**The Erl-King Study Guide**

**Summary**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jwcg_Vqhe_Y>

* The story starts in the late October forest, followed by a description of what it is like to walk through the woods alone. The forest having an air impending death, are desolate and unwelcoming to people, because there are no manmade tracks to follow there.
* The narrator then hears the sound of the Erl-Kings pipe and warns that “The Erl-king will do you grievous harm”. She then steps into a "darkening clearing" where the Erl-King sits among the forest creatures as if in a trance, as the Erl-King touches her with "his irrevocable hand" and shows her the ways of the forest.
* The narrator then visits the Erl-King every time he calls her into the woods with his birdcall to learn his ways and make love to him.
* Then she discovers that he is weaving a cage for her and realizes that the Erl-Kings birds do not actually sing but rather wail because they are imprisoned and lost, in fact the other girls which the Erl-King has lured into the forest and trapped.
* The narrator ends the story by describing her plan to kill the Erl-King - "I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking ... I shall strangle him with them."
* Finally, the story shifts to third person, explaining that the heroine will free all the birds to turn them back human. She will then cut off the Erl-Kings hair and use it to string the old fiddle which will then play of its own accord, "Mother, mother, you have murdered me!"

**Intertextual references**

* ‘The Erl King’ – Geothe
	+ The story is centered on a German legend rather than a fairy tale, where a malignant goblin haunts the Black Forest and lures wanderers to their doom.
	+ <http://www.online-literature.com/donne/1648/>
* Red Riding Hood
	+ The line “What big eyes you have” reminds us of the fairy tale origins of innocence and experience with which Carter is playing and the Erl-Kings predatory nature. Which is enhanced by the brief echoes of childish language such as “skin the rabbit”, to remind us of the childish origins of such stories and offer an ironic and disturbing counterpoint to the sexual subject matter.
* Emily Dickinson love poem
	+ “Light is sufficient to itself”
	+ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/light-is-sufficient-to-itself/>
* Rossetti Goblin Market
	+ Story of a sister who succumbs to the appetite of desire.
	+ “Eat me, drink me, love me; Laura make much of me” and “Goblin ridden”
	+ <http://plexipages.com/reflections/goblin.html>
* The Green Man – myth
	+ The Green Man is often perceived as an ancient Celtic symbol. In Celtic mythology, he is a god of spring and summer. He disappears and returns year after year, century after century, enacting themes of death and resurrection and links with the characterisation of the Erl-King.
	+ <http://www.dl.ket.org/humanities/connections/class/medren/greenman.htm>
* Dracula
	+ Use of vampires and werewolf imagery. “White pointed teeth” and “eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes” – portrays animalistic nature of the Erl-King.
* Garden of Eden
	+ It is possible to interpret the green apples of the Erl-King’s eyes with the traditional symbol of temptation in the Garden of Eden. The Erl-King thus becomes identified with temptation and original sin to the reader.
* Robert Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover’
	+ An obsessive male lover strangles Porphyria with her own hair.
	+ Carter inverts the role by having the female doing the strangling, in fitting with the gothic theme of Corruption of innocence.
	+ <http://www.love-poems.me.uk/browning_robert_porphyrias_lover_l.htm>

**Characters**

* The Narrator
	+ Just like all of Carters other stories in the bloody chamber the narrator is nameless.
	+ The story starts with a reference to a specific time (“this afternoon”) suggesting a story, in a narrative voice which is that of mature, artistically-conscious adult.
	+ The narrator describes the Erl king as "tender butcher" as she knows that he is both her lover and destroyer similary to how his touch “consoles and devastates”. She "colludes in erecting the bars of the golden cage" because she indulges the Erl-King in his desire to control and even consume her, allowing him to call her naked body a 'skinned rabbit' and to bite her neck. She believes that the Erl-King can enlighten her by consuming her; she wishes, "I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me ... Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me." However, while other heroines in Carter's stories find happiness in relationships with men, the narrator of The Erl-King rejects them entirely and comes to the conclusion of killing the Erl-King to supplant male domination with female domination.
	+ At the end when the girl is forced to confront her own dark side in the woods of the imagination, the linguistic experience of reading is so rich that we, the readers, undergo a similar experience and are able to identify with the narrator.

* The Erl-King
	+ The Erl-King is introduced using the present tense (“He smiles”), and the narrators experience of the Erl-King is made to seem immediate, ongoing and something which we can all experience through this present tense experience, therefore we in turn are drawn to the Erl-King just as the narrator is.
	+ The Erl King: Seems to be at one with nature, a part of the forest. ‘He knows all about the wood and the creatures in it’. Physical description of the Erl King creates the image of a tree, ‘hair that is the colour of dead leaves, dead leaves fall out of it’. The way in which the birds come to rest on him, as if the branches of a tree. ‘Like a tree that bears bloom and fruit’
	+ The way that all the animals collect around the Erl-King gives the impression of him as a beneficent god of the woods. His pet is a fox, suggesting both his taming of all things wild, but also the Erl-Kings cunning; a white (innocent) goat (traditionally associated with sexual appetite) announces to the Erl-King the girl’s arrival. He is skilled in the ways of the wood, keeps his modest house with a womanly touch and smiles a greeting: but he is also the “butcher” albeit a “tender” one with “pointed teeth” which give an uncomfortable reminder of his wolfish counterparts. The presentation is entirely ambivalent.
	+ As someone who "came alive from the desire of the woods," the Erl-King is at harmony with nature. Every animal seems to obey him. He cooks with weeds and fungi, and makes cheese from his goat's milk. A house is typically a symbol of civilization, but the Erl-King's house attracts and blends in with the nature around it; his roof "has grown a pelt of yellow lichen" and "grass and weeds grow in the mossy roof." His very eyes embody the death-in-life quality of the woods. They are both "as green as apples" and "as green as dead sea fruit"; even though they are the color of life and growth, they are "dead."Nature cooperates with the Erl-King; if nature is deathly in the story, then the Erl-King is death's ruler. The Erl-King and the nature around him represent the standing order of things in the narrator's universe. In the reality of the woods, he is the dominating male and she is the submissive female whom he traps.

**Setting**

* The setting is very important in creating the tense atmosphere in ‘The Erl-King’, as she devotes 2 pages at the start describing the setting of the forest to create a gloomy threatening scene.
* The forest represents the subconscious, a place of darkness away from ‘civilising’ influences, where the narrator figure discovers and confronts alternative aspects of her personality. It is the Erl-king himself who comes to symbolize this alternative personality.
* The colours are dull and “discoloured” giving a sense of decay and death. Overall the setting created is very depressing and typically gothic – “dead bracken”, saddest time of the year”, “sulphur yellow” and “nicotine stained figers”.

**Gothic Themes**

* Entrapment/Isolation
	+ Central to the theme entrapment is the image of the caged birds which the Erl-King keeps. They are trapped in the cages just as the narrator is trapped in the enclosed wood. “Vertical bars of a brass-coloured distillation of light coming down” resemble a cage like quality and therefore foreshadow the narrator’s fate.
	+ Additionally Carter develops the feelings of entrapment further as the narrator never exits the woods and the reader is the same denied exit from the woods as the use of “You” in the opening paragraphs situates the reader inescapably inside.
	+ The Liminality of the setting between autumn and winter, sets the tale as if there is no particular time and the idea of being stuck/trapped but also mimics how the narrator is split into two by her desire for the Erl-King, yet the knowing that he will do her “grievous harm”.
* Power of Nature
	+ A feeling of claustrophobia/entrapment is created in Carter’s description of the overbearing forest - ‘Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again’. This enforces the idea that nature is in control, by personifying the forest and making it seem above the powers of human control. Also as the Erl-King is associated with nature and over powers it, it asserts his dominance and power from the start.
* Transformation
	+ The stripping of the narrator is employed as an image of transformation from her journey from a child to becoming a woman. Linked with the corruption of innocence, transformation is a typically gothic theme that carter reinterprets. Sex and violence collide in an act of transformation. In "The Erl-King," the transformation is negative; sex with the Erl-King precedes enslavement. But the heroine manages to avoid violence against herself by wreaking violence upon the Erl-King.
	+ The sound of the Erl-King's bird call mimics the narrator’s journey/transformation. The first call sounds like "girlish and delicious loneliness ... made into a sound." In contrast, the second call sounds "as desolate as if it came from the throat of the last bird alive." The first call is that of the free bird, the independent woman, and the second is that of the caged bird, the subjugated woman, the "silly, fat, trusting [woody] with the pretty wedding [ring] round [her neck.]"
* Love
	+ Carter draws on Romantic ideas in the whole of The Bloody Chamber. However, while the Romantics looked to nature as a source of spiritual enlightenment and life, in The Erl-King, it is a source of confinement and death.
* Sexuality/Corruption of innocence
	+ Carter explores female sexual freedom and challenges society’s views on the way a woman should act. In The Erl-King she does this by portraying the narrator’s confusion between the desire and disgust for the Erl-King and forms ideas of sex leading to death.
* Timelessness
	+ As you become lost as a reader due to the constant shift in tense and narrative, time becomes undefined, linking to the idea of mortality and renewal of the green man.
* Magic realism
	+ The Erl-King appears magically turn the narrator into a trance like state, and possess power over the narrator and even the surrounding nature. The narrator knowledgeably goes into the forest despite knowing that the Erl-King will do her “grievous harm” and without the supernatural concept that she in fact had no control being drawn to the Erl-King, it could affect the sympathy we feel for the narrator, and therefore the reaction to the Erl-Kings death.

**Symbols**

* Eyes
	+ “The black vortex of his eye, the omission of light at the centre, there, that exerts on me such a tremendous pressure, it draws me inwards.” –Eyes in the Erl-king and other stories such as ‘The Bloody Chamber’ represent how the male consumes the female both physically and in terms of destroying her independence and identity, by the way that the male visual desire determines how a women looks.
* Masks
	+ The vortex eye, is similar to the marquis in ‘The Bloody Chamber’, gives a sinister feel and links with the gothic theme of secrets.
* Hair
	+ Hair is often mentioned and is a symbol of masculine strength, so when the narrator cuts the Erl-Kings it represents female dominance overcoming male dominance, similar to how the bicycle is a symbol of masculinity in ‘The Lady and the House of Love’
* Clothing
	+ The stripping away of layers is important to the idea of entrapment. Layers of clothing are removed to reveal the rawer and real human underneath to explore women’s traditionally defined role in society as a wife, provider and innocent. Also, the Erl-king uses the metaphor of “skin the rabbit” to take off the narrators clothes, previously being compared to a fox, this enhances his predatory side and dominance over the narrator.
* Colour
	+ The green colour is often associated with renewal.
* Birds
	+ Usually seen to represent freedom, they are trapped by the Erl-King, this shows his control over nature and enhances themes of isolation.
* The Ring around the birds neck
	+ Similar to the decapitation reference and choker in ‘The Bloody Chamber’, represents the control and mimic the strangling of the Erl-King.

**Narrative**

* From the tale's beginning, slipping pronouns and sliding tenses suggest that "The Erl-King" is, in Daphne Marlatt's terms, a "labyrinth of language". On one level, "The Erl-King" is a series of broken contracts between writer and reader. Like the young girl who voyages trustingly into the woods on a visit to granny, the reader cracks the spine of this tale with certain expectations of intelligibility. Just as the girl never reaches granny's house, the reader is similarly refused everything from a fixed ending to a clear differentiation of one narrator from another. The confusion only increases with the realization that Carter's pronouns produce the reader as a character. The third-person narrator's early assertion, for example, that "You step between the fir trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up" situates the reader firmly within the woods.
* The tense shift from past, present and future also adds confusion to the story, giving the reader the same confusion of emotions as the narrator so that we can emphasise with her more. This change in tense may also contribute the idea of mortality and time, linking to the ideal of renewal presented by the green man.

**Key Quotes –**

* “perfect transparency must be impenetrable” (pg. 96)
* “Vertical bars of a brass-coloured distillation of light coming down from sulphur yellow interstices” (pg. 96)
* “You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the woods swallow you up” (pg96)
* “It is easy to lose yourself in these woods”(pg. 97)
* “Erl-king will do you grievous harm” (pg. 97)
* “There are some eyes can eat you” (pg. 98)
* “He came alive from the desire of the woods” (pg. 98)
* “white pointed teeth” (pg. 99)
* “all its strings are broken” (pg. 100)
* “he could thrust me into the see-bed of next year’s generation” (pg. 100)
* “He strips me to my last nakedness” (pg. 102)
* “His touch both consoles and devastates me” (pg. 102)
* “black vortex of his eye” (pg. 103)
* “green eye is a reducing chamber” (pg. 103)
* “I know the birds don’t sing, they only cry because they can’t find their way out of the wood” (pg. 103)
* “each with the crimson imprint of his love bite on their throats” (pg. 104)
* “Mother, mother, you have murdered me!” (pg. 104)