

The evolution of little red riding hood



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In the popular fairytale Little Red Riding Hood, the road to grandmother's house is no walk in the park – it is dark, ominous, dangerous. It also offers choices, but Little Red Cap tends to make those that lead to trouble. The innocent heroine's decisions always involve a seductive stranger, usually a wolf. In the Brothers Grimm version of the fairy tale Little Red Cap's naivety and poor decision-making get her into a lot of trouble, and though she eventually escapes, she cuts it quite close. In Angela Carter's modern interpretation of the fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood is forced to sacrifice her dignity and virginity in order to keep her life; this is the result of yet another credulous decision made on the way to grandmother's house. While the general storyline of an innocent girl encountering a flesh-eating wolf on her way to grandmother's remains largely congruent in both of these adaptations of the classic fable, the differences in moral and theme suggest an evolution of women from dependent and naïve to self-empowered and aware of the influence of sexuality. In the classic Brothers Grimm account of Little Red Riding Hood the prevailing moral seems to be, as Little Red Cap puts it at the end of the story, “ Never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it (Brothers Grimm 16.)” Though simple, this conclusion entails that girls were not to think for themselves, as it would surely get them into trouble; this is a lesson that Little Red Cap nearly learns the hard way. This sugarcoated version of the fable is not as bold or risqué as other interpretations where the young protagonist is ravished by the wolf or is even killed in some cases, as the authors allow both the guiltless heroine and her grandmother to survive and live happily ever after. Instead of an empowering statement about the advancement of women, this account serves to illustrate more than anything

the helplessness of females, and their reliance on men to bail them out. It is not until Little Red Cap is caged within the ribs of the satisfied and snoring wolf, (and assumed dead as the result of her own unadvised gullibility,) that she is saved by a brave and attentive neighboring huntsman, who cuts the wolf open and redeems her from the pits of her captor's stomach. In his analysis on "The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales," Bruno Bettelheim concludes that the caesarean operation and liberation of Little Red Cap by the huntsman symbolizes rebirth, by stating that the central theme "is that of a rebirth to a higher plane (Bettelheim 179.)" Just as Jonah's stay in the belly of a whale was God's way of teaching him a lesson and enlightening him, Red Cap emerges a more careful and knowing being after she is released from the stomach of the wolf. This marks the transformation of Red Cap from naïve and dangerously curious to circumspect and submissive. The Grimm Brothers' adaptation shows that women at the time were not to be independent, as it was a certain means to an end. The theme of rebirth suggests that although it may take a harsh lesson, women will ultimately come to the understanding that they are dependent on others, generally men. This rendering of the children's fable serves as more of a cautionary tale for women than anything else. After all, the huntsmen will not always be around to save the day. "The Company of Wolves" has an entirely different intention than its predecessors, expressly the Brothers Grimm account. Whereas in the Grimms' version Little Red Cap is saved by a huntsman, hence sugarcoating the dangerous reality that sexual predators pose, Carter's tale is brutal, as the heroine is forced to use her female sexuality in order to evade death. The world Carter creates is real. There is no huntsman and no noble gentleman to pull Red Riding Hood out of the mess she is in. It

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is now up to her to spare herself, use her wit, and ultimately sacrifice her dignity and become one of the “wolves.” In her modern interpretation of the fairy tale, Carter reassesses women’s self-understanding. Nowadays women are aware of the power of eroticism; rather than crying out for assistance, Little Red Riding Hood is her own savior. In fact, Carter’s heroine, who starts off the story as a pure and seemingly untouchable virgin of a child, knows how to use her sexual allure to her advantage better than most. As she watches the wolf’s “jaw begin to slaver” and “the room fill with the clamour of the forest’s Liebestod”, she laughs in the face of death and bravely thinks “I am nobody’s meat (Carter 118.)” Carter’s ending leaves no question that a woman’s awareness of the influence of seductiveness is an empowering understanding, as it enables Little Red Riding Hood to rescue herself.

However, it also offers a sad reality. Sometimes women are forced to reduce themselves in order to elevate in society and a partial loss of dignity must be sacrificed. Carter acknowledges this female power and the great deal of responsibility that accompanies it. The main difference between modern Carter’s version of Little Red Riding Hood and the earlier Brothers Grimm version is that nowadays women are not feeble and guarded, rather they have developed an understanding of the weakness that their libido precipitates in most men, particularly in rapists and sexual predators. This realization has allowed some women to elevate themselves and avoid trouble, as is the theme of “The Company of Wolves.” It is impossible for the werewolf, who symbolizes sexual predators, to turn down consensual relations with a girl who “stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity...an unbroken egg...a sealed vessel...[who] has inside of her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of

membrane.” This is why the heroine laughs at the prospect of death; she is fully aware that she serves a more useful purpose to the wolf alive and willing to meet his sexual demands than if she is raped and eaten. Unlike her helpless grandmother whose “ old bones set up a terrible clattering under the bed (Carter 118,)” because she offered no potential sexual pleasure to the wolf, the red-cowled vestal maiden is spared by the carnivorous beast. In the end Little Red Riding Hood’s fearlessness proves valid as she sleeps “ between the paws of the tender wolf,” who like many rapists, makes her life less unpleasant for choosing consent over struggle. The moral of Carter’s interpretation, then, is that woman’s sexuality is one of their most powerful tools, and if used wisely can help to level the societal playing field between men and women, or get them out of dire straits. Yet, women must hold onto this unique influence carefully and use it wisely because it is so closely tied to their self-worth and self-respect. As times have changed the Little Red Riding Hood saga has evolved. Although in both the Carter and Grimm accounts the young girl does not change in terms of curiosity – as she lets her guard down when she encounters the wolf on her way to grandmothers house – the true change is revealed when she meets the wolf for the second time. Where in the Brothers Grimm account Little Red Cap is feeble and yielding she is now cunning and seductive. This change is borne of a new understanding of the power of sexuality, and the irresistibility that accompanies it. By altering the moral and theme of the classic fairy tale Carter is commenting on the advancement of women and the principle that they can now care for themselves. Bibliography:“ Little Red Cap” by Brothers Grimm pg. 16, from *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Ed. Maria Tatar. NY: Norton, 1999“ The Company of Wolves” by Angela Carter pg. 118, from *The Bloody* <https://assignbuster.com/the-evolution-of-little-red-riding-hood/>

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