in the fairy tales rather than heroines. It seems that their only function in the story is to make Bluebeard appear more sympathetic in contrast, and to defend his own actions. Their retellings end up repeating the same patriarchal discourse focusing on blaming women for men’s transgressions. Barthelme’s and Updike’s stories become yet another tale where the husband’s crimes are just a result of women overstepping their boundaries. Second, rather than pointing towards the future, these two texts cannot seem to escape the feeling of decadence. Just as Bluebeard, the retellings become stuck in the past. Instead of suggesting change, they end up repeating the same patriarchal values of the original fairy tale.

This chapter has four parts. First, I will address some elements in Barthelme’s and Updike’s retellings which indicate some use of reflective nostalgia. They both update the theme to fit with contemporary relationship issues, which automatically indicates some reflection on the past and its relevance and use for the present. In both stories, the relationship between Bluebeard and his wife is strained, and the two couples both show signs of not knowing how to interact with each other or fix their problems. Second, I will discuss the ways in which the portrayal of the heroines indicates restorative rather than reflective nostalgia. The portrayals show no sign of progress, but instead repeats the same discriminating discourse towards women, recreating the cautionary stories warning against curiosity and individual thinking when dealing with men. Third, I will look at the ways the stories look back to the past for answers instead of learning from the past. Lastly, I will look at how Barthelme and Updike address expectations, both to the text and in relation to gender. Both play with our expectations to the text, but while Carter and Oates played with expectations in a way which forced the story out of the endless repetition, Barthelme and Updike are too caught up in the past.

2.1 Elements of Reflection

Nostalgia is a more complex concept than a lot of people give it credit for. Boym refers to reflective and restorative nostalgia as tendencies rather than absolute types. Both Barthelme and Updike use the Bluebeard fairy tale to reflect on how modern couples today are incapable
of communicating with each other, utilising the chamber from the original story to represent the gap between people and contemporary relationship issues.

Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” is in many ways similar to Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and Oates’s “Blue-bearded Lover.” It uses Perrault’s version as a backdrop, letting the original fairy tale drive the story onwards. It assumes that the reader has some knowledge of the fairy tale, playing with both the reader’s and the female protagonist’s expectations to the story. Carter and Barthelme implement the same idea of having Perrault’s “Bluebeard” in the background and using their retellings to reflect on the original story, thus also reflecting on the reader’s own contemporary expectations for the original story and the retelling. Just as Oates’s heroine, Barthelme’s female protagonist knows the story of Bluebeard and who her husband really is. She even tells us that she has no inclination of opening the door at the beginning of the story. However, as the story goes on, we realise that the door is probably going to be opened one way or another. Barthelme’s heroine is trapped in the narrative. The story line tells us that in the end she will in fact open the door to the chamber even though she had decided early on that she would not. Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” becomes a metanarrative commenting on how the Bluebeard narrative keeps repeating itself again and again and how even if we try, we cannot escape it. It does not matter that the heroine is aware of her own situation and has already come to terms with her own sexuality. The discourse will nevertheless lead her to the same place and ending. Boym describes restorative nostalgia as “not simply ‘forgetting of reality’ but a psychotic substitution of a delusional homeland. Tradition in this way is to be restored with a nearly apocalyptic vengeance” (43). Restorative nostalgia easily slips into a conspiratorial worldview which recreates a paranoiac reconstruction of home based on collective delusions (43). The “we” will find scapegoats to blame for their misfortunes and disconnect from the modern world (43).

Bluebeard’s secret chamber is not only the thing that drives the story forward, it also represents a secret that threatens to destroy their “(to that point) happy marriage” (Barthelme 93). In Barthelme’s story the chamber represents their inability to relate to each other in their marriage. Their expectations towards the chamber create between them a tension that culminates. While she expects the chamber to reveal “the beautifully dressed carcasses of [her] six predecessors,” (94) for him it represents a narrative win. He has changed the story. He no longer collects dead wives, but art. The chamber comes to represent the gap between the couple, symbolising their inability to communicate. They both want different things from their marriage, and they have opposing expectations which show us how they do not know
each other at all and that they both got into the marriage with opposing ideas of what their relationship was to be like. Instead of dealing with the issue and talking to each other, they are letting the problem fester, decaying like the zebras in the chamber.

While the fairy tale’s moral on female curiosity represented by the bloodstained key has received a lot of critical attention, it is not the only central theme in the story. Bacchilega argues that the forbidden chamber motif is just as prominent in the originals as well as in later retellings (107). Focusing on this theme opposed to the bloodstained key, the story does not necessarily read as a cautionary tale, nor does it just speak to women (107). Instead, it becomes a story about an initiation process, warning of the dangers of marriage and sexuality at a time when marriage for young girls probably was not that easy and needed an awakening and preparation of sorts. It also becomes a story about a secret, a darkness lurking in the marriage. Therefore, many retellings use elements from versions such as “The Robber Bridegroom” or “Mr Fox”, versions of the Bluebeard fairy tale where the bloody key is not as prominent a part as in Perrault’s “Bluebeard” (107). “‘Bluebeard’ and related ‘Forbidden Chamber’ tales (AT312, AT311 and AT955) 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 (Bacchilega 110). Many feminist rewritings use this initiation process as a way of reinforcing a link between the wife and the community, associating the wife with light and life, while Bluebeard is associated with darkness and death. Consequently, they create a place where Bluebeard does not belong and no longer is able to live. Female disobedience is not the point of the story, “[p]ursuing independent though related goals, each function as means and obstacle in the other’s plot. By crossing the threshold of the bloody chamber, both have trespassed, and blood marks them both. Both also want knowledge of, and power over, the other” (111). This battle between Bluebeard and the wife is clear in Barthelme’s “Bluebeard,” and in the end, they both lose.

Likewise, Updike updates the theme from Bluebeard to fit with contemporary relationship issues in his retelling “George and Vivian.” Just as Barthelme, he has removed the blood and threat of murder from the story, and instead focused his story on the failure of communication in modern relationships. As argued by Carmen Giménez Smith: “George and Vivian’s problem isn’t that they don’t love each other, but rather that love doesn’t invalidate the quiet darkness of every marriage” (410). According to Smith, Updike furthers the original Bluebeard theme of preparing young women “for the brutality and shock of marriage” (410).
George Allenson, a modern bluebeard who has gone through several divorces (all his wives still alive), is on vacation with his wife. In the first part of the story they are driving through Italy, the second part through Ireland. They avoid their problems instead of dealing with them: “left the inner cry unexpressed” (Updike 189). The two years between their two vacations have not changed anything except making them both a little older. The last sentence of the story sums their progress up: “[t]hey were back where they had started” (189). Nothing has been discussed, nothing has become better, nothing has been fixed. There is no physical chamber in Updike’s retelling. Instead, the gap becomes here a representation of the chamber, driving them further and further away from each other. It figures as this resentful thing between them creating tension. The elephant in the room that neither of them wishes to see.

As a fairy tale which over time has appeared in so many variants and versions, Bluebeard carries a sense of something that has been going on for ages. The story line has been repeated over and over, always resurrecting somewhere in a different form. The feminist retellings of the fairy tale all focus on breaking away from this repetition of history. Updike’s and Barthelme’s retellings, however, seem to be caught in the theme of repetition rather than breaking away from it. According to Boym, nostalgia looks sideways:

Nostalgia is never literal, but lateral. It looks sideways. It is dangerous to take it at face value. Nostalgic reconstructions are based on mimicry; the past is remade in the image of the present or a desire future, collective designs are made to resemble personal aspirations and vice versa. (354)

Though nostalgia is in many ways about the past, restorative nostalgics are not looking backwards. The past they think they are restoring does not actually belong in the past. It is an imaginary past they have created to justify their actions and feelings in the present.

### 2.2 Strong Heroines or Just Wicked Women?

The lack of violence is one of the most apparent differences between Barthelme’s and Updike’s retellings and other feminist adaptations of the tale. Several of the other rewritings are concerned with the way that violence towards women have become normalised and emphasise the limitations of female gender roles. Updike and Barthelme, on the other hand, explore the difficulties of modern relationships while emphasising how the masculine identity is rooted in history and is starting to slip away from Bluebeard, leaving him anxious and
uncertain. Barthelme’s Bluebeard is struggling with his wife’s perception and expectations towards him, while Updike’s Bluebeard is struggling with his own identity, feeling that there is no longer any room for his dated masculine version of himself. Like the other rewritings, they both focus on the transgression of gender roles and the expectations towards gender, but in contrast to the others they have emphasised Bluebeard’s perspective. While Barthelme has kept the heroine as the main protagonist, Updike has chosen to write his story through Bluebeard’s eyes.

Both Updike and Barthelme might be risking, as Tatar argues, not taking the story seriously enough by removing key elements of the story and thus neglecting the importance and the issue of violence towards women (Secrets 163). In their non-violent retellings, they have neglected the two most vital parts of the story, which, according to Tatar, is the woman’s curiosity and the man’s secret (163). In doing so, they fail to replicate the hermeneutic circle of the story “reducing the man’s secret to something that no one wants to know or so limiting the woman’s curiosity that the mysteries of the man’s psyche have no appeal to her what so ever” (163). Instead of using the original themes of the fairy tale to reflect on how these are problematic, they ended up leaving them unquestioned, thus reinforcing the same patriarchal values from the original story and offering up no solutions for progress.

By not addressing the story’s theme of violence towards women Barthelme and Updike eliminates a key element which has been a driving force behind a lot of the revisions done to this story. Updike removes the female perspective completely by making Bluebeard the protagonist of the story. Instead of taking the theme of female violence further he makes his retelling about a man who struggles with identity issues and blames women for his feeling lost. Barthelme, on the other hand, almost makes a mockery of the theme by portraying a heroine who desperately wishes her husband was a serial killer. Tatar argues that Barthelme’s portrayal of the wife as cunning, conniving, and deceitful makes her unlikeable and turns the story into a defence of Bluebeard, making excuses for his behaviour towards his wife (Secrets 136). Updike, who has chosen to write the story from solely Bluebeard’s perspective also finds himself in danger of merely defending a man for wanting to kill his wife.

Both Barthelme and Updike set their heroines up to fail. Their retellings seem to be questioning femininity, focusing more on reconstructing the male authority than reclaiming the female one. According to Stephen Benson, since “the authority of the masculine is legitimized by the weight of history […] the heroines must ultimately fail” (260). As Bluebeard’s authority is rooted in the past, he needs to recreate that past which, consequently,
also restrains the women. For Bluebeard to legitimate his lost authority and identity, he must stop the heroines’ quest for progress.

Not only does these two Bluebeards use nostalgia to create a link between past and present, but they are also nostaligically longing for the past. It is here that it becomes evident how Carter’s and Oates’s work which are using nostalgia more reflectively than Barthelme and Updike. There is a difference in the way which they relate their texts to the past. While Carter and Oates use the nostalgia linked to the fairy tale genre to question certain ideological and patriarchal patterns that seem to repeat themselves, Barthelme’s and Updike’s texts long for this repetition. This romanticised longing without consideration for the costs and battles that have been fought in the meantime, threatens to undermine and trivialise the issues the tale asks you to consider.

Barthelme’s heroine has heard the story of Bluebeard and knows whom she is marrying: “[i]n truth I had a very good idea of what lay on the other side of the door and no interest at all in opening it” (92). Instead of being frightened or repulsed, she is attracted by the myth surrounding him: “I admit I found him very attractive despite his age and his nose” (92). This attraction to his features is also apparent to some degree in some of the older versions of the fairy tale, where the heroine would overlook her husband-to-be’s strange features. According to Bacchilega, this tells us that the heroine would have some degree of affinity with Bluebeard (112). Bacchilega further argues that in some versions of the tale, the heroine’s deception, meaning her way of tricking Bluebeard to reveal his true nature, would mirror Bluebeard’s deceptions (112). Barthelme takes this even further. His heroine is not interested in unlocking the chamber until she suspects that it might not be filled with his dead wives after all. While she is having affairs left and right, even with the castle’s chaplain during midnight Sabbat, Bluebeard appears as a loving and forgiving husband who only wishes for his wife to see his new art collection.

As discussed in chapter one, Oates’s heroine also refused to open the chamber, but in contrast to Barthelme’s retelling, she stood her ground and the door remained closed throughout the story. In Barthelme’s “Bluebeard,” however, we early on get the sense that the chamber will be opened even though the heroine states otherwise. The power Oates’s heroine got from refusing to open the chamber is thus undermined in Barthelme’s retelling.

Several feminist revisions of the Bluebeard fairy tale have highlighted how the heroine outwits her destructive husband and manages to survive both him and a society that wants to kill her (S. R. Wilson 6). Barthelme, on the other hand, is read by Tatar as a defence of
Bluebeard’s behaviour, ascribing his crimes to his wife’s infidelities and scandalous behaviour (*Secrets* 163). Barthelme’s heroine shows agency and a confidence in her own sexuality, both of which are aspects that Carter and Oates emphasise in their retellings as well. However, Barthelme’s heroine is not freed by her agency the same way as the other heroines of other retellings. Her actions are actually being used against her. Instead of being portrayed as active and free, she is portrayed unsympathetic, reminding us more of the wicked stepmothers from fairy tales rather than a strong heroine. Barthelme’s bloodless chamber then becomes a way for his Bluebeard to trick the cheating wife. It becomes just another tale where the girl is punished for opening the chamber, getting what she deserves for disobeying her husband. Lieberman claims that although there are active female characters in fairy tales, the only powerful, but good women are fairies (391). The powerful good characters are however outnumbered by the powerful bad ones (391). The active characters are therefore not the ones that young girls can relate to or should aspire to be like. Barthelme, with his cunning and cheating wife, is thus repeating this pattern of only giving agency to wicked female characters. He reinforces the discourse describing women as either passive and good, or active and bad.

Fairy tales have long tended to depict passive female characters. This reoccurring characterisation of women as just waiting for prince charming is part of what led to the debate between Lieberman and Lurie, a debate which in various ways is reappearing also in contemporary discussions about girls and their role models. With the increasing disinterest in feminist politics among young women, McRobbie argues that women again are expected to be “quiet and quiescent” (“Beyond Post-Feminism” 180). With post-feminism and the rejection of second-wave feminism, young women today are distancing themselves from the older generation by being happy and content with the status quo. As McRobbie claims, they are restrained by a different kind of control, where complaining has become the image of past battles already fought (180).

Barthelme’s “Bluebeard,” just as Carter and Oates, is written from the wife’s perspective. But instead of making her the focaliser as a way of giving her voice and agency, she is still trapped in the patriarchal discourse. While describing her husband as attractive and full of knowledge, she describes herself as the opposite, admitting to her lesser intelligence: “I was not that intelligent” (93). Her view of herself and her husband is reinforcing the same patriarchal stereotypes presented in the original fairy tales, except that instead of being innocent and naïve, she is bad and unintelligent.
Though the story seems to be trying to break away from the expectations linked to Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” in the end it just keeps repeating the same ideology and patterns of the original fairy tale, portraying a husband who has no choice but to punish his disobedient wife. Maria Tatar reads Barthelme’s Bluebeard’s chamber of dead zebras as Bluebeard finally succeeding in “duping a conniving wife” (Secrets 136). The way the wife’s behaviour is portrayed, as lacking no respect for either her husband or religion, plays into a narrative where Bluebeard’s crimes are legitimised due to his wife’s despicable behaviour. Though the intention of the story might be satirical, Tatar contends that the effects and “truth’ they reveal about the protagonist and their wives only reinforces myths about female duplicity that are embedded even in the stories that present Bluebeard’s wives as victims” (136). Yet again, woman takes the fall for man’s crimes.

The wife’s disappointment in finding the chamber empty of dead bodies comes from the fact that she thought she was helping her husband overcome some deep sorrow. Finding it empty, she realises that she has not helped him overcome anything. His secret was that he had nothing for her to forgive. Hermansson asserts that the ending of Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” echoes a story where every man is a Bluebeard. The true mystery of Bluebeard is not a chamber filled with dead women, but the “the boring emptiness of absolute mediocrity” (Ysaye quoted in Hermansson Bluebeard 144-145). The story reveals that all men are just “poor pretenders,” pretending to be more interesting than they are (144-145).

Though Barthelme’s character is not sympathetic, she is given some agency whereas Updike’s heroine does not seem to be doing anything at all except following and complaining about her husband. At least Barthelme’s heroine does what she wants to do. Vivian, on the other hand, is describes as moody and childish, always dependent upon her husband. Throughout the story she is sobbing and, at least according to George, keeps throwing tantrums: “Vivian sat still, eyes shut, like a child trying to hold down a tantrum” (162). She is portrayed as consequently complaining about her husband’s failures and incapability of doing things right, but never shows any signs of agency or a will to do something about it herself.

Vivian does however present some good comments on feminism and the men’s view on themselves and history, but they are all left hanging in the air or brushed off by George. When they during their trip through Italy visit the house of D’Annunzio, an Italian writer connected to the decadence movement, she refers to the “two-story mausoleum” (167) as “[h]ideous male bonding, right through to the afterlife” (168). Where George sees a grand remembrance of “a fin-de-siècle poet” (168), Vivian sees it as “the most hateful place [she’s]
ever been. It’s Fascist” (168). She is not impressed by a bunch of dead men lying in boxes: “[y]ou mean men are in all these boxes? Where are their wives? Why aren’t they buried with their families?” (168). However, her reflection on how women tend to be written out of history is overlooked by George, who seems to take personal offense of her critique. Instead of actually discussing the subject with his wife, he shuts her down, criticising her whole generation’s view on history and politics: “[t]he fucking trouble with your generation, all you know about history is Auschwitz and the A-bomb,” “Vivian, a full generation removed from him, was an instinctive feminist, but to him any history of unrelieved victimization seemed suspect” (170, 173). He has no time for her “insatiable questions, like a child’s” (168). He is not interested in having a proper discussion with her because he has already decided that her whole generation is unable to see things properly.

During their next trip, George decides that they should go to Ireland, “a land whose history was muffled in legend and ignominy” (176), precisely to avoid Vivian’s instinctive feminism from acting up again. In the part of the story named “Bluebeard in Ireland,” George compares his wife to all his previous ones and wonders how his next wife will turn out: “[h]e had meant Vivian to see him into the grave, but unexpected resistances in her were stimulating, rather than lulling his will to live” (175). Not taking any self-criticism, or doing any self-reflection, he blames his wives for his failed relationships and marriages. It is not his fault that women are so hard to live with: “[i]n his simple and innocent manhood he had taken on a swarming host of sexist resentments – men were incompetent (his driving in foreign lands), men were ridiculous (his desire to see, *faute de mieux*, old Ireland’s lichenized gray beehive huts, dolments, menhirs, and ruined abbeys), men were lethal” (175-176). He begins to fantasise about leaving her in the wilderness of Ireland while he moves on to his next wife, maybe an old mistress “whose love had never lessened and who was miraculously unaged?” (186). Again, we see how easily restorative nostalgia turns paranoid. George, the “we,” feels threatened by Vivian, “them.” They persuade themselves that “them” is conspiring and thus they have to conspire against “them” in order to restore their imagined community which they feel the “they” are trying to destroy (Boym 43). So, while Vivian is portrayed as a complaining wife, George spends the story complaining about Vivian’s complaining. However, despite how much he complains about her complaining, he cannot avoid intentionally doing and saying things that he knows will drive her mad: “the devil in him […] could not resist teasing her” (177). Their inability to have a proper discussion because of
George’s persuasion that they are a “we” against “them,” thus creates tension between them, never allowing them to connect on a deeper level.

2.3 Bluebeard’s Nostalgia

Barthelme’s and Updike’s Bluebeards are experiencing nostalgia for a lost identity. Both Bluebeards appear to have lost grip on who they are, both as husbands and as men, but also on their place in the narrative. The two retellings can be read as Bluebeard’s reaction to all the feminist retellings putting him in a bad light. He now gets the chance to tell his side of the story. To do so, both Barthelme and Updike draw heavily on history. Bluebeard’s identity is anchored in the past and the stories try to return to that place to restore Bluebeard to his former glory.

Several retellings of the Bluebeard story feature Bluebeard as especially interested in symbolism, making him embody the decadent spirit of fin de siècle. Towards the end of the 19th century people were looking anxiously towards the new century. It was a time of rapid progress and modernisation and people had a hard time picturing the next century. Bluebeard is often portrayed as a character interested in art and especially symbolism, as we saw in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber.” Resembling the decadent spirit of symbolism, Bluebeard is often portrayed as stuck in the past, paralysed by his fear of the future and of change. He is struggling to find a place for himself in the new future, feeling his roots to history are slipping away. With Updike’s Bluebeard, who is not just a figure in the background of the story, but the protagonist of the retelling, the decadent and fin-de-siècle spirit takes even more presence in the text. Instead of functioning as an element of contrast, showing how the text is moving forward, the whole story becomes emerged in Bluebeard’s decadence and nostalgia. It thus becomes the opposite of the progressive texts of Carter and Oates which always point to the future. Instead, Updike’s “Bluebeard” keeps pointing backwards, hinting towards an endless repetition of the past.

This fear of the future and Bluebeard’s roots to the past is what creates a gap between him and his wife. Bluebeard’s fascination with art symbolises his fear of the future and his unwillingness to move forward. In “George and Vivian,” their contrasting views on the significance of art and historic ruins is enlarging the gap between them. Instead of dealing with their issues, they avoid them: “it placed the least strain on their marriage if he agreed
with her assertions” (172). They both have different expectations for their trip, but they never voice them.

History has a strong presence in Updike’s retelling. As George and Vivian travel through Italy and Ireland, the past has a very prominent presence in the background as well as being the source of tension between the couple. According to Benson, Updike intertwines history together with the retelling in a way that makes it “resonantly present, for reader and characters alike” (244). The presence of the past is not only setting a decadent mood in the story, but it also symbolises a distance between the couple. The past becomes a symbol for everything in their relationship that is not working, creating a gap between them that they cannot seem to connect. Instead of bringing them closer as a talking point, or as a way down memory lane, it creates tension.

The difference between restorative and reflective nostalgia becomes very prominent in “George and Vivian.” George desperately wants to restore a former version of himself: “he wanted to be forever a young lover” (158). He feels a discomfort in growing old and wishes he could once again be the young man he used to be. This discomfort is expressed through his insecurities and his need to keep up appearances. “People lie to be merciful” (160), he would rather live with a false, but good impression of himself than face the truth. He has a need to impress, both himself, his wife, and the strangers that they encounter. George fears growing old and is perhaps even more afraid of appearing to grow old. He wants to go back in time. The exchange of money between the Japanese girl and the young gondolier “who gallantly made his way back across the narrow canal by stepping on other gondolas” (162), is something that leaves a huge impression in him. The “strangely electrifying, passion-filled voice” (162) of the Japanese girl follows him on their trip to Ireland two years later as he starts to picture what his next wife will be like.

George attempts to restore the past and his past Self in order to stabilise his present identity. When George reminisces about his previous wives, he tries to restore the idea of himself as young and vibrant lover, but feels that his present relationship with his wife is making that hard: “[h]er figure, he noticed when she stood, had broadened since he first knew her – thicker in the waist and ankles, chunky like her aggravating shoes. And developing a bad back besides. As if she were hurrying to catch up to him in the aging process” (Updike 186). When he looks at his wife, he is reminded of years passing and his own age. He starts to reminisce about his past relationships in order to feel like the person he used to be. The person that he wants to be. The idea of leaving his wife in the middle of the empty Irish landscape
empowers him: “Allenson was feeling abnormally tall, as if his vision of Vivian stuck in the Irish landscape forever had a centrifugal force, spilling him outward, into a fresh future, toward yet another wife” (185). He feels it is his 20-years-younger wife who holds him back from the person that he wishes, or thinks, that he is.

One of the ways that George is trying to restore is past identity is through his driving. He wants to appear as an Italian in his driving through the Italian landscape: “[w]hy do you feel you have to pretend you’re an Italian driver?” (160). He wants to appear as someone who knows what he is doing and someone who is in control. When he later reminisces about his past relationships, he thinks of the time when he and one of his previous wives were speeding in their Ford Thunderbird convertible: “Jeaneanne and he had owned a Ford Thunderbird convertible when they lived in Texas, and would commonly hit a hundred miles an hour” (180). It is a steep contrast to the little Fiat and the little Toyota compact that Vivian and he are driving in the present. That makes it even more important for him to appear as anything else but the old American tourist that he actually is. Although driving is making his wife carsick, “[s]he did look a little greenish” (162), it is more important for him to appear as a good driver and to be impressive to the people around him: “[t]he little Fiat emitted a satisfying squeal of tires as Allenson surged around a hairpin curve. The grille of the tailgating Ferrari switched back and forth in the rearview mirror like an exasperated beast in a cage” (161). He desperately fights against the notion that he, just as his wife, is growing old. His past haunts him like the Ferrari in the rearview mirror reminding him that time has gone by.

This uncertainty about and discomfort with his age also leaves him to be easily jealous of other men, and very egocentric. He does not understand why his wife smiles when she gets flowers from strangers outside a church, seeing her reaction as a female weakness: “[p]erhaps women are biologically conditioned to accept flowers, even from total strangers on the street” (157). He does not see her in the same way as he did when they first started sneaking around: “[h]e thought of his present wife as racily younger than himself but her fortieth birthday had come and gone, and since the days when they had surreptitiously courted, in the flattering shadows of Claire’s unknowing, Vivian’s face had grown angular and incised with lines of recurrent vexation” (179). The thrill of the relationship is gone, and he has no clue as to how to fill the void.

George does not only reminisce about the past, but he wants to restore it. The past has become so linked to how he sees himself, which is why it is so important for him to glorify it.
According to Damjana Mraovic-O’Hare, reminiscing about private and historical experiences can leave the characters perplexed about their own position in the historical context (215). Characters who use restorative nostalgia embrace historical elements as a constitutive part of their identity (218). George longs for the time when he was younger, when he had a young and healthy body. He wants to go back to that time and relive it. He does not want to simply remember it, but he wants to make the past into the present.

George looks up to famous womanisers such as Ernest Hemingway and Gabriele D’Annunzio. For George, these are men he considers prime examples of masculinity. Men he describes as “looking for the good life,” and “great womanizer[s]” (164). Both Hemingway and D’Annunzio were writers who wrote about their female conquests and who ooze of macho masculinity. Men who George wants to be like. He therefore longs back to a time when this kind of masculinity and patriarchal values were accepted. Today, however, his attempts to romanticise that era are met with cold hatred from his wife. In Barthelme’s “Bluebeard,” we find this type of masculinity in the mentioning of another famous womaniser, the Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa. Here, he is one of the wife’s many lovers. Just as in Updike’s text, there is nostalgia here for a time when this type of extreme masculinity was accepted and seen as attractive. Today, with the focus on feminism and #metoo, this type of masculinity is often quickly dismissed.

For Barthelme’s Bluebeard, a lot of his insecurities stem from his wife no longer respecting and fearing him as he wishes she would. He has lost the mystique that previously followed him, limiting his power as Bluebeard. Though attracted to him at first, she quickly loses interest and starts having affairs. His secret chamber is no longer of interest to her. As Tatar (Secrets 163) asserted, his secret is not worth knowing, and thus the hold he has over his wife is gone.

At the beginning of the 20th century, gender roles started to change as a result of the war and the suffragette movements. As the image of masculinity used to be reflected in society and culture, the shift in gender roles did not only impact the image of femininity, but also the image of the ideal man. Men had previously been able to define their identity as man by mirroring images in society. The changes in gender politics started to blur the lines. George L. Mosse refers to this as ‘the masculine curse,’ a term used by a writer in 1993, describing men’s anxiety about their manhood (191). The male standards used in the past, such as duelling and courage in war, no longer existed. It became harder and harder to find concrete standardised tests one could use to ascertain one’s manhood.
This “masculine curse” is evident in Updike’s version of Bluebeard. We see how George continually feels the need to ascertain his own masculinity, not only towards his wife and others, but also towards himself. He uses grand images from history and literature to legitimate his feeling of authority which he sees as an important part of his identity as a man. When Vivian criticises his points of reference, he feels that she is attacking him personally: “Men […] putting themselves in pompous marble boxes, ruining all this woodland, the lovely view. Oh, I hate it” (169). This “attack” on the things that George looks up to and uses to build his own masculine identity around is why Benson argues that George sees his wife as someone who is “allergic to history” (251-252). By questioning the grandness of the history, George feels she is attacking the grandness of masculinity, hating not only the fascists, but all men in general for being men.

Again, we see how George and Vivian’s different views can be used to describe the difference between reflective and restorative nostalgia. Whereas George focuses on the “total reconstructions of monuments of past” (Boym 41), seeing the mausoleum in its former glory, relishing in the work that lies behind it, Vivian’s approach “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41). She does not see the mausoleum for its construction, but looks instead at its costs and meanings. She sees the sacrifices that it represents, and its lacking. To her, it does not represent grandeur and a better time, but the winnings of men made by the sacrifice of others.

George feels connected to the history of Italy and the grandeur of fascism because of its big structures and celebration of the past. In contrast, the emptiness of Ireland makes him feel uncomfortable: “[i]f the Irish were so wonderful, why was Ireland such a sad and empty country? Vivian, a full generation removed from him, was an instinctive feminist, but to him any history of unrelieved victimization seemed suspect” (172-73). He glorifies the history, ignoring the brutality and focusing instead on the grandeur and splendour, “big gestures” and “heroic exploit[s] (164, 167). In the present “[t]he Japanese were flooding the world with money, as once Americans did” (162), and his attempts at masculinity are all shut down making him “feeling unappreciated” (162). He longs for the past of Hemingway, where masculinity was celebrated. It does not matter that the past he longs for is fictional, a romanticised version. As he desperately holds on to the history he barely remembers, yet thinks he knows so well, Vivian tears it apart: “[h]istory, his fragile knowledge of it, was crumbling under him” (167), and with it, his masculine empowerment.
The vast “emptiness” of Ireland exemplified by George and Vivian’s walk to nowhere does not provide him with a history to draw power from. According to Benson, George’s unease in Ireland is due to the lack of historical signifiers which, as Benson argues, George draws sustenance (261). This, along with a language that he does not completely understand, gives him a feeling of uncertainty (261). His heightened self-consciousness with which he travelled across Italy is slipping, and instead he is experiencing moments of doubt and uncertainty as well as his authority slipping away.

It is no coincidence that in a time where the image of manliness is changing rapidly that George looks back to fascism and Hemingway with envy and respect. According to Mosse, the image of masculinity reached its heights with the appearance of fascism (155). Never before, or after, have such importance and hopes been linked to the image of manliness and it played a crucial role in the fascist regimes. Decades after the end of the fascist regime, and era of the manly man, the set standards for masculinity are gone. Mosse argues that “the construction of masculinity had fashioned itself a stereotype that in its ‘quiet grandeur’ and self-control reflected the view society liked to have of itself” (56). This image of masculinity was deeply connected to the morals of society as well as being linked to how one was supposed to live. This ideal, however, needed an image to define itself against. By looking at people from the margins of society, people excluded by origins, religion etc., masculinity defined itself against an image of everything they were not and saw their own masculinity contrasted from an image of less.

Barthelme’s and Updike’s Bluebeards mourn for a lost identity. They see their wives gradually finding hers while theirs seem to be slipping further away. Mosse contends that the gender division was a crucial part of the construction of modern masculinity (78). As the masculine role has long been defining itself opposite to femininity, the changing of femininity was felt as an attack on normative masculinity (78). While this identity battle between the sexes opened for more room to be feminine, it “stiffened the ideal of normative manhood” (107). Men who were not able to live up to the masculine ideals were considered sick or unmanly (83). It thus became a fear among men of being labelled as an outsider, as homosexual, as feminine, as not manly enough. This led to a lot of men to feeling anxious and nervous, again characteristics that were usually used to describe the female sex. The men thus needed a way to reaffirm their manhood and masculinity. Yet again, the paranoiac “us” against “them” which Boym refers to as a characteristic of restorative nostalgia becomes
visible in “George and Vivian.” There is an embedded tension, almost like a zero-sum game, where one cannot win without the other losing.

It is this mourning for a lost identity based on the othering of others that makes the two texts less progressive than other retellings. This mourning and nostalgia that is presented in these two retellings are similar to the negative critiques that many associate with the term nostalgia. According to Benson, this difference in historical perspective is also something that Angela Carter explores in “The Bloody Chamber” where Bluebeard is stuck repeating history over and over again, while the female characters represent progression and the future, looking to change the future rather than repeating the same history over again. As the female characters, both in “George and Vivian” and “The Bloody Chamber,” uproot the past, ignoring and decimating all the elements which the male character has built his entire position on, the Bluebeards feel their positions slipping and the future seems uncertain, filling them with anxiety. In contrast to the female characters who seem to look to the future with hope and new energy, Bluebeard and the masculine identity have their roots in history and tradition. The female threat of changing the story thus unravels Bluebeard’s existence.

2.4 Transgressing Expectations

Fairy tales carry a lot of expectations. As their story lines are so well known, we expect certain things to happen. Barthelme very explicitly plays with the reader’s knowledge of the Bluebeard fairy tale. Both the title “Bluebeard” and the first sentence of the story directly refer to the fairy tale: “Never open that door,” Bluebeard told me, and I, who knew his history, nodded” (Barthelme 92). As in many Bluebeard-versions, the text is concerned with the question of what lies behind the door. Clearly, this will be a story about Bluebeard and his secret chamber. And just as us readers, this heroine has also heard the stories: “In truth I had a very good idea of what lay on the other side of the door …” (92). But as soon as Barthelme confirms our expectations of the story, he also shatters them: “… and no interest at all in opening it” (92). To both our and Bluebeard’s annoyance, this heroine does not feel that she needs to open the door to confirm her expectations: “I told him I had not [opened the door], that I was not at all curious by nature and was furthermore obedient” (93). Instead of praising the heroine for transgressing her role, the story desperately tries to push her back into her predetermined path.
Barthelme uses the reader’s knowledge of the story to continually thwart the reader’s and the protagonist’s expectations. For Bluebeard, it becomes about achieving something once lost. In a way, the expectations in the retelling are about Bluebeard’s own expectations. The story becomes his way of trying to get back to the way things were. After having “lost” the game so many times in newer versions of the story, he finally gets to have control over the expectations, and this time it is not his that will be crushed.

Barthelme’s Bluebeard has a desperation to him. He desperately pleads for his wife to open up the door: “Will you never attempt the door?”, “keep the key you must have the key” (93, 94), breaking his very own prohibition in the end: “You must open the door” (96).

Hermansson describes the plot of the story as frustrated (Bluebeard 242). By not doing as she is supposed to and going against his “wishes” and opening the door, Hermansson argues that the heroine is questioning the foundations that lie behind the prohibition: “I cannot imagine opening the door against your wishes. Why then do you say I must open it?” (Barthelme 96).

Her refusal, or rather lack of interest, in opening the door is not only a transgression of her role as the heroine, but it is also an attack on Bluebeard’s power over the narrative. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will explore in more detail how the heroine in Mr. Fox conquers Bluebeard by taking control of the narrative. In Oyeyemi’s retelling, the heroine’s transgressions are affecting Bluebeard’s power and authority of narrative. Bluebeard’s wife is supposed to open the door and he is supposed to catch her doing it, but if she never opens that door, he will never be able to gain that power over her. Barthelme’s Bluebeard wishes for a return to the “expected narrative” where the female heroine would open the door “despite” her husband’s wishes. He longs for the time when he was the one running the show, or the narration of the story.

What successful feminist revisions of the Bluebeard fairy tale do is deploying a story originally used against women and change the plot dynamics using the doubling and duality already embedded in the story to further our knowledge of and explore gendered relationships (Bacchilega 138). Bacchilega contends that the effects of feminist revisions like Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber,” but also retellings like those by Margaret Atwood or even Jane Campion’s movie The Piano (1993) are both empowering the female protagonists, as well as interrogating the naturalisation of gender dynamics that has taken place in fairy tale tradition (113). According to Bacchilega, to be successful in doing so requires not only a focus on the heroine’s agency, but also on her voice and ties to other women. It also requires emphasis on how she is implicated in Bluebeard’s plot as well as on the socio-economic dynamics.
Because the story has a history of being “played out over the bodies of women” (112). Today, women adopt a “mask of feminine submissiveness” in order to remain sexually attractive (McRobbie “Top Girls?” 726). In fear of scaring away men by appearing too strong, or too masculine, they make themselves appear more submissive (726). McRobbie argues that this kind of masquerade re-establishes gender relations, yet again confining women to the inferior position (726). The patriarchal discourse is hidden behind the illusion of choice, forcing women to submit in search of a male partner. It is important to address questions of sexual politics in terms of the story’s value for women today.

In contrast, Barthelme’s and Updike’s non-violent Bluebeard retellings instead focus on the need for the protagonists “to protect his identity, to establish a preserve in which the private self can express its authentic feelings” (Tatar Secrets 159-160). Bluebeard is nostalgic for the past, because it stabilises both his identity and his understanding of the world. He wishes to restore the story to its original form, where women were innocent and passive, because that is a time when he knows who he is, and where that version of him works.

Still, there is a glimmer of hope for Updike at the end of “George and Vivian.” As Vivian squats down to pee, Updike describes “[a] powerful ammoniac scent followed her up, rising invisible from the roadside turf” (188-189), before George, for a brief moment, considers giving Vivian the child she wants: “[o]h, let’s have a baby, he thought, but left the inner cry unexpressed. Too late, too old” (189). Lana Barhum at medicalnewstoday.com lists pregnancy as one of the causes of ammonia-smelling urine. If Vivian is pregnant, the last line of the story: “[t]hey were back where they had started” (189) is false. The ending of the story suddenly points towards the future. The cycle of repetition is broken. Suddenly, George has a hard time of thinking back to his first wife: “[w]hat an effort it now seemed to cast his mind so far back!” (189). A child with Vivian would lead the story in a new direction. It would weaken his hold on the past and force him to think ahead. It would also force the couple to seriously consider their relationship and future together.

However, Barhum also lists menopause as one of the causes for the urine to smell of ammonia. Read as such, Vivian’s hope of having a child with her husband is crushed. Repeating George’s statement, they are too late, and they are too old, the opportunity of change has passed. Thus, the ending of “George and Vivian” is ambiguous. It either restores status quo or is hinting towards a different future. Benson has argued that Updike draws on history to represent the difference of gender in the story (252). The authority of the male character is legitimised and bounded by the past. In contrast, Vivian represents “the desire of
a comparatively unburdened, even irreverent, curiosity – a curiosity which is ripe for historical recontextualization” (252). If one reads the ammonia smell as sign of Vivian having reached menopause, then the ending can be read as the discourse killing Vivian’s chance of having a child of her own. Bluebeard and the past have won, and Vivian’s days as a young fairy tale heroine are over. She is now ready to assume the role of the wicked stepmother.

2.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to examine how Barthelme’s “Bluebeard” and Updike’s “George and Vivian” are different from “The Bloody Chamber” and “Blue-bearded Lover.” What is it that makes these two retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale less progressive than the two explored in chapter one? My claim is that it is the use of nostalgia that differentiates the Bluebeard retellings in chapter two from the those in chapter one. By using nostalgia as a framework, I argue that one can compare the different versions with each other. Nostalgia offers us tools to discuss how and what it is the versions do. By analysing it as either reflective or restorative it is easier to understand what it is Carter and Oates are trying to achieve with their retellings. Understanding the difference between restorative and reflective nostalgia can better our understanding of how Barthelme’s and Updike’s retellings differs from Carter’s and Oates’s.

Barthelme’s and Updike’s retellings are very different, but what they both do is focusing on restoring some emotion or incident of the past which they feel belong to them or should belong to them. They want to restore that historic element in the present. They want to build a future on the ruins of the past. Where Carter and Oates are suggesting change, Barthelme and Updike are paralysed by the fear of it. Their Bluebeard retellings are reminiscent of Carter’s Bluebeard character who freezes when confronted by the mother’s gaze. When confronted by progress, he halters. Instead of trying to build a viable future, both their retelling long backwards to a simpler and imaginary past.
This chapter will look at how Helen Oyeyemi’s novel *Mr. Fox* (2011) uses nostalgia to create a dialogue between the past and present. She emphasises multiplicity, offering up a way for different narratives to interact. Through reflective nostalgia she reveals how the patriarchal discourse silences the voice of Others. She plays on the tropes from the Bluebeard fairy tale to criticise how violence against women are ignored and trivialised. Violence portrayed in literature tend to cover up the fact that women, both in fiction and reality, live under constant threat of violence. Through the use of language, this violence is covered up and forgotten. By intertwining different narratives in the novel, Oyeyemi lets go of the search for one truth and focuses instead on all the previously hidden fragments and narratives overlooked by the dominant discourse.

Oyeyemi draws on nostalgia to create a link between the past and the present. She looks at the connectedness of stories and the impossibility of creating a whole from fragments. Her use of nostalgia emphasises the need of multiple perspectives, moving away from the focus on one truth, but suggests instead that multiple truths can interact together. Through the novel, she suggests that we look away from the repetitive patterns and instead revel in the diversity. Described by Chloë Buckley and Sarah Ilott as “a connecting narrative that acts as a portmanteau for a series of fairy tale retellings” (16), *Mr. Fox* is structured as a series of short stories coming together to create the novel. Some of them are untitled and are directly about the lives of St John, Mary, and Daphne. Others are titled and are more like short stories standing on their own. These are pieces of the game which Mary and St John play, sometimes they are a part of them, other times they are not. Thus, it is a complicated piece of literature, giving the reader a fragmented narrative to piece together. As the novel goes on, the stories become more complex and it is harder to tell who the narrator is and where the story fits in. While the story’s narrator alternates just between St John and Mary at the beginning of the novel, we later get stories told from Daphne’s and the mysterious
Reynardine’s points of views. Therefore, the reader, just as St John, gets more and more confused as the story (or stories) goes on, finding it hard to separate fiction from reality.

Though some critics have described Mr. Fox as too fragmented, wishing for more coherent links between the narratives, Buckley and Ilott argue that this fragmentation is “crucial to the novel’s revisionist agenda” (17). Through the structure of the novel, they argue that Oyeyemi “reveals and disrupts what she posits as a fundamental human need to order fragmentary experiences into a structuring narrative, warning how such narratives limit and ensnare those who weave them” (17). They argue that it lets the stories be seen as more than just feminist reinventions of a cautionary tale, they allow for Mary Foxe to be revived and transformed in tale after tale. Oyeyemi has thus created Mary as “an adaptable subject” (18), someone who is able to bring her experiences with her through the different stories.

This chapter is structured in four parts. The first part examines how the novel critiques the normalisation of violence towards women. Through the repeated killings of Mary throughout the novel, Oyeyemi emphasises how naturalised and accepted violence towards women have become. The discourse tends to trivialise violence towards women. Mediating on the passage of time, she reflects on how this is something which has been ignored consistently through time and how women who try to speak up against violence are always shut down. Second, I will explore how writing influenced by reflective rather than restorative nostalgia creates a dialectic between the past and the present. By focusing on a multiplicity of narratives instead of searching for one authentic image of the past. This creates more nuance, emphasising a need for different perspective. In emphasising multiplicity, and by continually shifting narrative perspective, Oyeyemi implies how we can never know a person if we only hear one side of the story. Both stories and people have different sides to them and there is always one more. Third, I will look at how the patriarchal discourse restricts women by always putting them in object position. Functioning as the Other, women’s voices tend to be silenced. This binary between us and them makes it hard for people to connect and the way we keep accepting the dominant narrative as the truth never stopping to question whose truth it is. Lastly, I will look at how the novel uses nostalgia to destabilise the binaries of the patriarchal discourse. By drawing upon the Bluebeard fairy tale, Oyeyemi unsettles traditional tropes and ideas by contrasting binaries and oppositions. She is playing with the intertextuality embedded in the Bluebeard fairy tale, drawing links between the different versions, as well as to her new one. While we cannot ever completely be free from the past, she suggests that we can modify it just enough to break away from the cycle of repetition.
3.1 Normalised Violence

In Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox*, the Bluebeard fairy tale functions as an ominous presence lurking the background. We find the characteristics of Bluebeard in St John as he figures as a puppet master trying to control the women in his life. However, this Bluebeard kills the women in his literature. Perhaps even more so than in Carter’s and Oates’s versions, the deaths in *Mr. Fox* are even more meaningless and unnecessary. This Bluebeard might be the scariest of them all as he does not need any form for excuses or moral lessons to kill off his heroines. He kills them because it is an easy way out. Although St John’s crimes might be victimless, it is important to reflect on and acknowledge how he reinforces patriarchal storylines and attitudes in literature which impact our view and attitude towards real people.

Oyeyemi uses the Bluebeard trope to explore the issue of domestic violence towards women. St John has a false, or at least he hopes that it is false, memory of Mary being his wife at some point and that he was hurting her: “[w]hen I saw that you had that chain on, I knew I was going to hurt you. I was going to get in there and hurt you” (114). In this memory, Mary begs him to stop while he keeps slapping her to make her quiet. In hearing that St John has such a memory, Mary does not seem surprised: “Mary didn’t shudder or look shocked. She looked polite, if anything. Somewhere between polite and bored” (116). The story seems more surprising to St John than to Mary. When St John is finished retelling what he believes to be his false memory, he looks down to find the story already written down: “[t]here, in my handwriting, was the tale I had just told her. As soon as I saw it I remembered writing it, and I was flooded with relief. Thank God it wasn’t me” (116). Mary is not surprised by the story because she has read it many times. St John, himself, is losing track of what is fiction and what is real. He has written about it so many times that it almost becomes real.

Reflective nostalgia makes it possible for Oyeyemi to explore alternative narratives that have previously been erased by the dominant discourse: “reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness” (Boym 50). According to Hillsburg, one can use reflective nostalgia to look at how abuse and violence are continuously normalised and ignored (8). Following this normalisation is a logic blaming women for bringing the violence upon themselves through beauty, age, and naïveté (8). This is allowed to happen because the violence is never discussed. Furthermore, the discourse makes it hard for women to talk about the violence inflicted upon them as the language itself is “made” by those inflicting the violence. Because it is a problem that often is ignored there does not really exist a language to discuss this sort of violence. Women tend to be shut down pretty fast when
they try to bring the issue up for discussion, just as we saw in the previous chapter in “George and Vivian.”

As I briefly mentioned in chapter one, some of the reaction to the #metoo-movement resembles the cautionary tale moral of Perrault’s “Bluebeard.” Katie Gentile discusses how women who speak up against sexual harassment become “victimised children,” seen as too immature to handle male sexuality (241). She claims that the accused men change the narrative to become less about their actions towards women and more about what they have done to themselves (242). This eerily mirrors the moral from the Bluebeard fairy tale where the husband’s crime is overshadowed by how the heroine went against his orders, breaking his trust. It again becomes one woman against a whole system of men (242). Sexual harassment towards women has been normalised, described as only being for fun. Women who dare to speak up are quickly labelled as humourless.

In an effort to deflect responsibility of their own actions, men refer to the #metoo-movement as a “witch hunt” (242). Though as Gentile argues, while witch hunts traditionally targeted women who went against the norms of the heteropatriarchal society, this “witch hunt” is targeting men in power who “have been exploiting patriarchy” (242). Again, this is about the power binaries. Similar to the issues of normalised domestic violence which Oyeyemi explores in her novel, this “witch hunt” is about men trying to hold on to their power. By turning on the female accusers, shifting the focus away from their own faults and instead start to question the women’s reliabilities as truth-teller, they shut down any attempt at developing a language to properly discuss the issue. As Gentile argues:

Projecting the morality onto women reinforces their supposed vulnerable victimization (better keep them safe at home), elevates sex as the site of this traumatic humiliation (women better wear more conservative clothing for their own protection), and liberates men from their accountability or responsibility, in essence, enabling them to disavow their shame and vulnerability projecting it, once again, onto female identified bodies. (243)

Gentile argues that campaigns like #metoo attempts to create a community as well as showing the continuity and frequency of these kinds of issues. Like in the different fairy tales, women have had to fight the battle alone. Though the heroines in the fairy tale got help from their male relatives, that did not happen until after she was put in a position of danger. Women are always the ones who have to point at and prove the misconduct in order for action to be taken. As Gentile puts it: “[o]nly when the anxiety of acknowledging and exploring male
vulnerability and shame can be seen for what it is will the onus of the problem be placed where it belongs – on racist and classist heteropatriarchal institutions” (244). There seems to be a need for a thorough reflection on this need for blaming women for men’s insecurities.

In contrast to Carter, Oyeyemi manages to keep the tone light and humorous, which also takes away the disturbing aspects which have been criticised in Carter’s works. In her review of Mr. Fox, Aimee Bender praises the novel for its “satisfying and unexpected reframing of violence towards women – Mary is not only protesting the act itself; she is angry about the artistic dodging.” She argues that it is not the depiction of violence that the novel is critiquing, but instead the way that it is used as an “easy out.” Instead of exploring the act of violence itself, Mary forces St John to explore what Bender describes as “the murkier, scarier territory of human connection pre-death” through her storytelling game. The game she lures St John in to, is a game where he again and again, story after story, is forced to see and take part in the misogynistic trope in literature. Serving not as one story, but as fragmentations of many, the impact is larger. It shows how easy and natural it has become to give a text a certain direction. How easy it has become to defend the representation of women as passive, helpless, and wrong. How easy it is to kill them off once they have become a nuisance. According to Bender, both Mr. Fox in the English fairy tale and St John in Oyeyemi’s novel lure women into their lair or stories to kill them. But Bender also comments that Oyeyemi has turned herself into her own Mr. Fox and is luring us into her web of stories.

Mary criticises St John’s reasons for always killing off his heroines in his work. It seems almost as if he cannot stop himself from doing so, that he cannot think of any other ending.

What you’re doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, ‘Yes, he is talking about things that really happen,’ and they keep reading, and it makes sense to them. You’re explaining things that can’t be defended, and the explanations themselves are mad, just bizarre – but you offer them with such confidence. It was because she kept the chain on the door; it was because he needed to let off steam after a hard day’s scraping and bowing at work; it was because she was irritating and stupid […] it was because ‘nothing is more poetic than the death of a beautiful woman’; […] It’s obscene to make such things reasonable. (140-41)

St John does not understand why it matters so much that he always kills off his female characters in various grotesque ways: “does it really matter how it happens” (141). Through her little game of stories, Mary is showing, rather than telling, St John how his fiction matters. Death after death, she is letting him experience the hits as they come, letting him feel the loss
of control. As the game develops, the murders become more and more useless and ridiculous. She lures him into her web of stories and lets him experience the full impact stories can have, and how constant repetition can make it hard to separate fiction from reality and past from present.

The endless excuses are no longer sufficient: “[y]ou simply have to change. You’re a villain” (4). Jo Ormond argues that both Carter’s and Oyeyemi’s writings can be seen as “talking back” to their aggressors (153). They both blur and complicate the narrative in a way that unsettles the reader’s grasp of who the victims and villains are. While Carter explores the relationship between victim and victimiser, Ormond argues that Oyeyemi creates complicated characters to emphasise how the villain is a social construct rather than something inherent (154). Oyeyemi does not specifically critique St John, but rather the society that popularises entertainment which romanticises and naturalises violence towards women to such an extent that women have learned to think of it as normal, “crime fiction centred upon the murder of young female characters – sells” (157). It says more about the society that craves such entertainment than about St John as a person.

What we read in literature can often have a big impact on how we think in real life, influencing our thoughts and expectations towards female behaviour and its consequential punishments. Clare Louise Radford describes it as an undertow, a strong pull from literature towards reality carrying assumptions back and forth (199). She asserts that Mary’s storytelling game is blurring the lines between fiction and reality, and that she is “suggesting that these different realities are constantly interacting and shaping one another, demonstrating Mary’s objection to create fictions that legitimate violence” (199). Radford’s assertion aligns with Buckley and Ilott’s claim that what Mr. Fox is doing is placing the tales of misogyny, male privilege and violence in a dialogue with “the promises of romantic fiction and the threat of slasher horror” (16). They claim that this unravels and reconfigures the power structure of male-female relationships while revealing the misogyny that has taken root both in the literary tradition and in social conventions. To “fix” these issues, the novel tries to establish channels of communication between the characters, and just as Bender commented on in her review, it forces the characters to interact on a more human level, breaking free from their patterns of expectations and limitations. Buckley and Ilott argue that the novel’s “ambivalent ending also promises the possibility of emancipation for the initially incarcerated Mary Foxe and gestures towards a more equal and satisfying relationship between Daphne and St. John in the future” (17). Read as such, there is hope for them yet.
Where Carter has included the “original” chamber, and Oates has included the presence of it, though not the opening, Oyeyemi’s chamber is more abstract. Instead of including a physical chamber for her heroine to open, Oyeyemi’s chamber is the storytelling game which Mary lures St John into, and also which Oyeyemi lures her readers into. She uses the fairy tale and gothic tropes together with metafictive storytelling to create a chamber of intertextuality, a web of fragmented stories all grounded and playing off of the tropes. A game of infinite stories which all come together to create the forbidden chamber. This time, however, it is Mary who is in control of its contents.

Even though no physical chamber is opened (or not opened as in Oates’s version), Mary goes face to face with the brutality towards women in her game with St John. She does not open a physical door, instead she lets herself be killed again and again in St John’s stories. Because of the lack of a physical chamber, this Bluebeard story does not end with its opening. Oyeyemi has the ending occur several times in her novel if you think of the ending as being Bluebeard killing Mary. This happens repeatedly throughout the novel. The real ending in Oyeyemi’s version is however three short stories about some foxes. As David Punter suggests, this ending refers to the infinity of stories (34-35). There is always the question of who is telling the story, and consequently, what is the other story. There is always one more story to be told: “I almost forgot to mention another fox I know of – a very wicked fox indeed. But you are tired of hearing about foxes now, so I won’t go on” (Oyeyemi 324). Even after the end, there is always another story to be found.

In confrontation with the external discursive regime, Mary is allowing herself to die repeatedly to prove how naturalised female death has become in fiction. According to Punter, the significant part of Oyeyemi’s alternative to and escape from patriarchal domination is that it does not include any actual recognisable forms of freedom: “repetition remains, indeed it may be the only thing that does remain” (31). What Oyeyemi is trying to say according to Punter, is that repetition surrounds us and happens all around:

[y]et there is no terror here, instead a matter-of-fact acceptance that in the end we cannot be free from the past, that the bloodline continues to run, that unless the utmost care is exercised, then all there is is the repetition, the filling out of a predetermined set of prophecies from which there is no escape. (33)

According to Shuli Barzilai, the Bluebeard trope is in many ways about female survival, a survival that does not only appeal for rescue, but is also about “removing the murderous male principal” (254). As Boym argues: “[w]hile restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one
homeland with paranoic determination, reflective nostalgia fears returning with the same passion. Instead of recreation of lost home, reflective nostalgia can foster a creative self” (354). It is about to kill or be killed.

3.2 Rediscovering Multiplicity

Before I continue with my analysis of *Mr. Fox*, I first want to briefly outline the concept of intertextuality in relation to gender. Robert Dale Parker asserts that intertextuality is about looking at texts’ relationship to each other and exploring how they either are read or written in connection to other texts (55). Instead of viewing a text as an individual unit, one sees it as part of an “overall system of writing” (57). Literature can thus be seen as representing the cultural world, consisting of a collaborative and inherited system of convention and language. Several feminist writers have implemented this system in their texts and use intertextuality to bring forth aspects which have previously been overlooked. By using intertextuality, Monika Kaup argues that it is possible “to take the reader into the very Otherness which traditionally occupies the margins” (Allen 151). By using well-known stories and tropes, putting focus on the margins in the text can help the reader see things in new ways. As Kaup argues, intertextuality helps to demonstrate how a shift in focus opens up for certain social and cultural changes which demonstrate how the construction of gender or race has tended to revolve around the patriarchal culture (Allen 151-52). It forces the reader to see a situation from a different perspective and thus makes the mechanism of social and cultural norms more visible.

Returning to the roots of intertextuality as a term, Graham Allen demonstrates how critics have used the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva to take the signifieds from texts and to reincorporate them in other texts as new signifiers, and establishes “a distance between the incorporated text and its initial meaning … [opening the] text to another point of view” (Kaup qtd. in Allen 162-63). Intertextuality is not only incorporating old texts in new texts, it also concerns itself with seeing how words carry certain meanings, all sort of connotations, and how words in themselves can incorporate social division. Thus, marginal writers can be looked at as being “‘double-voiced’, their own and yet replete with an ‘otherness’ which can associate with a socially oriented notion of intertextuality” (Allen 165). Here, as Allen argues, the return to Bakhtin and his notion of subjecthood helps to see
marginalised groups as “othered subjects” (164) struggle to find their identity and agency in a discourse which always seeks to place them as an Other and thus allows them to describe themselves in the terms which inevitably put them in the position of the Other.

An analysis focusing on intertextuality can therefore be an effective way of adding new perspectives to already existing tropes and texts. Whenever we tell a story, it will always be told through the dominating discourse, meaning that it is never completely our own story. The stories we tell will always be influenced by the dominant discourse as it is their words and meanings that are used. According to Allen, women always “write within and yet against such an ‘othering’ process” (160). Women and other minorities are seen as being outside of the discourse, being muted and objectified. This aligns with Punter’s argument that Oyeyemi’s stories suggest that we are always subjected to someone else’s narrative (35). Hence, Oyeyemi’s *Mr. Fox* questions what Allen refers to as the “monological discourse dominant in society” (160). When fiction keeps referring back to the patriarchal discourse, it also keeps putting women in the position of the Other. As put by Punter, Oyeyemi tries to tell “the other story of how we have all our lives been subjected to an external regime” (35), in this case, meaning that women are always under the regime of the male author re-establishing the patriarchal discourse through his unchanging narratives.

Allen argues that female character and feminist readers will try to move away from the position which Elaine Showalter refers to as “mutedness” and into “alternative discourses and subject positions” (Allen 161). What they are trying to expose in this shift of positions is how the self is constructed as the Other by the discourse. This means that the idea you have of your own Self is affected by the way that those in power see and describe you. Oyeyemi takes up this issue by exploring not only the importance of the stories themselves, but also the way in which a story is told.

By employing a dialogical narrative, Oyeyemi links the different narrative and voices together. Oyeyemi’s narrative does not only allow her to create a dialogue between the past and the present through intertextual use of fairy tale and her own retelling, but the dialectic also allows her to switch between different viewpoints, creating a multiplicity of voices. Hillsburg argues that reflective nostalgia can be used to contrast different narratives and to give voice to voices previously unheard (7-8). Nostalgia can be employed to create alternative narratives which can be used to counter already existing narratives. This multiplicity stands as contrast to the monological voice of the fairy tale and the past. It destabilises the homogenic
binaries that have become so normalised in the discourse that we have stopped noticing that they are there.

Reflective nostalgia is not about retelling events as they happened or establishing a single truth. As Hillsburg claims, reflective nostalgia “is grounded in an ever-changing truth” rather than searching for one specific truth (6). This “freedom” from having to seek out the past exactly like it happened, allows for the exploration and juxtaposition of different perspectives (6). Reflective nostalgia becomes an ongoing process where the idea of truth is always negotiated, never allowing it to settle on one universal meaning:

The border zone between longing and reflection, between native land and exile, explored by the Nabokovian passportless spy, opens up spaces of freedom. Freedom in this case is not a freedom from memory but a freedom to remember, to choose the narratives of the past and remake them. (Boym 354)

Reflective nostalgia does not take itself as seriously as restorative nostalgia (49). It does not have a specific goal in itself other than to mediate on the passage of time (49).

*Mr. Fox* implies that it is impossible to create wholeness from a sample of fragmented experiences. Although Oyeyemi tries to represent a range of different women in her stories, Radford claims that there is also an underlying understanding in the novel that this is an impossible task (202). It is neither easy nor harmless to try to contain the lives of different women in narrative form (203). What Radford claims that Oyeyemi is doing instead, is to invite us to collect all the different stories while she at the same time never allows us to believe in their wholeness. One cannot know a person just from one little story. A story is just one fragment of the whole person, and it is an impossible task to collect all the fragments.

She continually shifts between fairy tales, letters, narrative perspectives, making sure that the reader is always paying attention. According to Radford, Oyeyemi forces us to reconsider how the fairy tale and factual narratives are linked through her shifting of genres (195). Radford argues that Oyeyemi’s use of the Bluebeard story explores how these types of tropes shape other kinds of literature, but also impact other parts of life. Fictional narratives have the power to shape our encounters with others. It is therefore important to consider who the “we” is that occupies the subject position and, consequently, how this “we” addresses diversity in gender and ethnicity. As Punter claims, the stories in *Mr. Fox* question who it is that makes the rules of the discourse (30).
3.3 Patriarchal Discourse of Writing

Oyeyemi examines how the patriarchal discourse restricts women through the storytelling game between Mary Foxe and St John. She draws attention to the way violence against women is perceived in literature. According to Radford, Oyeyemi explores how power structures impact narration and interpretation of stories (199). How the myth of women being blamed for the violence against them, known from the Bluebeard fairy tales, is more than just fiction (199-200): “[t]his is worse than I thought. If you make the women wicked, then killing them off becomes a moral imperative” (Oyeyemi 294). As mentioned in chapter two, active women in fairy tales are often evil or wicked women. An active woman therefore becomes someone to fix:

She doesn’t complain about anything I do; she is physically unable to. That’s because I fixed her early. I told her in heartfelt tones that one of the reasons I love her is because she never complains. So now of course she doesn’t dare complain (1-2).

According to the patriarchal discourse women are not supposed to have opinions and agency. For St John, it is completely reasonable that he should have a wife that fits in with the patriarchal stereotype of the passive and pliable wife. More reminiscent of the Victorian “Angel of the House” rather than a strong fairy tale heroine.

Just like Carter and Oates, Oyeyemi writes in a way that shows how the patriarchal discourse tend to portray women in a restrictive way. Where Carter and Oates emphasised patriarchal assumptions of female sexuality, Oyeyemi focuses more on how marginal positions tend to be overlooked, merely functioning as the Other in relation to the dominant patriarchal position. Allen argues that it is especially important for those who feel out of place and alienated by society to interpret the discourses and discursive structures which are considered unquestionable truths by those in power (161). Oyeyemi criticises the labels that the discourse ascribes to both the Other and to those in power, and how these binaries keep people from connecting. The discourse also creates a language barrier between people, resulting in a disconnect between what we say and what we do. This leads to the gap between people which I also explored in chapter two.

In the story titled “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,” Oyeyemi uses tropes from the Bluebeard fairy tale and shows how the ideas from the fairy tale blend together with the patriarchal discourse, hiding in the background of everyday life. In “Be bold,” Mary is so affected by the patriarchal discourse that she does not think she deserves a more interesting
life. She is plain and therefore her life should be plain, because, as we have been told from fairy tales, it is the pretty girls who get the prince in the end. Likewise, she will not allow her student Katherine, who has good looks, to not take advantage of them: “[a]fter a while it will seem odd that she has these looks and makes no attempt to use them” (Oyeyemi 45).

Although she tries to convince herself that she does not believe in fairy tales, it is obvious that she is affected by their discourse: “[d]on’t look at people so strongly, Katherine Cole. Let your gaze swoon a little. Don’t speak so firmly; falter. Lisp, even. Your failure to do these things made me mistake you for someone like me” (45). She is unconsciously repeating the fairy tale trope where a character’s aesthetic is connected to their faith. Pretty Katherine should have a pretty, fairy tale princess’s kind of life. Mary is following the rules set by the fairy tale genre without even being aware of it.

Mary is restricted by the discourse. Though she is described as very realistic, someone who understands that fairy tales are just stories, she is also convinced that her fate is just to be a helper in the shadows and that fairy tale-endings are only for people like Katherine: “I don’t have to be happy. All I have to do is hold on to something and wait” (46). She has also convinced herself that it is okay, that she does not need her life to be something more: “I always understood that it was a story, like all her other ones, the fairy tales she told. I’ve taken no harm from its not coming true. I don’t expect it to come true” (34). She does not allow herself to hope or think that she can ever achieve something, while she at the same time critiques Katherine for doing the same thing.

The story “Fitcher’s Bird” describes a different way of being affected by the fairy tale discourse. In “Fitcher’s Bird,” Miss Foxe, this story’s version of Mary, loves fairy tales: “Miss Foxe’s other passion was fairy tales. She loved the transformations in them” (74). Through an advertisement in the newspaper, Miss Foxe gets in touch with Fitcher: “[t]his Fitcher, whoever he was, understood the beautiful risk of the fairy tale” (77). Miss Foxe is so swept up in her ideal fairy tale romance that everything is forced to fit in. Though she claims: “[t]hey spoke of fairy tales, and found their tastes were exactly matched” she later acknowledge that “[h]e doesn’t talk much though” and admits that it worries her: “he was a quiet man but not in the way that she was quiet. His quiet was of the measured kind, entered into to conceal his thoughts” (77). In fact, we as readers, get no proof that he shares her believes in fairy tales. Right before he cuts her head off with the sword, she asks “[d]on’t you believe …?” with his response being: “Oh I do […] I do” (79). Exactly what it is he believes is never uttered. This seems to be his thoughts on fairy tale matters at first reading, but
Oyeyemi does like to play tricks on us the same way as Mary likes to play tricks on St John. Keep in mind that this is the same guy who gave her a poisonous foxglove in the answer to her ad, though she interpreted that as a sign of his knowledge of the fairy tale, both beautiful and dangerous.

Miss Foxe knows more about flowers than most. She reacts to Mrs. Nash telling people to send azaleas to sick relatives, when it is evident that Miss Foxe thinks she ought to know that azaleas mean “take care of yourself for me” (74) and are thus not appropriate to send to sick people. Though she feels that the foxgloves she receives from Fitcher are a sign that they are on the same page, they could just as easily have been picked by him in ignorance, simply because her name is Miss Foxe. On their sixth date, he brought her a nightingale in a cage: the bird sang out its hope, the silly little romantic calling out for a mate, not caring if this nightfall was a trick” (78). It seems that both Miss Foxe and the nightingale are singing their songs in the false night because at least a false fantasy is better than reality.

After seven meetings, Miss Foxe asks Fitcher to cut her head off, imagining it will be like the fairy tale where “the enchanted princess, pleading with her love to strike the blow that would release her from her animal form,” (78) finally believing she has found a lover who believes in fairy tales as much as she does:

And without further argument he unsheathed the sword and cleaved Miss Foxe’s head from her neck. He knew what was supposed to happen. He knew that this awkward, whispering creature before him should now transform into a princess – dazzlingly beautiful, free, and made wise by her hardship. That is not what happened. (79)

This story, however, does not have a happy ending. The story ends abruptly, leaving us without any absolute resolutions. However, the most likely reading would be that no transformation took place. Oyeyemi uses the Bluebeard fairy tale to emphasise how we tend to just accept the patriarchal discourse as truth. Although few people believe in fairy tales the same way as Mary in “Be bold,” the story shows us how ideas and ideologies from the dominant discourse become naturalised when we stop questioning where they come from.

3.4 Destabilising Through Nostalgia

The structure of Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox differs from the other retellings I have analysed in this thesis. Not only is it a novel instead of a short story, but it also features many small stories
linked together by an overarching narrative. As pointed out by Radford, Oyeyemi’s version echoes the ending of the fairy tale “Mr. Fox” where just as Mary in the fairy tale conquers her husband-to-be by telling the tale of what she saw and presents the hand as proof, Mary Foxe in Oyeyemi’s version confronts St John with her stories. Whereas Bluebeard in the English tale is trying to discursively control Mary’s narrative of the events by repeatedly telling her, and the others, that the event never occurred: “[i]t is not so, nor it was not so. And God forbid it should be so” (Jacobs 187). Her narrative is again and again put aside, because her story does not align with how it is supposed to be. Her truth is just fiction. St John is trying to do the same with Mary in Mr. Fox, telling her again and again that fiction and reality are two different things. Through their little game of stories, Mary Foxe is able to get more and more control over the narration, so much so that she at the end of the novel is able to sit down and have lunch with Daphne.

Oyeyemi takes the part from the original fairy tales where the heroine is given the most agency and expands on that throughout her retelling. Mary’s agency becomes the emphasis of the story, granting her more and more power. In contrast, Barthelme and Updike emphasises parts from the original fairy tales which derive agency from their heroines. According to Jo Ormond, Anne Cranny-Francis argues that although fiction or popular fiction, as a genre tends to reproduce patriarchal ideology, it can also be used together with feminist revisions to provide an awareness as to how these tropes works (158). The goal for feminist discourse, according to Cranny-Francis, is to challenge and make visible the naturalisation of the female role. Ormond claims that through her use of the fairy tale genre and by blurring the roles between the passive female and the active male, Oyeyemi is doing precisely what Cranny-Francis contends is the goal for feminist discourse (158). Oyeyemi’s retelling of Bluebeard is challenging the way that the female role has become naturalised in its position as the passive and weaker sex.

Throughout the story, Mary takes more and more control over the narrative, making St John unsure of himself and about his distinction between fiction and reality as he was at the beginning of the novel. Mary’s narrative control is made visible through her increasing physical presence. While in the beginning of the novel she only serves as St John’s imaginary muse, coming and going at his request, she becomes more and more real as the novel goes on. Following St John’s, according to Mary, “horrible kind of logic” (140), fiction is not real, “just a lot of games” (5). Later, Mary asks if St John would not mind if he were the one to die in the next story, to which he replies: “Yes, I’d mind. To be honest, I don’t like the sound of
that at all” (87). Clearly, it is not just a lot of fun and games anymore once he is the one being killed off, as a literary device. St John’s doubts about the realness of fiction are expressed through his belief in Mary as real or not real. Toying with the line of fiction and reality: “Thank God it wasn’t me. Thank God I wasn’t capable of doing such a thing. It was cold, but I was sweating. When I put the book down I saw that I’d left moist ovals on the paper. ‘Now I’m worried,’ Mary said” (117). Mary’s confrontation is unravelling St John as he begins to understand how his words and language is influenced by something larger than himself. His fiction is just another piece in the “monological discourse” which unconsciously keep placing women in object position (Allen 160).

Oyeyemi employs recognisable storylines in her text to comment on the naturalisation of the female as the passive Other in literature. As Ormond asserts, the tropes enable her to unsettle traditional ideas (158). She contends that the genre of the fairy tale fits well with the political project of many feminist writers in opening up the “naturalisation of sexist discourse to scrutiny” (158). The tropes are easily recognisable and therefore succeed in unsettling traditional ideas and highlighting how such a naturalisation and the reasoning behind them are empty. By mixing the fairy tale tropes together with actual historical elements such as the rules of courtly love and the school where young boys learn how to become the perfect husband, she manages to create a firm link between fiction and reality and comments on the impact the tropes in fiction have on us as readers. When being subjected to the same discourse and patterns over and over again, we become so accustomed to them that we stop questioning why things are as they are. Retellings of fairy tale are therefore a good way of asking such questions as we all know what is supposed to happen in fairy tales. With the slightest change in the well-known storyline most of us will react. The recognisable change in discourse thus allows us to question why is it that we reacted to and from there it is easier to also question why and where the patterns come from. A change of context can help change our perspective and help us see what might be problematic.

As I have already mentioned, Allen claims that female characters who challenge patriarchal roles by taking up the “quests for identity” challenge the patriarchal discourse when put in a context, where the women were traditionally idealised as the Other (163). By quests for identity, Allen refers to the way female characters, in finding their identity constructed by the language of the dominant male culture, start to question this discourse and move out from a position which Elaine Showalter has referred to as “mutedness” (Allen 161) and into a position of resistance. It is about acquiring an understanding of the discourse and
dialogic nature at play and starting to interpret the structures which the dominant culture views as unquestionable. Oyeyemi, as well as Carter and Oates, sets out on this quest by taking roles traditionally viewed as male and by using texts intertextually to echo the patriarchal discourse against the retelling. Oyeyemi utilises the well-known patriarchal story and draws links between the old versions and her new one. By deconstructing the old fairy tale and giving it new meaning, she is also criticising the limits of the patriarchal discourse.

One of the themes throughout *Mr. Fox* is the connection between what is real and what is not. It explores in what ways fiction affects reality. The question is explored through a game of stories between Oyeyemi’s Bluebeard St John and his imaginary muse Mary: “It’s ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It’s not real. I mean, come on. It’s all just a lot of games” (5). Mary’s argument is that fiction is not simply “just a lot of games,” but that the patriarchal discourse limiting women should be taken seriously. St John’s killings of his female characters serve as an image of how the discourse keeps silencing women who are trying to fight back, and that the refusal to see that the discourse is there is part of the problem. With the new post-feminist attitude that “‘things have changed’, so feminism is now irrelevant” (McRobbie “Beyond Post-Feminism” 180), the refusal to complain about gender equality has led to a reinstatement of patriarchal values (“*Top Girls?”* 723). Under the illusion of choice, women are now choosing to be viewed as sexual objects. Post-Feminism’s focus on hyper-femininity, stressing the importance of individualising oneself, are encouraging women “to collude with the re-stabilisation of gender norms” (723). McRobbie argues that the emphasis on hyper-femininity together with hegemonic masculinity undermines the new economic power women have achieved through equal access to education and work-spheres (725). While everything is emphasised as individual choice, there is this sense that doing otherwise limits your chances at succeeding. Just like Oyeyemi suggests that we embrace all the different perspectives a story can have, it can be wise to remember to see today’s situation from different perspectives from time to time as well. Reminding ourselves of why things are as they are, and why we do the things that we do.

In “Be bold,” Mary’s stories are dismissed as trivial, never really considered as literature. Defined by the patriarchal structure as a woman, she is dismissed as a writer. Radford argues that the burning of Mary’s work suggests “the ease with which those in power can destroy women’s narrative realities, this also images the resolve of holding on to the remaining fragments” (198). Mary has gone to Mr. Fox’s office to retrieve back her stories, her words. Instead, she is met by his secretary who has been ordered to set her work on fire:
“I felt the skin on my fingers shrink. I watched words turn amber and float away. I liked these stories” (56). Even as her words are burning, Mary holds on: “There was so much smoke in my eyes. But I held on” (56). It shows how easy it is for Mr. Fox to dismiss Mary’s work. Even the secretary dismisses Mary’s attempt at writing and suggests instead that she finds herself a man: “You don’t really want to write…. What you want is love. Go find yourself a beau. You’re so young, Miss Foxe. Go have a little fun” (55). Because, as we have learned from fairy tales, every girl dream about her marriage.

In several of the stories, Oyeyemi takes well-known fairy tale tropes and situate them in a modern context. In doing this, she exposes the unnatural construction of these ideas which we easily take for granted. In the story titled “Like This” Oyeyemi further explores the issue of women writing, where Brown is trying to write the stories that are expected of her: “[t]he words didn’t come easily. She put large spaces between some of them for fear they would attack one another” (106). And it is not weird that women have found it hard to write, when characters like Mr. Fox and his secretary in “Be bold” have always been there to criticise once you try.

In the story titled “The Training at Madame de Silentio’s” Oyeyemi turns the stereotypical gender roles on their heads. Madame de Silentio’s runs a school where young boys are turned “into world-class husbands” (119). The young men attending the school are learning how to become the perfect husband: “[y]ou earn a grade A by demonstrating, without a hint of nervousness or irritation, that you are impervious to any external logic” (120-21). To be able to ignore reason is one of the key things the boys learn. Playing upon the fairy tale genre, the story is structured as a cautionary tale warning the boys at the school of what happens if they do not follow the rules.

Oyeyemi also draws on more tropes than the fairy tale in order to deconstruct the existing binaries and hegemonic views that we all just accept. One of the stories in the novel is just an excerpt from *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Cappelanus, a book containing rules on what love is and how to obtain it. The rules that are of special interest to Daphne, Mary, and St John stand out in cursive, and contain short notes written by those characters. The rules suggest an impossibility of connecting, only focusing on the superficial. Also, the way each character focuses on the rules fitting their worldview while neglecting the ones that contradict it, also represents restorative nostalgia’s selective memory.

As I have explored in the previous chapters, one of the differences between the progressive works of Carter and Oates and the less progressive ones written by Barthelme and
Updike, is the use of repetition. While Carter and Oates manage to free their texts from repetition, Barthes and Updike end up repeating the same patriarchal patterns of the original tales. This repetition comes from the way they look back to the past, and how their nostalgia limits their vision of history and makes them neglect problematic aspects that both should and need to be addressed. And as Boym suggests: “nostalgia might be useful for an alternative, nonteleological history that includes conjectures and contrafactual possibilities (351).

The ending of Mr. Fox suggests that there is a connection between repetition and the failure to connect. According to Punter, Oyeyemi’s ending refers to repetition and infinity and an inability to connect to others on a human level (33). Punter claims that the last stories of the novel ask us to consider what it all means (33). Throughout the novel, all of Oyeyemi’s characters seem to be on the outside looking in. Just as the fox in one of the final stories is gazing at the girl through the window, everyone of Oyeyemi’s characters are gazing at each other and failing to connect on a human level:

Still, it interested him, and he gazed and gazed at her as she sat surrounded by all that greedy, dangerous fire that she kept in jars. He gazed and gazed though it served no purpose to do so, gazed without feeling satisfied and with the sensation of a deep scratch in his side (this was an awareness of time and its disappointments, the certainty that the girl would put out the lamps before he had looked his fill). (Oyeyemi 309)

They all lack the ability of human connection and are instead filled with an empty void, a “deep scratch in [their] side” (309). Punter reasons that no matter how long they gaze, they will never be able to get their fill because “no interpretation can ever be complete or satisfying” (33). Punter further claims that not one of Oyeyemi’s female characters are able to achieve freedom from mortality in a human relationship. The only solution might be to try a different kind of relationship altogether: “[i]f one can teach […] the dumb to speak, then what one hears may be voices that speak something truer than the deceits and evasions of merely human interaction” (Punter 34). But to achieve this, one first must open oneself up to being vulnerable. Just like Mary allows for herself to be killed again and again by St John, or as Lady Mary in the English tale, who lets her truth be told as a piece of fiction, as a dream she had, because the only way she is allowed to tell her story is by portraying it as a piece of fiction and not as the truth.

Through her stories, Oyeyemi is trying to show that we are all subjects to an external rule. To be able to escape from this rule, one cannot keep repeating the actions of the past.
again and again. According to Punter, *Mr. Fox* suggests that one cannot avoid repeating the past, but that it might be possible to achieve some modification of the past instead (34). Total escape or freedom might not be possible, but some modification of it is. Some sort of change is needed in order to break away from tradition and repetition. Though the ending of the novel might be saying that human relationships at this point are impossible, Punter argues that the ending also proposes that there might be a possibility of looking towards different kinds of relationship. As Boym argues:

> Reflective nostalgia has a utopian dimension that consists in the exploration of other potentialities and unfulfilled promises of modern happiness. It resists both the total reconstruction of the local culture and the triumphant indifference of technocratic globalism. (Boym 342)

It is only in the last story, featuring the woman and the fox, that we are offered two characters who actually see and listen to each other: “[t]he woman listened, and as she listened, she realised that she was hearing him – that he was saying words instead of showing her” (323). The fox is learning to speak, he builds his vocabulary from scratch, combining old words to make new ones. It is a fresh start free from the actions and ideas of the past.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how marginal voices tend to be overlooked and how they function as the Other in relation to the dominant discourse. Just like Angela Carter and Joyce Carol Oates, Helen Oyeyemi utilises nostalgia to show how stories are told and retold in a certain way which emphasises how marginal voices are silenced again and again. While Donald Barthelme and John Updike keep returning to this repetition, Oyeyemi, Carter, and Oates disrupt the cycle and break away from repetition. They break the discourse out of its traditional pattern.

The discourse restricts women by restricting them in their silenced roles. The endless repetition naturalises the stereotypical gender roles and the silencing of women. The use of nostalgia and the dialogue created between past and present allow this naturalisation to be seen and acknowledged, criticising the way women are objectified. This naturalisation has
also a tendency to tell women that they are to blame for domestic violence, as violence towards women is usually a punishment for the transgression of gender roles.

Nostalgia has generally been criticised for its longing and its romanticised notion of the past. Especially feminist critics have criticised it for its romanticised views of times like the Victorian era where women were so restricted in their roles as the lady or angel of the house. By ignoring such issues, critics feel like the nostalgics are forgetting the fights of the suffragettes and other fighters for female rights, ignoring the struggles fought to be where we are today. However, as Oyeyemi shows us, by using nostalgia reflectively, these battles are not forgotten. Instead, those issues are examined and emphasised, portrayed in a way that makes them resonate with readers today.
Conclusion

The study of nostalgia inevitably slows us down. There is, after all, something pleasantly outmoded about the very idea of longing. We long to prolong our time, to make it free, to daydream, against all odds resisting external pressures and flickering computer screens.

Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia

In this thesis, I wanted to explore Svetlana Boym’s two tendencies of nostalgia in relation to contemporary retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale. By using reflective versus restorative nostalgia as framework, I set out to see whether that could provide us with the tools needed to properly discuss what makes some retellings more progressive than others. My assessment is that such a framework provides us with a way of discussing these retellings which allows us to focus on what they do and how they do it. Additionally, by discussing how nostalgia is used in the texts and consequently focus on the connection between past and present, nostalgia can be used to address issues which has been historically consistent. It emphasises a repetition of patterns and norms which has become naturalised over time. I hope I have managed to introduce the reader to the multiplicity and intertextuality of the rich world of Bluebeard and his wives.

I chose five different retellings of the Bluebeard fairy tale which I argue show three different ways of expressing nostalgia. Both chapter one and three explores how nostalgia when leaning towards reflective, can be used to enrich our understanding of time. I claim that it is the use of reflective nostalgia which makes these retellings effectful and progressive in contrast to the retellings in chapter two. As I try to show in chapter two, Barthelme and Updike neglect certain vital elements which do not allow the story to move forward. Instead of suggesting progress, this neglect returns the stories to their starting points. While Carter, Oates, and Oyeyemi utilise the multiplicity and intertextuality of the fairy tale to create a dialogue between past and present, Barthelme and Updike just retell the same story in a different format. Differentiating between reflective and restorative nostalgia, nostalgia can
enrich our reading of the retellings. It shows how nostalgia does not necessarily make us forget or adapt our understanding of the past, but can be used to see it from new perspectives.

Within the scope of this thesis, I chose to mainly focus on how reflective nostalgia can be utilised to reveal unnatural gender constructions as well as a discourse that by being repeated over time has naturalised stereotypical and false images and notions of the femininity. I have not discussed the postcolonial aspect in these texts. An emphasis on the difference between reflective and restorative nostalgia might bring some nuance to a postcolonial analysis as well. It would be interesting to take a look at it in relation to Renato Rosaldo’s “Imperialist Nostalgia,” for instance.

There is nothing inherently bad in longing. As I have examined in this thesis, nostalgia is a concept which is about more than romanticising the past. Most people have an idea of what nostalgia is, but very few can explain exactly what that idea consists of. Usually, they relate it to a feeling or emotion tied to some past event. It surprises them when I tell them that the concept originated as a medical term describing a disease of displacement in soldiers fighting abroad (Boym 3). For most people, nostalgia as a concept is solely linked to an emotional remembrance of the past. Svetlana Boym’s distinction of two tendencies of nostalgia, reflective and restorative, resurrects the concept, making it relevant again in a world that has completely dismissed it as something belonging to the past.

The path of nostalgia is a slippery one. It is easy to get lost in its warm emotions and pretty pictures of good old days. Romanticising the past is not the way forward. The past will always be in the past, dwelling on it will get you nowhere. It is hard, however, not to get lost in the if onlys. What differentiates reflective nostalgia from restorative nostalgia is basically an awareness of the past as fragmented and unobtainable. The two tendencies are different ways of understanding and making sense of longing. They are not absolute types, they overlap. One can easily be a bit of both. However, the restorative nostalgic believes he is searching for the truth. The reflective nostalgic meditates on what has passed, trying to connect the past with the present and future.

We live today in a fast-paced society. We value effectiveness and productivity, progression. There is no time to ponder on what could have been or what should have been. We need to think ahead, preferably years into the future. Plan our whole life, get on the right path, build our own happiness from scratch. We do not have time for nostalgia, but perhaps we should make time. In the chapter titled “Like This,” Oyeyemi asks: “[b]ut who finds happiness interesting?” (90). The couple in the story are not able to be content in their
happiness until they lie dead in a tomb together, in complete stillness and silence, shut out from the rest of the world. We should use our nostalgia to find happiness. Longing for a particular time or event will not make us happy, but perhaps we can learn something about that longing which can be applied to our present-day lives. Employing the knowledge gained from our longing, we might understand what would make us happy in the future. If we stop to analyse what it is that we long for, which moments we choose to go back to. As Boym argues: “[c]ontemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present” (351). If we understand that our memories of the past are fragmented and fixed, perhaps we can stop searching and start to live in the present instead.

It is no coincidence that most of us tend to think nostalgically back towards our childhoods, reminiscing about the times when days were longer, happier, and simpler. When we are stressed by school, work, or other grown up stuff, we tend to long for the simpler times of our childhood when our biggest worry was having to eat our vegetables. Of course, that image is romanticised. As we get older, we forget the struggles we had as kids, how hard it sometimes was. Homework, friends, family situations. Though the problems perhaps were smaller, they felt really big back then. Our worry-free childhood dreams are just us daydreaming of better, but imaginary times. There is nothing wrong with being nostalgic. We probably need it. As humans, we have always looked to the future with a mix of fear, amusement, and curiosity. We have always longed for more. I will end this thesis with a quote from Charles Baudelaire from his poem “Anywhere Out of the World” (N’importe où hors du monde):

At last my soul explodes! “Anywhere! Just so it is out of this world!” (100)
Works Cited


