The Erlking Study Guide

The Erlking by Angela Carter

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

After first appearing in the periodical *Bananas*, Angela Carter's "The Erlking" was published in her 1979 collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber*. Throughout this collection, Carter revises classic European fairy tales, exploring provocative variations on their underlying themes of the bestiality within human nature and the power dynamics of sexual desire. This was the first book that brought the lyrical and iconoclastic British writer's fiction to the attention of people in the United States. Controversial for its gender politics as well as its ornately descriptive writing style, the collection garnered mixed reviews. In the years since her 1992 death, Carter's reputation has soared, and *The Bloody Chamber* remains one of her most highly esteemed and frequently discussed works.

In "The Erlking," an innocent young woman walking through a deserted wood is seduced by a wild man who lives there. Like the animals that surround him, she falls subject to the Erlking's strange power. She learns that he is planning to transform her into a bird—many of which he keeps in cages in his cottage to sing for him—but she nevertheless remains compelled to submit to his will. However, an alternate fate for the woman is imagined when, at the story's close, it is conjectured that she will strangle him with his own hair and set free all the birds, which will then turn back into the form of other young virgins the Erlking has seduced. "The Erlking" is one of the collection's more experimental stories. Through a series of sudden and disorienting shifts in point of view, Carter creates an intimate sense of the protagonist's experience of losing herself. The story addresses contemporary issues of female psychology and sexuality, making the ancient literary form of the fairy tale freshly relevant.

Author Biography

Carter was born in Eastborne, England, in 1940, the daughter of Hugh and Olive Stalker. It was the beginning of World War II and, fearing Hitler's approach, the family soon moved to South Yorkshire, where Carter was raised by her mother and maternal grandmother. After the war the family returned to the London area. Carter reports a close relationship with her father, a journalist originally from Scotland, but also claims that he was overprotective of her. In adolescence she suffered from anorexia, which she attributes to her family's sexual conservatism. Nevertheless, writes Alison Lee in her study *Angela Carter*, "the picture she paints of her family life is generally affectionate and her depiction of her childhood home highlights its dreamlike aura." She hated school and, against her mother's wishes, did not apply to university. Her father helped Carter secure a job as a journalist.

In 1960 she married Paul Carter, an industrial chemist, and moved to Bristol. Soon bored with life as a housewife, she began a degree in English at Bristol University. She graduated in 1965 with a specialization in medieval literature. Over one summer vacation, she wrote her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, which was published in 1966. She quickly wrote several other novels that were very well received. In 1968, separating from her husband, she took the prize money from a literary award and moved to Japan. It was there, she wrote in *Nothing Sacred*, "I learned what it is to be a woman and became radicalized." For the rest of her career, Carter remained an outspoken, if iconoclastic, leftist and feminist.

Carter returned to England and supported herself teaching and writing political commentary for several newspapers. A small but highly literate and enthusiastic readership, including well-known authors such as Robert Coover and Salman Rushdie, embraced her fiction. But Carter's work was experimental and hard to categorize, and literary glory eluded her. Nevertheless, she wrote prolifically. In the 1970s, in addition to writing nonfiction, several novels, and the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, she also translated a volume of fairy tales and wrote a controversial tract on famed French pornographer the Marquis de Sade, entitled *The Sadeian Woman*. In the late 1970s, she married Mark Pearce, with whom she had a son in 1983, at age 43.

In her last years, Carter wrote her most highly acclaimed novels, *Nights at the Circus* (recipient of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize) and *Wise Children* (Carter's own favorite). In 1991 she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Carter died at home the following year at age fifty-one.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a long descriptive passage depicting the stark and gloomy atmosphere of the woods in late October. These woods are characterized as entrapping and menacing, not so much because of any physical danger they present as because of their ability to undermine human identity: "It is easy to lose yourself in these woods." This point is further emphasized though disorienting shifts from second- to third- to first-person narration.

When a clear first-person narrator's voice does emerge, she describes hearing a bird song that expresses her own "girlish and delicious loneliness" as she walks through the woods. She believes that she is alone. She then comes upon a clearing where animals have gathered. The Erlking enters playing a pipe that sounds like a birdsong and reaches out to the narrator. She is immediately subject to his strange charisma. She states that he has the power to do "grievous harm."

The story goes on to describe the Erlking's way of life. He lives alone in an orderly one-room house, surviving on the wild foods he gathers in the woods and the milk of a white goat. The Erlking tells the narrator about the ways of the strange woodland animals and teaches her to weave reeds and twigs into baskets, which he uses to cage the wild birds he keeps trapped in his cottage. He laughs at her when she accuses him of cruelty for doing this. In his house, full of the music of birdsong, there is an old fiddle, silent because it has no strings.

The narrator relates that, when she goes out for walks, she now feels compelled to go to the Erlking and have sex with him, which she describes ambivalently as both tender and violent. She claims that she is not afraid of him, though she is afraid of how he makes her feel. She describes this feeling as vertigo, a dizzying loss of orientation. Like the birds he calls with his pipe, the narrator is pulled toward him again and again, despite the danger he evokes.

The narrator describes one such encounter with the Erlking: She finds him playing his pipe, surrounded by birds, at one with the natural environment. It begins to rain and they retreat to his cottage. They embrace and he bites her neck. As they have sex, she reflects on her innocence before meeting him and his magical attraction. She imagines stringing the silent fiddle with his long wild hair, making music she would prefer to that of the caged birds that surround them in the room. She describes her feeling of being stripped by him and then clothed by his body. She wishes to grow small so that he could swallow her and then give birth to her.

As winter draws nearer, there is less to eat in the woods, and the wild birds are dependent on the Erlking for food. They flock to him and cover his body. Like a bird, the narrator accepts the "goblin feast of fruit" he has set out for her. Looking into his eyes makes her feel as if she has become small as a bird. The Erlking has the power to contain her. She realizes his plan to keep her in a cage, another singing bird, but says

that she will remain silent out of spite. She doesn't think the Erlking means any harm, despite the fact that he has captured her psychically with his strange powers.

The first-person narrator describes lying with the Erlking and combing the dead leaves out of his long hair. She says that, as he sleeps in her lap, she will take his hair and wind it into two ropes to strangle him with. There is a sudden shift to thirdperson narration. This narrator states that the protagonist will next open all the of cages and set free the birds, each of which will turn into a young girl with the mark of the Erlking's red love bite on her neck. Then she will cut off his hair and string the silent fiddle with five strands of it, and the fiddle will play magically without a human hand. The strings will cry out a discordant music, saying "Mother, Mother you have murdered me!"

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The Erlking begins with a detailed description of the forest. Through the author's words, the reader can almost see the light peaking through the tall tress to reach the forest floor. It is autumn and the trees are bare of most of their leaves. The ground is wet, a testament to the fact that it has rained recently.

The author is describing how the woods completely enclose you as soon as you step in. As the author walks through the forest, she explains the sights, sounds and smells of her surroundings in detail. It grows colder and it is explained that there is now ice forming on the small stream.

The author travels deeper and deeper into the forest and she hears a bird's song. It reminds her of her childhood as a young girl, the author first identifying herself as a female. She tells of the tree's branches that are now surrounding her, like a cage.
It is then that the call of the title bird, the Erlking, is heard. The author explains that this bird will harm you.

She keeps walking deeper into the forest. She comes upon a clearing, a garden filled with flowers, and a variety of creatures. A green-eyed goat smiles at her. He has been smoking a pipe. Across the clearing the Erlking sits. A fox is resting its head on the bird's knee. The Erlking lives by himself in a house he built deep in the woods. At the word house, and the proceeding description the reader is first introduced to the fact that the Erlking is human, not bird.

The author describes the Erlking life in these woods. In the morning, he goes out and gathers his supplies. During the day, he makes salads and gives them mischievous names. He milks the goat he keeps for milk and makes cheese out of its offerings. He traps animals for meat and fur. The author explains that she knows these things because the Erlking has spoken to her. She further explains that the Erlking keeps caged songbirds. She has told him that this practice is cruel but he only laughs at her. He stacks the collected cages in his kitchen.

The author explains that the Erlking does very well for himself in the forest. He is quite handy in his home. He has a fully stocked kitchen including saucepan and skillets. He picks and dries herbs to hang around his home.

She explains that she visits the Erlking often, whenever she walks into the woods. When she does so he commands her to lie on his bed and take off her clothes. She complies. She was a virgin before she met him. She is not afraid of his big hands or sharp teeth. Her only fear is heights and of falling. When they are finished, he calls to the birds in the forest and they come to him and rest on his shoulders.

The author is again in the clearing. It begins to rain so goes with the Erlking to his cottage. She lies on his bed. She can feel his sharp teeth in his kiss. Then instantly they are on her throat, piercing her skin. She lets out a scream of pain. His caged birds are singing now and she thinks that they should have real music. He lays on top of her while she compares there meeting to two halves of a seed. Despite his bite to her neck, she is not afraid. She is engulfed in the feeling of him; she wishes that she could somehow shrink so that he may surround her.

Afterward they lay on the mattress with the moon bathing their nakedness. He is stroking her, comforting her. She explains that she always comes back to the Erlking, to feel like this.

Suddenly it is winter. It has grown much colder. He calls out to the birds and once again, they engulf him. She catches her lover's eyes as birds surround his body. It is if he is looking through her. She feels she might "fall" into his eyes. All at once, she is the one who sees. He has been weaving a new cage, meant for her. He means to keep her, like the innocent songbirds he keeps caged. Although the author had loved him, she did not wish to be kept as he keeps those birds, no matter how well he takes care of them. She realizes now that the caged birds are not singing, rather crying and wishing to be freed. He did not want to harm her, but she recalls that she knew he would be dangerous upon their first meeting.

She explains that sometimes while they are lying still he lets her comb through his long hair with her fingers, removing the leaves of the forest. She plans to take his hair tonight, in his sleep wind two ropes of it, and strangle him. She will then free all of the birds and they will again turn into young virgin women, all with identical bite marks on their necks.

Analysis

There is an incredible amount of rich, descriptive language in *The Erlking*. The story is also filled with symbolism. Throughout the story, the author speaks in first person narrating her story. The texture of the language is so detailed that the readers are able to visualize her walk through the forest. The time of the year is fall. She moves deeper and deeper into the woods, thus farther away from reality. She is stepping into the world of the forest and away from the normalcy of her own life.

As she steps into the clearing, it is filled with vivid flowers and animals. What is interesting is that she speaks of the goat smiling at her, of it putting down its pipe to do so. At this point, the reader can only visualize that she is speaking literally. There is a clear description of a green eyed, smoking goat. The image is laughable as the story turns from a description of the forest to a fantasy of animals with human traits.

The author had previously announced the call of the Erlking so that the reader might surmise that the Erlking is a powerful bird, or perhaps another creature of the forest. Yet a quick look into a dictionary reveals that an Erlking is a German mythological creature,

much like a gargoyle or monster, which terrorized mostly children (Dictionary.com). The author does not identify her Erlking as such, although she does give him large hands and pointy sharp teeth.

The Erlking is given human characteristics such as building and living in a home, cooking, and keeping animals. The Erlking lives alone, far away from anyone. He does not live with people and his house is far away in the woods. The author seems to be the Erlking's only human contact. The creatures of the forest are both his friends and family and resources for his food. Again, this shows a departure from reality, the reality of her life. She is looking for something different, perhaps dangerous, in visiting him.

The author predicts that the Erlking will indeed devastate her. However, the first time we are aware of any negative aspects of his personality is his predilection for collecting and caging songbirds. Upon her telling him that this is a cruel practice, his only response is indifference and laughter. This tells of the power structure in their relationship. The Erlking has a power over her and she adjusts to his will. The author explains that she is not afraid of him; her only fear is falling. This fact is important to note.

The author then deepens her explanation of their relationship. She is no longer just the Erlking's visitor or friend: she is his lover. Before him, she was an innocent virgin. Even in her recollection of their intimate times together, he is clearly in charge, the more experienced of the two. He orders her clothes off, does not ask or help. He bites her neck so hard it bleeds and she screams in pain. Still she is not afraid.

Perhaps the author craves this passion, or wishes to be controlled. The reader never has the chance to find the answer to this query. It is when she locks eyes with the Erlking in his final scene that she becomes afraid. She immediately realizes her fate in the relationship.

Her conclusion that she will be caged as the other songbirds can be interpreted several ways. The reader can take her words literally. Perhaps the Erlking seduces innocent virgins and when he is done with them he somehow turns them into birds and cages them; collecting his conquests in the forms of birds who only cry for their release. When she imagines herself releasing the birds, after killing the Erlking, perhaps they really will transform into their former innocent virgin selves. This may not be such an unrealistic theory in a story that has a smoking goat.

This version would be congruent with the dictionary's definition of an Erlking. As a mythical creature, he would have the ability to transform innocent young women into mere birds. It would also explain his large hands and sharp teeth, and the fact that he bit her neck until it bled.

Another, less literal translation that may be reaches is that the author, finding herself in love, gets suddenly scared. She does not want to be "kept" by this person. She does not want to be forever his innocent. The caged songbird is a metaphor for her situation. The caged birds are crying for freedom and so is the author, young and inexperienced. Yes, the Erlking will take good care of her, but perhaps she wants more from her life.

When she releases the birds, they will return to the wild. She is no longer sure that she wants the fantasy life that she has created.

As *The Erlking* is such a short story, it is left for the reader to choose what they believe the real meaning of the author to be.

Characters

Erlking

The Erlking is the main subject of the story. The narrator, an innocent young woman, comes upon him while walking through the woods one October day. She immediately becomes subject to his magical attraction, which he also uses to charm and tame the woodland animals around him. The Erlking lives in a cottage alone in the woods and lives off the bounty of nature. While he seems in some ways to be at one with nature, he also exerts a certain tyranny over it. Most significantly, he draws the birds to him with the beautiful songs of his pipe playing; then he traps them in cages, which he keeps in his house.

Like the natural environment around him, the Erlking is both alluring and menacing. The narrator is drawn into a sexual relationship with him that she describes as both tender and brutal. While he seems to represent a model of masculine dominance, his power transcends gender boundaries. His young lover depicts him alternately as an overpowering mother figure that would swallow her and then give birth to her and as a butcher who skins her like a rabbit. She describes him as kind but also states that he intends to do her "grievous harm," and she realizes that he can cage her, along with his other bird-women. She feels trapped by him but ascribes to him no malice, as if he were a force of nature or an animal merely following its instincts.

Narrator

The young woman, who narrates most of the story in the first person, meets the Erlking and, under his power, loses her grip on her own identity. Readers learn little about her except how she feels as subject to the Erlking's strange allure. She is an innocent when she first drifts into the Erlking's enchanted clearing, but she abruptly enters a sexual relationship with him to which she is compelled to return, despite the danger it poses to her freedom and sense of self. His eyes "eat" her and his love-making "skins" her, both "consol[ing] and devastat[ing]" her.

The songbirds that the Erlking keeps in cages in his house reflect the narrator's plight. Like her, they are drawn to the Erlking and then entrapped by him. She sees how her relationship to him makes her small, and she anticipates that he will cage her like his other birds. This has a psychological dimension to it—suggesting the extent to which her will and sense of identity are overwhelmed by him—as well as a magical one—suggesting that he has the power to actually transform her into a bird. At the end of the story, in a passage narrated in the third person, the young woman frees all of the birds, which turn back into young women who, like her, were seduced by the Erlking. Thus, despite her enchantment by the Erlking, the young woman does see an alternative: she projects strangling the Erlking and replacing the music of caged birds with that of his hair, strung on a violin.

Themes

Nature and Its Meaning

The deep woods where the story is set is a lonely, melancholy place, giving in to the creeping coldness of the oncoming winter. It is also a truly wild place; it has "reverted to its original privacy." It has a disorienting effect on any human passerby, as indicated by the second-person address: "It is easy to lose yourself in these woods." The unsettling power of the wood is soon ascribed to the Erlking, whose presence permeates it. The Erlking is a wild man. He lives among animals, surviving off the land, and has dried leaves in his long, wild hair. He is a symbol of nature's power but also transcends nature with his magical control. He is destructive in the same way that nature is destructive—merely by following who he is, with no malicious intent. Yet he tames fierce and independent beasts like the fox and draws all the wild animals to him with his charming pipe-playing and offers of food. He rules nature, not through the human power of civilization but through the supernatural powers of charisma and transformation. The story addresses the wild nature within human beings, including its attraction and power as well as its danger. Nature is associated with the loss of individual identity and with sexuality.

Freedom and Entrapment

The story pivots on the relationship between the Erlking—a figure of freedom—and the narrator— a figure of entrapment. The narrator feels trapped as soon as she enters the wood, a place where the Erlking lives free from the rules and judgments of human society. The story takes up the theme of freedom and entrapment most explicitly through the treatment of the caged birds that the Erlking keeps in his cottage. Birds—especially birds in flight—are a conventional symbol of freedom. The Erlking lures these wild creatures with his pipeplaying and selects the ones with the most beautiful songs to sing for him, depriving them of their ability to fly. More broadly, wild animals, free from the strictures of civilization, represent a special kind of freedom. But the Erlking, who is in some ways a creature of nature himself, commands the animals of the wood with his magical and controlling presence.

The plight of the caged birds closely reflects that of the narrator. At the end of the story it is revealed that the Erlking has transformed his earlier lovers into birds and that he is preparing a similar fate for the narrator. This magical plot twist reflects the psychological state of the narrator, a previously virginal young woman who has become ensnared in a powerful sexual bond with the Erlking. As his lover, she feels small, incapable of flight, and afraid of falling down. "Falling as a bird would fall through the air if the Erlking tied up the winds in his handkerchief and knotted the ends together so they could not get out. Then the moving currents of the air would no longer sustain them and all the birds would fall at the imperative of gravity, as I fall down for him." Though she senses his danger to her, she seems to have lost her free will. She is compelled to return to him

and submit herself to his power. The story suggests the extent to which she—and, more broadly, women—participate in their own psychological entrapment. Only through the narrator's murder of him—narrated ambiguously in the future tense—will she regain freedom, for herself and the other entranced and entrapped bird-women.

Sex and Sex Roles

Sexuality can be understood as a natural and animalistic aspect of the human self, a wilderness territory of the human soul. Therefore, this fairy tale can be read as a parable about the psychological impact of sexual awakening. The narrator is innocent, virginal as Little Red Ridinghood, when she enters the wood. After becoming initiated into sex by the wild Erlking, she cannot ever truly leave the wood. She is trapped, compelled to return and to lose herself in the woods and in the Erlking's powerful attraction again and again.

Carter represents sexuality as dark and dangerous in ways that are tied to gender roles. The Erlking, a man, experiences the wilderness of sexuality as its master, its king. The narrator, a woman, experiences it as a loss of self. She feels herself becoming smaller as they make love. There is a combination of violence and tenderness in her experience of their encounters. "He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes." Their power relations seem very fixed according to gen gender roles, but the end of the story suggests the possibility of reversal, when the narrator twists the Erlking's hair into ropes and strangles him from a posture of lovers' tenderness.

Style

Setting

The story takes place at a time and in a place that is not historically specific. It is set, like a classic fairy tale "once upon a time," in a timeless, magical anyplace. Yet, unlike a traditional fairy tale, the concrete, sensual elements of the setting are very important to the story, as indicated by the highly specific and descriptive opening paragraphs. The story takes place in a wood whose dangerous and seductive ambience seems almost like a character itself. It opens with a long passage describing the natural environment. The wood is invested with a powerful and menacing atmosphere, one connected to the passing of the seasons and the inevitable death that winter brings. The wood has the power to enclose: "once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out." It robs human passersby of their sense of self, obliterating their identities.

Point of View

Carter's manipulation of point of view is the most difficult stylistic element of "The Erlking." It is therefore helpful to review the shifts in point of view throughout the story. It opens with a thirdperson description of the wood, seemingly described by an outside observer: "The lucidity, the clarity of light that afternoon was sufficient to itself." Then it drifts into a more immediate and intimate secondperson address, with the "you" addressed being the reader: "There is not much in the autumn wood to make you smile." Not until the fifth paragraph of the story is the identity of the speaker revealed to be that of a first-person narrator who has, until then, spoken of the woods only in general descriptive terms. She goes on to describe meeting the Erlking and her strange and dangerous relationship with him in the first person, occasionally returning to address the reader in the second person ("Erlking will do you grievous harm") and occasionally addressing the Erlking himself in this same voice ("You sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream"). Finally, at the story's close, the first-person narration abruptly ceases, replaced by a third-person narrator who describes the former narrator as "she."

"The Erlking" begins with statements that the wood undermines human identity. The story concerns the primary, first-person narrator's frightening experience of losing her direction, will, and sense of self. The abrupt and disorienting shifts in narrative point of view create a similar effect on the reader. Upon entering the world conjured in the story, like entering the wood itself, one frequently loses one's bearings. It becomes hard to keep track of who "you" is, and the "I" who speaks appears and recedes mysteriously. Thus the shifts in point of view create a more immediate sense of the disorientation that the protagonist describes experiencing.

Symbolism

The story is highly symbolic, with most of its meaning suggested through metaphors rather than descriptive statements. Before the narration of the narrator's experience of becoming lost in the Erlking's power is even initiated, the woods are described with a simile foreshadowing this experience: "The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt around hopelessly for the way out."

The narrator loses herself, but she also sees herself in all that is around her. Her subjective experience is expressed through the wood itself and the animals that surround the Erlking, particularly the birds that he keeps caged in his cottage. Like a bird, she is drawn to him, and he chooses her because of her charms. He takes the wild, innocent things and harnesses their power of song for his own pleasure. These birds reflect her ambivalent feelings in his presence—they are small, dependent, charmed, and hopelessly trapped. In the end, in a magical twist, it is revealed that the Erlking is in fact building a cage for the narrator and plans to actually transform her, through his lovemaking, into a bird. It is the logic of fairy tales that symbolic connections are enacted as literal ones; a woman who feels like a caged bird is threatened to be transformed into one, and the birds that remind her so much of herself are revealed as the Erlking's former lovers, young innocents like herself who fell subject to his transformational power.

The fiddle that sits silent in the Erlking's cottage offers a symbolic contrast to caged birds. A musical instrument, the fiddle represents culture and civilization. The Erlking silences these realms, finding music in nature instead. After the narrator strangles the Erlking and strings his long wild hair on the fiddle, the tables are turned, and he symbolically sings for her.

Historical Context

Fairy Tales

The genre of stories known as fairy tales is very diverse but shares certain important qualities. Fairy tales derive from oral culture. That is, they were told and retold by generations of people around the world before they were ever committed to print. They are not set at a specific time in history, but they are set in places that are (or at least were) familiar to the stories' listeners and tellers. Despite their everyday settings, in fairy tales normal rules of reality do not apply. Fairy tales contain an element of the supernatural—typically, objects and characters that change form, animals that speak, and figures both good and evil who have magical powers.

"The Erlking" is one of Carter's modern interpretations of the ancient fairy tale form. Carter sees classic fairy tales—often discounted as lowly or juvenile—as an important, even crucial, part of literary history. She places particular value on the original, oral forms of the tales that flourished before the rise of literacy and the publication of books for wide consumption that spread through Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. She writes in her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, "Fairy tales, folk tales stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of ordinary men and women who labored to create our world." When fairy tales were set down in print, a popular form of entertainment for the poor was transformed, as Carter writes in the same introduction, into "the refined pastime of the middle-classes, and especially the middle-class nursery." In her revisions in *The Bloody Chamber*, part of Carter's intent is to restore to the fairy tale the vitality, maturity, and frankness of its earlier oral form.

"The Erlking" employs various fairy tale devices— a wild man, a speaking instrument, and humans that are transformed into animals. "The Erlking" also makes two specific references to the classic fairy tale "Little Red Ridinghood" and shares several of its features. At the beginning of "The Erlking," the narrator is compared to the familiar fairy tale figure: "A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Ridinghood to her granny's house." Like the protagonist in the classic fairy tale, the innocent narrator is charmed by a man/beast whom she meets deep in the wilderness. Later, a famous line from the classic tale is repeated in reference to the Erlking: "What big eyes you have." In "The Erlking" Carter makes explicit the fairy tale's subtle sexual subtext—a warning against seduction by strange men.

Feminism

In all of the stories included in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter writes about the pleasure and fear that women experience in their relationships with men. Using fairy tales as a starting point, she explores issues of sexuality, power, and identity. This focus must be understood in the context of Carter's unconventional feminism. She was part of a

generation of feminists who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s who strove not only for legal and economic equality with men but also for a fundamental change in interpersonal relations. The bedroom was a battleground in this political struggle, with conventional forms of masculine and feminine sexuality seen as a root of gender inequality. Pornography became one of the movement's targets, blamed for reinforcing unequal sexual power dynamics.

Carter was often criticized by fellow feminists for her acceptance of female sexual submissiveness and masochism—which might be illustrated in "The Erlking" through the narrator's consent to and partial enjoyment of the Erlking's power over her. Other feminists, including Carter, saw the denial of the element of power relations in sex as a form of censorship that itself hampered female liberation. Shortly before coming out with *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter published a nonfiction tract entitled *The Sadeian Woman* that was a feminist defense of the notorious French pornographer the Marquis de Sade. Carter was fascinated with psychological questions surrounding sexuality and was interested in the freedom that the genre of pornographic writing allowed for exploring this issue.

In her study *Angela Carter*, Alison Lee suggests that criticism by some feminists of Carter's representations of female suffering "must be balanced against the extraordinary complexity with which she viewed relations between men and women. She called herself a feminist, but her feminism is no more monolithic than her representations of female sexuality. As is clear from her fairy tales, women can not only run with wolves but be wolves and even seduce wolves."

Critical Overview

Carter began to publish novels when she was in her mid-twenties, and her early works brought her an unusual degree of recognition for a young writer. Her first two novels, *Shadow Dance* and *The Magic Toyshop*, were received warmly by reviewers, and her third, *Several Perceptions*, won a Somerset Maughm Award. After such an auspicious start, however, Carter's literary career became more of a struggle. Taking her prize money, she left her first husband and moved to Japan, where she became politically radicalized and began to identify herself as a feminist. Her writing developed in important ways during this period, becoming less realistic and more speculative and intellectual. Upon returning to England several years later, she found herself without a secure relationship with a publisher and marginal to the British literary scene. In the 1970s, when Carter was in her thirties, she considered herself deeply unsuccessful. "At that time," wrote Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton in their preface to *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, "hardly anyone seemed to understand what she was trying to prove in her increasingly experimental work."

Carter's writing, which incorporated and revised various popular genres, such as gothic, romance, science fiction, fairy tales, and pornography, clearly did not fit in with the prevailing literary vogue of realism. In a 1977 *New Review* essay, Lorna Sage applauded Carter's works for the way they "prowl around the fringes of the proper English novel like dream-monsters, nasty, exotic, brilliant creatures that feed off cultural crisis." But for the most part, Carter received little positive attention in the press in this period. Particularly controversial was her use of eroticism. "It is not a particularly English trait, nor a conventionally feminine one, for a writer to be brazenly concerned with sexuality. So it is unsurprising that Carter was not always favored by a literary establishment that sometimes found her message and her methods troubling," write Bristow and Broughton.

With the publication of a pair of books—the nonfiction study of pornographer Marquis de Sade, *The Sadeian Woman*, and the collection of revised fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*—in the late 1970s, Carter began to attract a wider audience, if not a friendlier one. Both books drew fire from establishment critics for their sexual explicitness and from fellow feminists for their nonjudgmental portrayal of female masochism. Alan Friedman of the *New York Times Book Review* criticized *The Bloody Chamber* on stylistic grounds, accusing Carter of "comical overwriting" and describing the stories' "whipped passion as full of cold air as whipped butter." Patricia Duncker, writing for *Literature History*, objected to the collection's erotic descriptions of female victimization. "Heterosexual feminists have not yet invented an alternative, anti-sexist language of the erotic. Carter envisages women's sensuality simply as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire." But others saw more of value in these representations. Praising the stories' rich symbolism, Patricia Craig of the *New Statesman* wrote that "hints, connections and associations proliferate. . . . Ms. Carter's stories are too rich and heady for casual consumption, but they do provide, at a very high level, romantic nourishment for the imagination." Despite, or perhaps because

of, the controversy it generated, *The Bloody Chamber* was widely reviewed and sold relatively well.

In the 1980s Carter wrote novels highly commended by a small group of literary figures but little known in the mainstream. However, since her untimely death in 1992—when she was widely considered to be at the height of her creative powers—her reputation has grown. She is now a part of the contemporary British canon and has become especially popular in university curricula and scholarship. Despite the criticism at the time of its publication, *The Bloody Chamber*, as well as Carter's other works, became increasingly recognized as visionary in both style—anticipating movements such as magical realism and postmodernism—and politics— anticipating feminist debates about pornography and gender identity. In her 1997 study *Angela Carter*, Alison Lee posits that "one consistent interest [throughout Carter's works] is the position of women in literature, in history, and in the world, and her corpus provides a large number of perspectives from which to see women and from which women may see themselves." Bristow and Broughton declare that the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* "have never ceased to engage—and enrage—their readers, who continue to debate whether Carter's revisionary handling of European legends contests or colludes with patriarchal values." Scholars agree that Carter was ahead of her time and that her fiction has only begun to be understood and appreciated.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses how Carter both borrows and diverges from the traditional fairy tale "Little Red Ridinghood" in her story "The Erlking."

All of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* re-imagine the plots and revisit the themes of traditional fairy tales, making explicit their sexual subtexts. For example, Carter offers several different versions of "Little Red Ridinghood" and "Beauty and the Beast" that focus on innocent young girls' seduction by animalistic men. Carter observes in her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, that "most fairy tales are structured around the relations between men and women," thus offering an opportunity to look at these relations in all of their complexities and variations. But Carter laments how fairy tales have been simplified and sanitized in their transition from a popular oral tradition to books published for an audience of middle-class children. Carter sets out to candidly tell the morally ambiguous truths of gender dynam ics in her own time by restoring frank sexuality and violence to the ancient fairy tale form.

While many of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are immediately recognizable as modern adaptations of classic fairy tales, "The Erlking" is not so easy to place. It borrows images and figures from various fairy tales and makes an explicit reference to one of the best-known European fairy tales, "Little Red Ridinghood." In this essay, some of the connections between "The Erlking" and "Little Red Ridinghood" will be explored, as well as ways in which the two stories differ.

In the most familiar version of "Little Red Ridinghood," published by the German brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm in the mid-nineteenth century, an innocent and much-beloved young girl sets out into the woods to bring her ailing grandmother, who lives there, a basket of treats. She is waylaid by a wolf who—humanlike in his ability to talk—encourages her to dally in the woods and enjoy herself. She is naïve to any danger he poses and trustingly takes his suggestion, pausing to gather a bouquet of flowers for her grandmother. Meanwhile, the wolf goes to the grandmother's house, devours her, dresses in her clothes, and lies in her bed in wait of the girl's arrival. When she gets there, she feels that something is wrong but nevertheless speaks to the wolf as if he were her granny, at which point he devours her as well. Luckily, a huntsman comes to the rescue, cutting open the wolf's stomach, from which both grandmother and Red Ridinghood emerge safe and sound. They kill the wolf by placing stones in his stomach.

The Grimm version is an example of what Carter would consider a sanitized and simplified fairy tale. The moral conflicts that arise are completely resolved; there is a clear distinction between good and evil. In the end, Little Red Ridinghood's innocence remains intact and the wolf's deception and violence are punished. In an interview with John Haffenden in his *Novelists in Interview*, Carter recounts her first encounter with the story. She says that her grandmother "had no truck with that sentimental nonsense about a friendly woodcutter carefully slitting open the wolf's belly and letting out the grandmother." At the frightening climax of the tale, when the wolf eats Little Red

Ridinghood, "she used to jump on me and pretend to eat me. Like all small children, I loved being tickled and nuzzled; I found it bliss, and I'd beg her to relate the story to me just for the sake of the ecstatic moment when she jumped on me." She goes on to say that, as a traditional oral tale, "the acting out of the story has always been part of the story," which turns it into "something completely different—a rough kind of game." It is a game that combines fear with pleasure. In Carter's case, since it was her grandmother who told the tale, the confusion between benevolent and malevolent figures is particularly thorough: Carter's (real, good) grandmother pretends to be the (evil) wolf who is, in the story, pretending to be the (fictional, good) grandmother. Maternal, caring, playful features are combined with masculine, threatening, deceptive features. The complexity of the emotions this evokes is apparent nowhere in the Grimm version but everywhere in *The Bloody Chamber*.

The oral versions of the original fairy tales were not intended especially for children; thus they were often not only frightening but also risqué. In *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, Carter explains that, starting with fairy tales' print publication in the nineteenth century, "the excision of references to sexual and excremental functions, the toning down of sexual situations and the reluctance to include 'indelicate' material—that is, dirty jokes—helped to denaturize the fairy tale and, indeed, helped to denaturize its vision of everyday life." The happy ending to the Grimm version of "Little Red Ridinghood" is one example of such expurgation. Another is the toning down of the story's erotic subtext. This remains in Grimm only residually, for example, in the fact that the wolf lies in wait for Little Red Ridinghood in bed. Oral versions of "Little Red Ridinghood," derived from werewolf tales, were likely to have Little Red Ridinghood a girl poised on the verge of womanhood and the wolf taking human form during their first encounter in the woods. This allows the story to stand as a warning against seduction and rape as much as against the danger of wild animals. Carter tells John Haffenden that it was her intent in *The Bloody Chamber* to "extract the latent content from the traditional stories and use it as the beginnings of new stories."

"The Company of Wolves," which also appears in *The Bloody Chamber*, retells the "Little Red Ridinghood" story quite faithfully, sticking to the events and even the language of the classic tale. A young girl, just beginning to become a woman, departs for her grandmother's house deep in the woods, carrying a basket of treats and wearing a brilliant red shawl. She meets a werewolf in the human form of a charming hunter who finds out where she is heading, goes there ahead of her, eats her grandmother, and lies in wait for her. When he reveals himself as a wolf, intending to eat her, she— as if in response to the story's subtext warning young girls against seductive strangers—takes off her clothes and submits to him sexually. The story ends with a tender embrace between girl and beast. While this ending may seem perverse, Carter explains it in terms of a change in power dynamics between the wolf and the girl, with Little Red Ridinghood taking control. "She 'eats' the wolf," Carter explains to Haffenden.

"The Erlking" is a much looser interpretation of "Little Red Ridinghood," borrowing from other tales as well. However, like "The Company of Wolves," it treats the latent erotic content of the traditional tale as a starting point and shares an unflinching interest in a young girl's ambivalent experience of losing her sexual innocence. It diverges

significantly from the plot of the classic "Little Red Ridinghood," though it loosely follows the events of a virginal protagonist's perils as she sets out in the wilderness, meets a beast-like man, and loses herself in him. Carter makes this parallel specific in one of two explicit references to "Little Red Ridinghood": "A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Ridinghood to her granny's house, but this light admits of no ambiguities and, here, she will be trapped in her own illusions because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems." This statement both sets up the story's parallel to the classic tale and suggests how it will reinterpret it.

Some of the imagery in "The Erlking" also refers to "Little Red Ridinghood." The wolf's most salient features are his hair (in the earlier werewolf version, hairiness is the first thing that distinguishes the beast from a man), his eyes ("the better to see you with!"), and his teeth ("the better to eat you with!"). These are also the physical features of the Erlking that Carter emphasizes. His long hair, the color of dead leaves and tangled with them, signals the Erlking as a bestial creature of nature. His eyes, "quite green, as if from too much looking at the wood" also represent his wildness and his danger. "What big eyes you have," Carter writes, again referring explicitly to "Little Red Ridinghood." "Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes [werewolves]." When he laughs, he "shows his white, pointed teeth with the spittle gleaming on them," and in one sexual encounter he actually bites the narrator's neck.

Furthermore, the Erlking's unsettling charisma is described through imagery of eating: "There are some eyes that can eat you." Eating is, indeed, the most prominent metaphor used to describe the girl's sexual encounters with him. However, as in "The Company of Wolves," Carter re-imagines the original girl-beast dynamic in "Little Red Ridinghood" through imagery of eating that goes both ways. He is a "tender butcher" who skins her like a rabbit, but he also offers her food, and his own body is described in erotic terms as edible: "His skin is the tint and texture of sour cream, he has stiff, russet nipples ripe as berries." Thus he combines nurturing and threatening qualities, ones that reflect back on the grandmotherly guise the wolf takes in the classic tale.

The Erlking also takes on maternal characteristics even more explicitly in other passages. "I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me, like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed. Then I could lodge inside of your body and you would bear me." The combination of pleasure and fear, of warning against strange seductive beasts and loving "rough play" that Carter encountered hearing the story on her grandmother's lap are evidenced in her characterization of the Erlking himself. To be eaten by this "wolf" is, on some level, a tenderly nurturing experience.

In the traditional tale, the wolf charms Little Red Ridinghood, then pretends to be her grandmother, then, finally revealing himself as the true beast that he is, ravages her. In "The Erlking" there are "no such ambiguities . . . everything in the wood is exactly as it seems." The animal-man figure, the Erlking, doesn't trick her. He doesn't change form or pretend to be anything other than what he is—a beastly and sexual man who is also compellingly attractive. It is only the young narrator's own illusions that allow her to

become entrapped by him, if she is indeed entrapped. The story's ambiguously narrated ending—where the protagonist's revenge and liberation are narrated in the future tense—leaves open the question of who ultimately gains the upper hand.

Though "Little Red Ridinghood" is doubtless one of "The Erlking's" imaginative underpinnings, Carter transforms the tale to an almost unrecognizable degree and, in the process, transforms the way female "innocence" and its loss are represented. While some feminists have criticized Carter for portraying women who enjoy their own victimization, it clearly could be argued that Carter, instead, redefines the deflowered Little Red Ridinghood figure as ultimately responsible for her own fate and, therefore, not a victim. She is not tricked by a wolf; at worst she is "trapped in her own illusions." And even before the story's ambiguous close, there is evidence that the protagonist is capable of acting in her own interest, motivated by pleasure as well as fear.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, Critical Essay on "The Erlking," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she analyzes the young girl's attraction for and fear of the Erlking.

In 1782 Johannes von Goethe wrote his lyrical poem "The Erl King" about a young boy riding through a dark, cold forest with his father. He is scared as he hears the entreating calls of the king of the elves, but the father refuses to validate his son's fears. The Erl King continues fruitlessly to tempt the boy with promises of games, colorful flowers, and attentive stepsisters, but the boy will not willingly join the Erl King. By the time the father and son have arrived home, the boy is dead, the Erl King having taken him through force. Almost 200 years later, Carter evoked the eeriness of this earlier work with her own "Erlking," which depicts a young girl drawn into the "heart of the wood" by a green-eyed man. Though powerfully drawn to him, both sexually and emotionally, the girl eventually will trick her seducer through his murder and her own escape.

"The Erlking" is included in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter's collection of reworked, feminist fairy tales. Alison Lurie comments on the tale in a *New York Times* article:

A recurring scenario [in Carter's fairy tales] is that of a beautiful young girl imprisoned in a remote castle by a rich, powerful, animalistic-or part-animal-man. Sometimes the heroine is destroyed; at other times she is rescued; but often she turns the tables by proving to be as passionately animal as the hero or villain.

This generalization can be further extended to apply to "The Erlking," in which the young girl is imprisoned by her own desire for her "tender butcher." In order to emerge unharmed from their relationship, she has no choice but to ruthlessly murder him. "I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair," she plans, "as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind them into ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, I shall strangle him with them."

Goethe's "Erl King," explains Marina Warner In *No Go the Bogeyman*, "personifies death as a danger above all to the young, who are credited with a more intense perception of the other world in the first place; this intimacy with the supernatural makes them vulnerable to its charms and its desires." Similarly, in Carter's "Erlking," the narrator is attuned to a whole underworld of the forest. The Erlking, who calls the girl to him by means of a bird whistle, is at the center of this world that is far away from civilized, safe society, even though the girl can easily walk the distance. As the story opens, ominous hints abound. On this day, the day the narrator will first meet the Erlking, the late fall sunlight "struck the wood with nicotine-stained fingers." She walks among "stark elders [that] have an anorexic look" into wood so dense it quickly "swallows you up." The ground below is carpeted with the "russet slime of dead bracken where the rains . . . had so soaked the earth that the cold oozed up through the soles of the shoes." A "haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being" fills the air, as does "a sickroom hush."

The narrator feels "the cold wind that always heralds your presence" but as the air "blew gentle around me, I thought that nobody was in the wood but me." It is only later, after she has become deeply involved with the Erlking, that she likens this wind to "the cold air that blows over graveyards." Despite these cues, the scene that she observes on her first meeting with the Erlking evokes innocent pleasures. He rests in a garden of beasts and birds. Animals flock to him; the "little brown bunnies with their ears laid together along their backs like spoons, crouching at his feet"; "the rusty fox . . . laid its head upon his knee"; a watching squirrel; an observant rooster; "a goat of uncanny whiteness, gleaming like a goat of snow, who turned her mild eyes towards me and bleated softly, so that he knew I had arrived." Before meeting the Erlking, the narrator was innocent and "girlish." She recalls, "How sweet I roamed, or, rather, used to roam; once I was the perfect child of the meadows of summer, but then the year turned, the light clarified and I saw the gaunt Erlking." She thus likens her attraction to the Erlking as the very perversion of her innocence as she continues to answer his call "like any other trusting thing that perches on the crook of his wrist." But, she later writes, "I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erlking would do me grievous harm." Despite her intuition, she allows him to lure her to him. In stripping her of her clothes and teaching her of desire, he also opens her eyes to the possibility of deceit, to the formidable melding of love, desire, and danger. As she admits, "[H]is touch both consoles and devastates me."

In a real sense, the danger is attractive to the girl, who relishes in her sexual subjugation to him. His larger body almost completely covers hers. The imagery she employs also shows how she prefers to conceive of herself in relationship to her seducer. More than once, she compares her nakedness to the body of a skinned rabbit. Against the Erlking and his seductive power, she becomes helpless. "Desire is dangerous because you may create out of it the cage of your own entrapment, like the young girls trapped as birds in the Erlking's cages," writes Avis Lewallen in an examination of *The Bloody Chamber* that appeared in *Perspectives on Pornography*. Because the girl does not want to become trapped by the Erlking and her own desire for him, the narrator must kill him.

The theme of entrapment is woven throughout the story, and the girl always knows just how troublesome it is. "How cruel it is, to keep wild birds in cages!" she says without realizing the enormity of that statement; these birds were once girls who had fallen under the mercy of the Erlking. His laughter at her exclamation emphasizes "his white, pointed teeth with the spittle gleaming on them." The wood that leads to the Erlking also serves as cage. "Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety." His arms become bonds, even "his embraces were his enticements and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was wove."

The Erlking's eyes also become objects of entrapment that will figuratively devour the girl and steal her away from herself. "There are some eyes can eat you," she succinctly notes. Later, she rhapsodizes on the power of these eyes:

If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection. I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be drawn down into that black whirlpool and be consumed by

you. I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty.

The idea of being physically and symbolically eaten up by the Erlking is emphasized elsewhere as well. The teeth appear again as she muses, "I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses. . . you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream." The girls who have come before, such as the baker's daughter who is now an owl, have been similarly treated. When the Erlking's death will allow the birds to go free, "they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats."

The narrator, however, is powerfully attracted to being so consumed. "I should like to grow enormously small," she says, "so that you could swallow me." The metaphor that the girl invokes immediately thereafter, however, drastically changes the tone. She says she would like the Erlking to swallow her "like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed." Then the narrator "could lodge inside your body and you would bear me out." This imagery of the Erlking becoming impregnated by the girl is powerful and disturbing. Though this fantasy arises from her desire to be enclosed in the same skin as the Erlking, in essence, he is her lover and yet she longs for him to be her father too. This paragraph raises the specter of incest, which reemerges in the story's closing line, the violin with strings fashioned out of the Erlking's hair, giving voice to his final thoughts: "Mother, mother, you have murdered me!" As Lewallen writes, "[W]e deduce from the punch-line . . . that the Erlking is also the created child of desire in an Oedipal configuration."

By the end of the story, despite the abundance of imagery implying cruelty and destruction, the narrator has again bestowed purity upon the Erlking. "But in his innocence," she says, "he never knew he might be the death of me." Indeed, the description that follows most resembles maternal tenderness.

Sometimes he lays his head on my lap and lets me comb his lovely hair for him . . . His hair falls down over my knees. Silence like a dream in front of the spitting fire while he lies at my feet and I comb the dead leaves out of his languorous hair.

The extreme quickness with which this scene turns violent only underscores the fragile but very real connection that the girl has been expressing throughout the story: the coupling of danger and desire.

In her discussion of Carter's fairy tales, Lurie makes this assessment: "Violence is always a possibility; beauty and courage and passion may prevail, but the weak and the timid go to the wall." The narrator in "The Erlking" knows that only one person can emerge from this relationship unharmed, either she or the Erlking but never both. Though she acknowledges that "I loved him with all my heart," her desire to survive is far stronger, and she rises, deceitfully, against him. In this depiction, Carter remains true to one of the basic tenets of fairy tales: there is always someone who is evil and must be vanquished. Carter's message is not surprising. As Lurie concludes, "After all, one

reason the old fairy tales have survived for hundreds of years is that they do not try to disguise what the world is really like."

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "The Erlking," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and is a copyeditor and published writer. In this essay, she looks at the feminist twists in Carter's fairytale parody of desire, death, and transformation of the virginal female by comparing it to the Brothers Grimm tale, "Little Red Cap."

In an obituary in London's *Guardian* upon Carter's death, Lorna Sage says that Carter had a "founding feminist perception." Carter was, she says, "a writer who always demonstrates how vital countercultural impulses are to the very existence of any worthwhile tradition." It is with an eye focused on both Carter's feminist perceptions and her countercultural impulses that this essay will examine her short story "The Erlking," with the "worthwhile tradition" being, in this case, the fairytale, a form that many of Carter's stories emulate.

In many of the traditional fairytales, especially those reinterpreted by the Brothers Grimm, some of the more popular moral lessons that are either obviously stated or subtly implied are directed at young, innocent, cute, and sweet little girls, of which the Grimms' tale of "Little Red Cap" is a prime example. "Once there was a dear little girl whom everyone loved," begins this particular tale. Next the fairytale normally posits a warning: the little girl is usually advised not to veer from the traditional path. In the story "Little Red Cap," it is the girl's mother who tells her, "Walk properly like a good little girl, and don't leave the path." Inevitably, in these stories, the little girl disobeys this formidable rule. She does leave the path, and although the consequences of the little girl's actions may vary, depending on the story line, the underlying moral message remains the same. According to feminist readings of these fairytales, the message behind these stories is that if little girls buck the patriarchal rule, they will be punished.

It is upon these sentiments, or rather in ridicule of them, that Carter begins "The Erlking," a fairytale kind of story with a fairytale kind of structure revolving around death, desire, and transformation, much akin to the tale of "Little Red Cap." Carter reinforces the relationship between her story and this traditional fairytale by making reference to it with this phrase in the beginning of her story: "A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood to her granny's house. . . ." ("Red Riding Hood" is the more familiar title of this story.) But there is a big difference between Carter's version and the Grimms' fairytale. The desire, death, and transformation all come about, but they come about in very dissimilar ways. Although Carter's story is also geared toward sending a chilling moral lesson, the recipient of that lesson is definitely not the little girl.

Similar to the opening of Grimms' fairytale, Carter begins "The Erlking" with a young girl at the edge of a great forest. Carter paints a very gloomy picture of the woods, using words like "dour spooks," "sulphur-yellow interstices," "nicotine- stained fingers," and "russet slime"—not especially enticing images, not ones that would draw a young woman in. In fact, she portrays an environment that a young woman might walk through very quickly, if she had to walk through it at all. "The fairytale genre," states Ruth Bushi in her essay on Carter, "teaches us to be afraid of the woods (the unmanned, female

space beyond social authority). . . ." Carter, possibly with tongue in cheek or at least duplicating the old formulaic structure of the fairytale, attempts to set up the same fear of the forest. But despite their fears, both Little Red Cap and Carter's young female protagonist enter the woods, though they step carefully, even seriously, with their eyes focused on the forest floor. As the wolf in the Grimms' story puts it to Little Red Cap: "You trudge along as solemnly as if you were going to school."

Ironically, it is the Grimms' wolf who points out the beauty of the woods to Little Red Cap. His motives, however, are not to be trusted. Unbeknownst to the young girl, he is setting a trap, distracting her so he can make it to the grandmother's house before she does. "Little Red Cap, open your eyes," says the Grimms' wolf. "What lovely flowers!" Little Red Cap does not take the subtle hint that the wolf is throwing her way. She is an innocent, trusting the wolf to a fault. She might have opened her eyes, but when she does, all she sees are the flowers, not the wolf's hidden intentions.

Carter's wolf, the Erlking, is also cunning, but he employs a different tactic; and Carter's young girl responds in a more mature way. The Erlking uses a more obvious lure—a whistle that mimics the call of a bird in distress—the sound of which goes directly to the young girl's heart. The mimicked call is "as desolate as if it came from the throat of the last bird left alive." Both Grimms' wolf and Carter's Erlking are successful in tricking their victims, but their lures work on different aspects of the female character. Whereas Little Red Cap is attracted to the flowers for their surface beauty, the young woman in Carter's story is drawn on a much deeper level, to the emotional cry, the "melancholy" of loneliness, and the possibility of a small creature's imminent death. While Little Red Cap gathers the flowers so as to bring pleasure to her grandmother, Carter's young woman senses that she is on a mission to, at the least, commiserate with the lonely bird she hears cry out. Once she sees all the birds that have been lured to the Erlking, she senses that she may have been brought there to save them. "As soon as I saw them I knew at once," states Carter's narrator, "that all its [the wood's] occupants had been waiting for me . . . "

Both Little Red Cap and Carter's protagonist have entered the woods and left the path. By leaving the path and going deeper into the wilder parts of the woods, they have disobeyed the dictates of society and must take the consequences of their actions. The woods into which they wander could be interpreted to stand for many different things. The woods could represent wildness in opposition to the organized and civilized world. On another level, they could represent the emotional as opposed to the rational mind. Whatever they represent, the young women in both of these stories are drawn to that wild space. Something in them desires to wander off the path, and it is this desire that gets them into trouble.

One of the more basic desires of young pubescent females is the sexual desire. In her essay, Bushi points out that not only does the fairytale genre try to warn young women of the dangers of the woods, it also tries to instill a fear of the wolf, "and more particularly, his genitals." There is little insinuation of sexuality in the Grimms' version of the story. Although there are older versions of this story in which the young girl does get into bed with the wolf, in the Grimms' story, the wolf jumps out of bed and consumes the

young girl while she stands there in disbelief, so innocent that she thinks that the costumed wolf is her grandmother. "Poor Little Red Cap," says the narrator. The sexuality has been written out of the Grimms' version, but whether she was raped or consumed by the wolf, Little Red Cap is definitely a victim in this story; and she must be rescued by yet another male hunter. So startled is she by all the activities around her, all the consequences of her bad judgment and misbehavior, that she declares at the end of the Grimms' story that "never again will I leave the path and run off into the wood when my mother tells me not to."

Oh, how different is Carter's version! To begin with, sexuality is strongly implicit. And not only is it implicit but the young protagonist, although possibly under the control of the Erlking's seduction, is an accepting partner. "Now, when I go for walks . . . I always go to the Erlking . . . where I lie at the mercy of his huge hands. . . . Off come all my clothes." It is through the sexual act that the young girl becomes a woman. "Once I was the perfect child of the meadows of summer, but then the year turned . . . and I saw the gaunt Erlking, tall as a tree . . . and he drew me towards him. . . . He strips me to my last nakedness." It is at this point, in the traditional fairytale that the couple lives happily ever after. Once the virgin has lost her hymen, she becomes a possession of the male. Carter illustrates this typical fairytale condition in her story by creating the Erlking's collection of birds trapped in cages. Unlike the innocence of Little Red Cap, Carter's young woman is well aware of the fact that the new cage that the Erlking is making has been earmarked to eventually cage her.

But she cannot resist the Erlking. She goes back and back again. But strangely, in one scene, the narrator declares, "I lie above him," and it is from this point in the story that, despite the tremendous lure of the Erlking, the young woman begins to gain perspective and a sense of self. She begins to realize the power of his gaze and to understand that his eyes are like a "reducing chamber." In other words, she is beginning to comprehend, through the reflection of herself in his eyes, that he sees her as powerless, and it is through this image of herself that she also foresees her destiny of eventually becoming caged. If she does not commit herself to forcing a change, she knows that she will "become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty." If she remains submissive and diminutive, as Little Red Cap did, she will become yet another victim.

"Sometimes he lays his head on my lap," the narrator says, and a couple of sentences later, the narrator reports that the Erlking "lies at my feet." Lower and lower he drops as the young girl gains more power in herself. There is also the birth of another strong desire in the woman, and it is the desire for revenge. Before the woman is consciously aware of how she will save herself, she knows for a fact that even if the Erlking succeeds in caging her, she will not sing for him. "I shall sit, hereafter, in my cage among the other singing birds but I—shall be dumb, from spite," she says.

But Carter's young woman is not dumb, neither in the colloquial meaning of not being very smart nor in being silent: "Lay your head on my knee so that I can't see the greenish inward-turning suns of your eyes any more," she tells the Erlking. She does not want to be lured by his eyes. She does not want to identify with his definition of her.

She wants literally to take matters into her own hands. She needs neither man nor hunter to rescue her. She has discovered that she can be just as cunning as a wolf. She uses what is available—the long hair of the Erlking—and strangles him.

In an interesting twist, the last words of the story have the once-unstrung violin, which the young girl restrings with strands from the Erlking's hair, cry out: "Mother, mother, you have murdered me!" Thus the male cries out from beyond his veil of death to his mother, or possibly to matriarchy itself, admonishing her but at the same time acknowledging her power. In her way, Carter may be anticipating a future generation of women singing, "Patriarchy is dead. Long live the queen."

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "The Erlking," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

List some of the adjectives that Carter uses to describe the woods and natural environment in "The Erlking." What is Carter's attitude toward nature? How does this differ from your ideas about nature?

The narrator feels entrapped and diminished by the Erlking, but she is also drawn to him. Do you think she would have preferred to remain innocent, a "perfect child of the meadows of summer," as she had been before she met him? Describe what benefits she may have derived from her relationship with him.

Carter was an outspoken but unconventional feminist. What does "The Erlking" suggest about the relations between men and women? What possible feminist messages may be within the story?

Discuss the symbolism of the silent violin. Why, when strung with the Erlking's hair, does it cry out, "Mother, mother you have murdered me!"?

Research one or more of the fairy tales from which "The Erlking" derives. What are some of the most significant changes that Carter has made to the original storie

What Do I Read Next?

Wise Children (1991), Carter's last novel, is also considered one of her best. Telling the story of twin sisters who are showgirls, the novel is an ironic and comic comment on family, theater, and the place of Shakespeare in Western culture.

Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book (1987), a set of classic, folkloric fairy tales from around the world, collected and edited by Carter, centers on the struggles and triumphs of female protagonists.

Spells of Enchantment (1991), edited by Jack Zipes, is an extensive collection of fairy tales from the Western tradition, spanning the contributions of Ancient Greek antecedents and contemporary revisions.

The Tales of Hoffman (1990), a recent anthology of nineteenth-century German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann's bizarre and grotesque tales, was translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Hoffmann's in- fluential and unsettling stories inspired psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's theory of "The Uncanny."

Red as Blood, or Tales from the Grimmer Sisters (1983), by science fiction and fantasy writer Tanith Lee, is a morbid and macabre collection of classic fairy tales that have been revised from a feminist perspective.

The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Tales (1997) is a sophisticated take on the fairy tale genre by British writer A. S. Byatt. It narrates the enchanted events that transform a middle- aged linguistics professor's life.

The Robber Bride (1993), by Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, is a gender-reversing story of revenge inspired by Grimm's fairy tale "The Robber Bridegroom."

Further Study

Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Significance of Fairy Tales*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Any student interested in fairy tales should be familiar with this influential study of their symbolic meanings and psychological significance. Though Carter often disagreed with Bettelheim's conclusions, they surely influenced her.

Carter, Angela, *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, Virago, 1982.

A collection of Carter's nonfiction, this volume sheds light on the author's views on feminism, politics, and literature, as well as offering some interesting autobiographical insight.

Lee, Allison, *Angela Carter*, Twayne Publishers, 1997.

Though it focuses primarily on her novels rather than her short stories, this brief, clearly written study is a helpful introduction to the themes and issues driving Carter's imagination.

Sage, Lorna, *Angela Carter*, Northcote House, 1994.

This literary biography was written by one of Carter's earliest critics, who was also a close friend. It discusses the relationship between themes in her fiction and events in her life.

Warner, Marina, *From the Beast to the Blonde: Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Vintage, 1995.

While this well-known volume contains only a few specific references to Carter's writing, its comprehensive analysis of fairy tale themes and devices is broadly applicable to her work.

Bibliography

Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, Longman, 1997.

Bushi, Ruth, "Consum[ma/p]tion: Beastly Sex," in *The Bloody Chamber*, at http://members.tripod.co.uk/thaz/carter. html (2000).

Carter, Angela, ed., *Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, Pantheon Books, 1990.

Craig, Patricia, "Gory," in *New Statesman*, May 25, 1979, p. 726.

Duncker, Patricia, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers," in *Literature and History*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 1984, pp. 3-14.

Friedman, Alan, "Pleasure and Pain," in *New York Times Book Review*, February 17, 1980, pp. 14-15.

Haffenden, John, *Novelists in Interview*, Methuen, 1989.

Lee, Allison, *Angela Carter*, Twayne Publishers, 1997.

Manheim, Ralph, trans., "Little Red Cap," in *Grimms' Tales for Young and Old*, Anchor Press, 1977.

Sage, Lorna, "The Soaring Imagination," in *The Guardian*, February 17, 1992.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535