

# Differences in carter's version of "the erl- king"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

When reading through Goethe's version of "The Erl-King," then Carter's, it is striking how different many of the core elements are between the two stories. Major changes Carter has made include the introduction of a female character and the narrative voice which becomes first person rather than the third person narrator Goethe uses. Although obvious, the length of Carter's story has a profound effect on the entire meaning of the story and the overall message; Goethe by presenting the myth in a short poem can present the morals of the story very simplistically. The fact that the Father should trust his Son is clear to the reader and the general warning that the Erl-King is dangerous is equally clear. In contrast, any morals in Carter's 9-page story are almost impossible to derive; she makes the plot more complex through stronger characterisation, which is only possible through an extended story. However, Carter by no means forgets the origins of the original myth and often references it through slightly archaic and not so contemporary syntax such as 'The Erl-King will do you grievous harm.' Carter also makes the reader aware that her story is based off an original myth through classic fairy tale lines such as, "What big eyes you have."

Another truth that runs through both stories is that the character of the Erl-King has many desirable virtues; he is not a simple antagonist or villain. For example the reader can only realise that Goethe's Erl-King is evil through the medium of the small child, if the techniques of "!" and strong imperatives were not included when the child speaks, then the audience's view of the Erl-King would be one of caring and generosity. The Erl-King offers 'gold' and 'care' which seems better than the Father's constant ignorance towards the child's fears. It could even be argued that the Erl-King saves the child and

gives him happiness. Humanity does not understand death and is unaware of what happens after it, but Goethe's Erl-King is the master of death and maybe knows that the child will be happier after death, whatever that may entail. The narrator in Carter's tale even argues directly to the audience that the Erl-King could be considered good or at the very least not to blame for the crimes he commits. She describes his hair as ' beautiful' and his eyes as ' life' , these are descriptions that one would give to a stereotypical male hero of a fairytale, one who comes and saves a damsel in distress. Carter may be including these descriptions to pay homage to the incomprehensible character in Goethe's version, a character that either saves or hurts the child; an answer the audience can never know. Carter also adds to the parallel between her and Goethe's Erl-King by making the Erl-King possibly evil as well; her description also comprises of phrases like ' his touch both consoles and devastates me' which is highly similar to how the child in Goethe's poem feels. In both versions the Erl-King is defined only by how other characters react to him, whether it is fear or sexual lust.

Despite Carter using some elements from Goethe's original the different narrative voice creates a wholly different story. The exploration of feminism is brought in through this technique as the female narrator struggles to decide whether the Erl-King is good or bad. The best description of him is probably a ' tender butcher' which is interesting because it is the first time Carter presents a man as perhaps being unable to objectify women, although the Erl-King does it so obviously through his collection of birds. The birds represent women becoming play things of men when they were free spirits. But Carter suggests the Erl-King cannot help himself because he epitomises

nature which is presented as dark; completely opposite to how romantic poets such as Keats presented it. Nature created him so he is nature in a humanoid form; it is only nature that scares the woman. The theme of threat is introduced as soon as she enters the woods, not when she sees the Erl-King; the line ' bars of light' foreshadow the fate nature has in store for her. This idea of Erl-King being in tune with nature is not included in Goethe's poem and neither is the exploration into how a woman can become the dominator in the relationship through powerful acts, such as the murder of the Erl-King.

One final similarity between the texts is clear at the end of the story. The female narrator suddenly changes her style of relaying the story back to the reader; she begins to state what ' she' will do not what " I have done". This gives the story an ambiguous end because we as a reader are unsure whether she did actually kill the Erl-King or only planned to; she could be in a cage at the end of the story. This ambiguity can be seen in Goethe's version as well because we, as readers, do not know the true fate of the child.