

## ***On Narrative Focalization, Textual Ambiguity and Contradiction in Angela Carter's The Erl-King***

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how shifts in narrative focalization in Angela Carter's *The Erl-King* contributes to the text's ambiguity and contradiction. It analyzes the ambiguous fusion between the narrating-I and the experiencing-I within the first-person narration, revealing the narrator's psychological conflict and the complexity of female desire. Furthermore, it explores the abrupt transitions between first-person and omniscient narration, which destabilize narrative reliability and blur the boundary between reality and fantasy. While these techniques highlight female agency and resistance, they also suspend the reality of key plot elements, undermining the story's coherence and political force. The study argues that the ambiguity and contradiction produced by focalization shifts exemplify what critics have termed the "political weakness" in Carter's narrative strategy, aligning with views that her non-realist style diminishes serious political critique. Thus, the narrative focalization not only enriches textual tension but also exposes the limits of its feminist subversion.

**Keywords:** Narrative Focalization; *The Erl-King*; Angela Carter

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### **Introduction**

Angela Carter's *The Erl-King* is a short story included in the collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. The story apparently recounts a simple tale: a naive girl who enters the forest and is bewitched and deceived by the Erl-King, but eventually escapes the predicament and kills him. While the plot summary seems straightforward, scholarly debate persists regarding the reality of the girl's experiences and perceptions, and whether she truly kills the Erl-King in the end. Alongside this skepticism, "the same critics who praise these stylistic traits in Carter call attention to an alleged political weakness in the narrative strategies used by the British writer" [1]. Examples include Paulina Palmer's assertion that "Carter's texts are 'frequently masculinist in association'" [2], and Terry Lovell's conclusion that "non-realist writing frequently 'connotes' not to be taken seriously. It licenses escape, fantasy, pleasure" [3]. This suggests that Angela Carter's presentation of the story as fantastical, unreal, and ambiguous weakens its political potency (such as advocating for feminism). The narrative focalization of this story substantiates aspects of these viewpoints, contributing to the text's ambiguous and contradictory nature. This paper examines the shifts in narrative focalization within the story, arguing that these shifts embody the text's ambiguity and contradiction. The story primarily employs a first-person narration, interspersed with shifts to different perspectives, occurring both within and between narrative modes.

### **1. Contradictory Psychology: The Fusion of the Narrating-I and Experiencing-I**

Firstly, the ambiguity within the narrative mode, specifically between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I, reveals the narrator's contradictory psychology. The opening paragraph is an extended description of the setting: "The lucidity, the clarity of the light that afternoon was sufficient to itself; perfect transparency must be impenetrable...It struck the wood with nicotine-stained fingers, the leaves glittered" [4]. The phrase "that afternoon" and the use of past tense establish a specific time, seemingly implying the story recounts real events. This alone cannot confirm first-person narration; readers might initially assume an omniscient narrator. However, another passage strongly supports this first-person narration. In the fourth paragraph: "...The trees threaded a cat's cradle of half-stripped branches over me so that I felt I was in a house of nets and though the cold wind that always heralds your presence, had I but known it then, blew gentle around me, I thought that nobody was in the wood but me" [4]. The clause "had I but known it then" demonstrates the narrator using the narrating-I to describe the feelings of the experiencing-I while simultaneously reflecting introspectively on that past self. This clearly establishes the story's

use of the dual focalization of first-person narration, a point further supported by later perspective usage. As Shen Dan argues, “In first-person retrospective narration, there can be two different narrative perspectives. One is the perspective of the narrating-I recalling past events in the present; the other is the perspective of the experiencing-I undergoing the events in the past” [5]. Given the evidence from the fourth paragraph, the environmental description and evaluative terms following “that afternoon” in the first paragraph are likely the narrating-I recalling past perceptions. The latter part of the first paragraph then uses “now” and present tense, seemingly shifting the reader back to the perspective of the experiencing-I:

Now the stark elders have an anorexic look; there is not much in the autumn wood to make you smile but it is not yet, not quite yet, the saddest time of the year. Only, there is a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being; the year, in turning, turns in on itself. Introspective weather, a sickroom hush<sup>[4]</sup>.

Close examination reveals this passage contains subjective, evaluative words like “anorexic” and “saddest time”. Furthermore, the concluding sentences (“Only, there is a haunting sense...sickroom hush”) summarize the narrator’s overall impression of the autumnal forest, clearly representing a reflective commentary. “Generally, in first-person narration, summarizing passages tend to be retrospective in nature”<sup>[5]</sup>. The use of “you” here might suggest a shift in mode, but Shen Dan advises: “When analyzing perspective, we should not classify based simply on narrative person, but on the nature of the focalization”<sup>[5]</sup>. This “you” is more likely the narrating-I addressing the reader or issuing a warning to the experiencing-I, with the forest’s oppressive atmosphere foreshadowing the story’s darkness. Similar uses of “you” appear in the opening paragraphs. For instance, following the fourth paragraph’s conclusion, “the cold wind that always heralds your presence, had I but known it then, blew gentle around me, I thought that nobody was in the wood but me”<sup>[4]</sup>, the narrating-I describes the experiencing-I’s perception of the wind and her sense of isolation. Simultaneously, the narrating-I, from a more mature present perspective, highlights the experiencing-I’s naivety. However, the focalization of the next, standalone sentence is unclear: “Erl-King will do you grievous harm”<sup>[4]</sup>. The focalizer could be the narrating-I, the experiencing-I, or an overlap of both. Given the primary narrative mode, if the former, it’s a warning to the experiencing-I; if the latter, it represents free indirect discourse, implying that the experiencing-I already knew the Erl-King would harm her; or that the girl knew this from the very beginning. The last interpretation proves more accurate later in the story. After a period of happiness with the Erl-King, the girl realizes his intent:

When I realized what the Erl-King meant to do to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear and I did not know what to do for I loved him with all my heart and yet I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages.....although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm<sup>[4]</sup>.

This sentence begins with the narrating-I’s focalization (“When I realized what...”). Then, The experiencing-I’s focalization then emerges (“I was shaken with a terrible fear...”), yet the narrating-I’s focalization remains, stating explicitly that the girl knew the Erl-King would harm her severely from the very first moment (“although I knew... grievous harm”). Here, the experiencing-Is’ is also embedded within the narrating-Is’. Both focalizers recognize the Erl-King’s danger. Therefore, the earlier “Erl-King will do you grievous harm”<sup>[4]</sup> is a statement emanating from both the narrating-I and the experiencing-I. The narrator knowingly enters the Erl-King’s trap, constrained by desire. The ambiguous focalization in the opening creates a sense of uncertainty, foreshadowing the story’s pervasive ambiguity. Sentences like this standalone one and the passage above exemplify the fusion of narrating-I and experiencing-I (this paper cites only these two instances), simultaneously exposing the narrator’s ambivalence towards the Erl-King and revealing the complexity of female desire. “The girl’s desire leads to her submission, but when she realizes she will be imprisoned in a cage to please the Erl-King, she vows not to sing, refusing passive victimhood”<sup>[6]</sup>, becoming the “active rather than passive female subject”<sup>[7]</sup> Carter constructs.

## **2. Textual Ambiguity: Shifts in Narrative Modes**

Secondly, the shifts between narrative modes, primarily from first-person narration to omniscient narration,

reveal textual ambiguity (is the story real or fantasy?) and further intensify its contradictory nature. These shifts are not arbitrary but occur at critical junctures, their abruptness challenging the reliable boundaries of first-person narration and plunging the reader deeper into uncertainty.

One instance occurs early in the story, depicting the girl entering the forest:

A young girl would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood to her granny's house but this light admits of no ambiguities and, here, she will be trapped in her own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems. The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me<sup>[4]</sup>.

The first part lacks any first-person perception; instead, an omniscient narrator's focalization surveys and comments on the forest and its inhabitants, even predicting the girl's fate ("she will be trapped in her own illusion"), framing the story as a fairy-tale fantasy. However, the focalization abruptly shifts back to the first-person experiencing-I ("before me"). This illogical transition creates an internal rupture in the text, forcing the reader to question the story's reality once more.

A similar shift occurs near the end. After realizing the Erl-King intends to cage her like his birds, the girl resolves to kill him:

Lay your head on my knee so that I can't see the greenish inward-turning suns of your eyes any more. My hands shake. I shall take two huge handfuls of his rustling hair 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<sup>[4]</sup>.

This passage clearly unfolds from the experiencing-I's focalization. Yet, it then shifts abruptly from first-person experiencing-I to omniscient narration:

Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats. She will carve off his great mane with the knife he uses to skin the rabbits; she will string the old fiddle with five single strings of ash- brown hair<sup>[4]</sup>.

The sudden shift from the girl's perception to an omniscient narration (accompanied by a shift to future tense) destabilizes the reader's cognitive grounding. Questions arise: "Did the girl really succeed in killing the Erl-King?", "Is this her imagination, her planned action, or an account of what actually happened?" This undermines the foundation of the first-person narration. The abrupt switch to omniscient narration weakens the story's verisimilitude, blurring its reality and highlighting the postmodern ambiguity ending: is the murder real or fantasy? Furthermore, this shift also seems to imply a separation between the girl's thought and action. As Arikian maintains, the final scene of the story "is again narrated from the third-person point of view, creating an alienation effect" <sup>[8]</sup>. This separation between thought and action also presents the reader with a complex character imbued with postmodern qualities, further deepening the story's uncertainty and contradiction. Notably, the shift in tense precedes the switch to omniscient narration; after "My hands shake"<sup>[4]</sup>, the use of "shall" and "will" already signals that the subsequent text describes the girl's mental plan of action.

### 3. Conclusions

In *The Erl-King*, Angela Carter constructs textual ambiguity and internal contradiction through the ambiguous fusion of the experiencing-I and narrating-I focalization, and through the abrupt, illogical shifts between first-person and omniscient narration. While this narrative strategy showcases the complexity of female desire and the force of resistance, the suspension of the key plot's reality undermines the story's credibility and coherence. The text's ambiguity collapses the boundary between supernatural elements and perceived reality, substantiating critiques like Terry Lovell's --- its non-realist traits slide into a realm that "not to be taken seriously"<sup>[3]</sup>, leading to a dilution of the political critical intent and the assertion of female subjectivity within the story's uncertainty. The contradiction and ambiguity generated by these perspective shifts thus become the manifestation of the alleged political weakness in

Carter's narrative strategy.

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