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Little Red Riding Hood's Defloration

Caileigh Marshall

It is very common to believe Little Red Riding Hood is a naïve character, however her tale, as some fairy tale scholars would argue, explores themes of female sexuality, moral boundaries, and gender roles. The tale's key motifs (girl in the woods, red cape-like accessory, grandmother in a cottage, and a hungry wolf) have remained the same throughout the years, but, as Catherine Orenstein, a writer on culture, mythology, and power; explained in her book *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*, "Fairy tales have remarkable mercurial properties. They adapt to the weather, to local fashions, and to the mindset of each new teller and audience."¹ In other words, fairy tales become what the current writer wants them to become. As the tale of Little Red Riding Hood evolved in regards to the treatment of women, so did society's attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and power. I will analyze the first literary version of Little Red Riding Hood by Perrault, the popularized Grimms' version, and the 20th century story "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter in order to see how these versions reflect the cyclical changes in attitude toward women's rights and sexuality.

Little Red Riding Hood was derived from two different oral sources in 16th and 17th century France: church legend and folk tale. The oral tale created by the Catholic church was meant to show children how strangers could be dangerous, more specifically relating to the superstitions about werewolves taking children wandering outside their homes at night. Jack Zipes, a professor and expert on fairy tales, wrote that "wolves...lived in the woods outside

¹ Orenstein, Catherine, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 12.

society and preyed upon humans,” though they were not directly related to the Devil until the late Middle Ages.² The reasoning for the surge in Christian belief in werewolves during that time was “from a strident campaign by the Church to exploit folk superstition in order to keep all social groups under control.”³

The folk people, by contrast, used the oral tale of Little Red Riding Hood to celebrate a young girl’s coming of age, not as a cautious message about wandering in the woods. The tale was originally told by working women to young apprentice girls as a “sexual and social initiation” into womanhood.⁴ Most authors in the 17th through 19th centuries who retold the tale interpreted the moral to be avoiding strangers in the woods. In the stories written by modern authors, however, there are numerous references back to the original meaning of the peasant tale through the praise of sexual exploration in adolescents and of a powerful female protagonist.

Sexual innuendos were at the core of the first literary version of Little Red Riding Hood. The first written tale was penned by Charles Perrault in 1697 as the story “Le petit chaperon rouge.”⁵ The story was written for the French Court of Louis XIV, where “sexual indiscretions were notoriously indulged [in]” and where “wives made their husbands rich through their extramarital affairs.”⁶ Sexual promiscuity was common among the upper class, so the story, as written by Perrault, had distinct sexual innuendos that the adult readers would understand and find amusing.

² Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.

³ Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*, 70.

⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵ Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid*, 24.

However, in spite of the seeming sexual freedom of the French court, the story's moral lessons dissuade sexual curiosity and promote victim shaming. Perrault's version of the story begins with the mother telling her daughter to take some food to her grandmother. The girl meets a wolf at the edge of the woods and he challenges her to a game. He takes the shorter of the two paths to reach the grandmother's house while Red takes the longer path. The wolf eats the grandmother and, when Red arrives, lures Red to undress and get into bed. The wolf then strips off his grandmother façade and "devours" Red. The story ends with a poem explaining the moral, how "young girls...should never listen to anyone who happens by," and how the "docile [wolves] are those who are most dangerous."⁷

The values of 17th century French nobility influenced Perrault's telling of the tale and forced him emphasize the necessity for sexual restraint until marriage. As seen in the tale, Perrault took a hopeful oral story of the initiation of a young peasant girl and turned it into a tragic and violent episode where the girl was to blame for deciding to sleep with a wolf. Perrault wanted to reinforce the accepted concept in French high-society that "an unchaste woman is as good as dead," or that losing one's virginity before marriage would make one single forever.⁸ He also used the tale as a way to react to social concerns at the time, especially involving the rise of women's education in the Court and the feminism blossoming in the French literary salons for which he wrote his stories.⁹ Perrault wrote his Mother Goose tales to "present a portrait of the duties and expectations governing the lives and relationships of the men and women of

⁷ Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*, 93.

⁸ Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

Versailles,” however the means by which he instilled those lessons involved blaming the victim for the loss of the victim’s virginity.¹⁰

The Grimm Brothers, in contrast to Perrault, disliked including sexual references in their stories. Their version of Little Red Riding Hood was written in 1812 as the story “Little Red Cap.” Because open sexual encounters were frowned upon during the 19th century, the brothers purged the French implications of seduction in the tale along with Perrault’s sexually suggestive moral at the end.¹¹ They instead focused on representing the classic Victorian child who needed to learn obedience and on endorsing the necessity for a male patriarch in the family.

The male authority figure emerges through Wilhelm Grimm’s addition of the huntsman. The Grimm version starts similarly to the Perrault version, only the wolf entices Red to pick flowers while he goes to the grandmother’s house. The other difference in the Grimm version is the ending. Both the grandmother and Red are swallowed by the wolf, but then a hunter passing by hears snores and realizes that the wolf ate the girl and grandmother. The hunter cuts the wolf’s belly to free them and they all fill the wolf with heavy stones so that, when he woke, he would fall down dead.

Although Wilhelm Grimm basically eliminated any form of sexuality in his retelling of the tale, the treatment of women was clear when it came to who would be the hero and who would be the humbled heroine. Wilhelm Grimm’s addition of the hunter in the ending was to emphasize that “salvation only [came] in the form of a male patriarch” because “women were expected to be stringent and self-sufficient, yet dependent and self-denying.”¹² The Grimm

¹⁰ Ibid, 33.

¹¹ Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 55.

¹² Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*, 40.

brothers had a male hero rescue the female victim from her own mistakes because they wanted to emphasize the importance of respecting the male authority figure in the family.

In addition to women having to submit to the male patriarch, children also were targeted by the Grimm brothers to learn lessons of discipline, piety, and obedience. Around the 19th century, the nuclear family of the German middle class was becoming commonplace. The Industrial Revolution brought families to the city and many children would work alongside their parents in factories, so lessons of respecting an authority figure and being disciplined were important for children to learn at that time.¹³ The Grimm brothers used the tale of Little Red Riding Hood to instill lessons of male authority and piety for its later-version readers consisting almost exclusively of women and children.

Unlike Perrault and Grimm, Angela Carter did not want to promote a guilt-free wolf or a saint-like huntsman, instead she made Red the one to decide her own sexual fate. Carter was an English writer who took well-known fairy tales and changed the perspective of the story. In her 1979 story “The Company of Wolves,” she took a feminist approach and “reclaimed the heroine and her grandmother from male-dominated literary tradition, recasting the women as brave and resourceful, turning Red Riding Hood into the...sexual aggressor, and questioning the machismo of the wolf.”¹⁴

Little Red, as seen by Carter, is an armed and powerful female protagonist. Carter’s story opens with a second person point of view, explaining how the wolf became to be so feared and why the reader should fear werewolves. She then begins her version of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, mentioning how Red had just entered puberty and was excited to venture out into

¹³ Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 161.

the woods with her carving knife hidden in a basket because, although she was sure the wild beasts would not dare hurt her, she was well-warned about the dangers of the forest. “She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing.”¹⁵ When she finds a very handsome young man, she talks with him. He offers to take her basket with the knife in it and she allows it. He boasts that his compass would take him to grandmother’s house faster than the path, so Red agrees that it is a bet and that if he wins he will get a kiss. The young man gets to the cottage first and, in front of the grandmother, strips down to reveal both that he is a werewolf and that he has “huge genitals.”¹⁶ The wolf-man eats the grandmother, cleans up, burns the inedible hair, and gets dressed. Red comes into the cottage and realizes the danger she is in. She then begins to undress, throwing her clothes into the fire. She walks up to the wolf-man and laughs when he says he will eat her. She then throws his clothes into the fire and he turns into a normal wolf who she subsequently sleeps with.¹⁷

Whereas the Perrault version shifted the sexual blame to Red and the Grimm version completely eliminated sex, Carter used the oral tale’s original moral to create a story about a girl’s first sexual encounter and the normalcy of female lust.¹⁸ Red’s personality in Carter’s version is quite different from the Grimm and Perrault versions. She is witty and wise, and although she made a bad choice in betting with the wolf-man, in the end she chose her own fate instead of being eaten.

Carter showed in her story that women had power over themselves and that it was the men, not the women, that needed to change. She took the “enduring cultural myth that women

¹⁵ Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*, 285.

¹⁶ Zipes, *Trials and Tribulations*, 289.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁸ Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 166.

tame men” and made the female character become the empowered one.¹⁹ In the 1960s and 70s, women were embracing “beast feminism,” where women could have free love and hairy legs.²⁰ Red carries a carving knife in her basket and is not afraid of the woods, which is a much more masculine character than the Perrault or Grimm version of Red. Carter used the oral folk tale to explore the ways in which Little Red could become an empowered female protagonist who would decide her own sexual fate.

The attitudes toward women’s rights and sexuality has varied from disgraceful sexuality in the 1700s to reserved sexuality in the 1800s and finally to open sexuality in the late 1900s. The story of Little Red Riding Hood is a great barometer to show the cyclical pattern of acceptance and then denial with women’s rights and sexuality. It is important to recognize the cyclical nature of these attitudes about women in order to predict and possibly maintain the ideal level of women’s rights and open sexuality in the future.

¹⁹ Ibid, 172.

²⁰ Ibid, 173.

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