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CRITICAL APPROACHES

CONTEXT

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (seventeenth edition, 2007) notes that in German legend the erl-king is 'a malevolent goblin who haunts forests and lures people, especially children, to destruction. ... Erlking means "king of the alders" but has popularly been understood to mean "elf king".'

CONTEXT

Legends concerning shape-shifters can be found in many cultures. Whether it be the Celtic selkie or the Native American Nanabozho or the Greek Zeus, the notion that the world cannot be trusted is expressed in many ways. Occasionally the shape-shifter is benign, but more often than not the monster is selfish and mostly malign.

CHARACTERISATION

It is partly the nature of the short story as a **narrative** form for characters to be defined by the use of carefully selected detail. Carter is not creating her characters from a blank sheet; many of the characters in this collection are stock characters from fairy-tale convention dressed in new clothes. Some are amalgamations of a wider variety of recognisable character types drawn from other literary genres. The Erl-King is the most singular character in the tales as a whole; he is a kind of pagan wood spirit, elusively representing a complex combination of ideas about nature (see **Extended commentaries: Text 2** and **Themes: Man, woman and nature** for more on 'The Erl-King'). Carter allows some of the characters to perform the role of **narrator**, though none of them tell their stories in exactly the same way. Transformation and metamorphosis are the key functions of Carter's characters: some are shape-shifters; others are disguised or masked in one way or another. The revelation of the true identity of Carter's characters is often accomplished through a thoroughly other-worldly moment of magic.

The women in *The Bloody Chamber* are in general given domestic roles without economic definition, whether they be aristocrats, petits bourgeois or peasants. The men are mostly figures of authority whose power or wealth has been inherited in one way or another. These Notes will consider together those who take the role of narrator and **protagonist**; the villainous patriarchs and the male characters who are predators; the male characters who are less threatening; the positive and negative models of motherhood; the few female characters who may be seen as victims of their circumstances; the female characters that represent the vivacity of life; and the clearest example Carter gives of the attractions and reciprocal identities of the human animal.

THE NARRATOR PROTAGONIST

A protagonist is usually taken to be the first character to act or the principal character causing most of the events in a story to be enacted. The question of who has the initiative at any moment in her stories is one that Carter returns to again and again. She wants to show who has the power to make things happen. The new bride in 'The Bloody Chamber', the girl in 'The Tiger's Bride' and the **eponymous** character in 'Puss-in-Boots' all narrate the events of their stories as a first person narrative. Each of these narrators could not be more different, however.

The bride of 'The Bloody Chamber' recalls the process by which her innocence was stripped away from her. She introduces her experience as a sequence of remembered moments. Her narration begins with a flashback through linked memories (on the train, thinking of her mother alone at home, the delivery of the wedding dress, the courtship, going to the opera on the night before her wedding), though the tale generally follows a traditional chronological recounting of events. She is a creature of sensations, delighting in the description of the '**impeccable linen of the pillow**' (p. 1); the gift of her mother's black silk dress '**with the dull, prismatic sheen of oil on water**' (p. 1); her satin nightdress, '**supple as a garment of heavy water**' (p. 2); and the Marquis's kiss '**with tongue and teeth in it**' (p. 2). She questions the appearance of things around her, being particularly attracted to the Marquis by the disturbing, '**absolute absence of light**' in his eyes and the notion that his face '**seemed ... like a mask**' (p. 3). She only glimpses sight of the truth about the Marquis – and herself – in '**gilded mirrors**': '**And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me**' (p. 6). In the many mirrors set in '**stately frames of contorted gold**' that surround the Marquis's bed she becomes a '**multitude of girls**', a '**harem**' for the Marquis to enjoy (p. 10). She reports the moment of consummation of her marriage through the reflections in the mirrors, as if she only exists in the Marquis's frame of vision.

When left alone, her idle existence as a rich man's wife is oppressive. The creative act of making music is her escape, her gift of self-creation and self-realisation. After she has discovered the truth of the secret room, she copes with the imminent threat to her life by adopting the '**therapeutic task**' (p. 30) of playing some challenging

 CHECK THE NET

Visit <http://en.thinkexist.com> for a wide range of quotations from Carter. Go to 'Authors'; writers are listed alphabetically by first names.

World events	Angela Carter's life	Literary events
<p>1939 Second World War begins</p> <p>1940 British Expeditionary Force rescued from Dunkirk beaches by naval and civilian fleet; assassination of Leon Trotsky</p>	<p>1940 Born 7 May in Eastbourne; evacuated to South Yorkshire</p>	<p>1939 James Joyce, <i>Finnegans Wake</i></p> <p>1940 Graham Greene, <i>The Power and the Glory</i>; Edmund Wilson, <i>To the Finland Station</i></p>
<p>1944 D-Day landings; Education Act raises school leaving age to fifteen</p> <p>1945 End of Second World War; welfare state in Britain introduced</p>	<p>1945 Family moves to Balham, south London</p>	<p>1941 Bertolt Brecht, <i>Mother Courage and Her Children</i></p>
<p>1946 Cold war begins</p>	<p>1951 Passes eleven plus exam; attends 'direct grant' school</p>	<p>1945 George Orwell, <i>Animal Farm</i>; Tennessee Williams's <i>The Glass Menagerie</i> opens on Broadway</p> <p>1946 Mervyn Peake, <i>Titus Groan</i></p> <p>1947 J. B. Priestley, <i>An Inspector Calls</i></p> <p>1948 T. S. Eliot awarded Nobel Prize</p> <p>1949 Simone de Beauvoir, <i>The Second Sex</i></p> <p>1951 J. D. Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i></p>
<p>1947 India gains independence from Britain</p> <p>1948 Establishment of National Health Service</p>		<p>1954 Kingsley Amis, <i>Lucky Jim</i>; William Golding, <i>Lord of the Flies</i></p>
<p>1951 Festival of Britain; Winston Churchill resigns as prime minister</p> <p>1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II</p>		

World events	Angela Carter's life	Literary events
<p>1956 Hungarian revolution crushed by Soviet military intervention</p>	<p>1957 Anorexia affects academic performance</p> <p>1958 Works as reporter for <i>Croydon Advertiser</i></p>	<p>1955 Samuel Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> (English translation); Vladimir Nabokov, <i>Lolita</i></p>
<p>1958 Empire Day renamed Commonwealth Day; Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) formed</p> <p>1959 Revolution in Cuba brings Fidel Castro to power</p>	<p>1960 Marries Paul Carter</p>	<p>1957 Jack Kerouac, <i>On the Road</i></p> <p>1958 Harold Pinter, <i>The Birthday Party</i></p>
<p>1961 Berlin Wall built</p>	<p>1962 Studies English at Bristol University</p>	<p>1960 Penguin Books acquitted in obscenity trial for publication of D. H. Lawrence's <i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i></p> <p>1961 Joseph Heller, <i>Catch-22</i></p> <p>1962 Anthony Burgess, <i>A Clockwork Orange</i></p> <p>1963 Betty Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i></p> <p>1964 A. S. Byatt, <i>Shadow of a Sun</i>; Philip Larkin, <i>The Whitsun Weddings</i></p>
<p>1962 Cuban missile crisis</p>	<p>1965 Gains BA in English</p>	<p>1966 Jean Rhys, <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>; Susan Sontag, <i>Against Interpretation</i></p>
<p>1963 President John F. Kennedy assassinated</p>	<p>1966 Begins reviews for <i>New Society</i> and the <i>Guardian</i>; first novel, <i>Shadow Dance</i>, published</p>	
<p>1965 Death of Winston Churchill; abolition of death penalty; US openly enters Vietnam War</p>		