# A Feminist Analysis of *Bluebeard*

Feminist literary analysis looks at issues of gender inequality and the ways men and women are represented in literature. The way these issues are represented in *Bluebeard* make it a very interesting and unusual story. At first, the story seems to be a typical fairy tale that ends with a 'happy every after wedding' but this story actually begins *after* the fairy tale wedding and soon the wealthy, handsome lord is revealed as a serial wife murderer. Is the story meant simply to entertain us or make us question established gender roles and the dangers of inequality?

This story has many conventional features of the fairy tale genre. The story starts with

'once upon a time' and has 'a happy ever after' ending, just like in *Cinderella* or *Snow White*. Bluebeard 'is the owner of estates, farms and a great, splendid castle' (line 1, p.50) similar to *Beauty and the Beast* or *Sleeping Beauty*. The story has a handsome lord and a beautiful princess as in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. The story has a trial in the form of the forbidden secret room, which reminds us of the spinning wheel in *Sleeping Beauty*.

The story has conventional male and female roles. Bluebeard is handsome, powerful, charming, domineering and older. He is called 'Sire' and does not allow his wife to go into the secret room or he will 'go into such a terrible rage that it is better that you don't' (line 25, p.50). The wife is 'young, pretty and noble' (line 7, p.50), as all Bluebeard's former wives. We never learn the wife's name, which suggests she is not important. Her sister, Anna, believes she is 'lucky marrying a lord like Bluebeard' (line 15, p.50). The brothers are also brave soldiers – 'a dragoon and a musketeer' (line 30, p.51).

We also find traditional gender division in terms of power in the story. Bluebeard has many several former wives so we know he is older, wealthier and physically stronger than his young bride. He gives the orders and his wife obeys him – 'nobody at all is allowed to enter the little room' (line 24, p.50). He can test his wife's obedience e.g. the key, he threatens her with consequences (as above) and can punish her if she breaks the rules.

His wife is afraid of him and promises to obey – 'I''ll do as you say' (line 27, p.50).

However, we find interesting, unconventional gender representation in this tale. Bluebeard firstly appears to be the 'handsome and charming' hero but is actually a serial killer. The wife courageously disobeys her husband by entering the secret room. It is also curious that the wife is rescued by her brothers, not her new Prince Charming such as in in *Cinderella* and *Snow White.*

Bluebeard's description is not detailed. He has a 'long, shabby black beard with glints of blue in it' (line 3, p.50), suggesting grey from age. However, the illustration accompanying the text represents Bluebeard as a Turkish prince rather than a French lord, who would be a white Christian. Why is this? Maybe the publisher feared offending the readers (probably white) by portraying a white, European, French Christian as an evil, woman hating murderer, so portrayed him as a Muslim with a drawn sword. This is racist and could mean the publisher thought the story was challenging male privileges in some way.

The main plot and action in this story is Bluebeard's test of his wife's obedience by

'handing his wife a bunch of keys' (line, 20, p.50). Is this test an acceptable thing for a husband to do? Why does Bluebeard make his wife curious about the room and give her the key but forbid her to enter? It is like the forbidden fruit in the story of Adam and Eve, as though Bluebeard is God, and the wife is Eve. So it appears Bluebeard is trying to prove a woman cannot control herself and may cause ruin (like Eve) so needs a man to control her and stop her getting into danger. It seems like a game until she 'opens the door' and discovers Bluebeard's horrible crime (line 32. p.50). The test is a cruel game. It seems he wants her to realise what his actual personality is like but only when it is too late. She is prey and she has been taken in by a predator. But does the author want us to think that Bluebeard is just a psychopathic killer or that he is just an extreme example of all men?

The blood on the key is mysterious and blood has many associations. Why is the little key 'stained with blood'? (line 39, p.50) Whose blood? Why would the blood not wash off the key? Why does Bluebeard know what the blood means? Are we meant to believe it is a magic key and Bluebeard, with his glittering beard, is an evil wizard. The blood reveals that the wife has disobeyed Bluebeard's rule and suggests her punishment (probably death). But what is the crime? Is it simply for being disobedient? How do we interpret the blood? We associate blood with crime, guilt, danger and death. On the other hand, a woman who produces a blood stain reminds us that women menstruate, so blood can also mean the special power to give birth and life. Also, a menstruating woman in some cultures is regarded as unclean and forbidden from certain places by men. So is her actual crime disobeying her insane husband or simply being a woman? Is Bluebeard and men like him motivated to murder of women by fear and even envy?

What can feminist analysis reveal about the meaning of the secret room? Why are the wives displayed 'hanging on the walls' (line 33, p.50) like a hunter's trophies? It appears they also failed the test. Does he secretly visit the room to relive the excitement of murdering them? Are they on display to prove that women cannot be trusted? It appears he wanted his wife to see them so that he could enjoy her fright. When he returned, 'Bluebeard did not ask his wife for the keys' (line 43, p.50) because he knew she would enter the room. He appears to enjoy watching her terror and it gives him an excuse to kill her like his former wives. Bluebeard seems like an accurate description of a psychopathic serial killer from a modern news story or horror movie. It reminds us that controlling husbands and partners are the main cause of female death in the home.

The wife's rescue is both conventional and unconventional. She is rescued by males (her brothers) rather than by her sister or by herself because men are supposed to be strong and brave and women are weak and cowardly. However, she is not rescued by her Prince Charming so he never proves he is brave, just a 'good, honest young man'. But how can she know this for sure if she has 'completely lost her sense of curiosity' (lines 34/35,

p.51). Is this a good thing? If she is not curious she cannot find out his actual personality. She has not learned that appearances can be deceptive or that gender inequality can lead to abuse and even murder. The 'poor wives were given a Christian burial' (line 32,

p.51), so perhaps she believes that only non-Christian men could murder their wives, but we know this is not true.

In conclusion, this feminist analysis of Bluebeard is very useful because it shows that this and similar fairy tales often supports gender inequality and gender stereotypes. However, feminist analysis also reveals that *Bluebeard* surprisingly make us question whether these gender stereotypes and inequality is a good thing*.* The story reminds us that there is no link between being handsome and good, or ugly and evil. Bluebeard is handsome *and* evil. The fairy tale marriage is revealed as a domestic violence nightmare. The story discourages men from behaving in any way like Bluebeard (the name Bluebeard became a popular label for an abuser of females). It may warn women to be aware of the danger of secret abuse in marriage. It may offer clues about the male psychological causes of gender inequality in society and domestic violence and murder in the home. Bluebeard's punishment for disobedience in the home is extreme, but the privilege to rule the home is similar to traditional ideas about men and women even in white Christian cultures up to recent times. The accompanying illustrations give the impression that domestic violence and murder of wives/ partners only occurs in non-white, non-Christian countries, when we know it is common in all cultures. Therefore, *Bluebeard* seems to be a strange kind of fairy tale. It makes us question the truth behind what may seem a fairy tale marriage and it makes us aware of the effects of fairy tales and popular stories to make young women want a fairy tale marriage.