

Sexual preferences and the liberation of oneself in the company of wolves



Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* is a different adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood where, instead of the little girl becoming the victim to a villainous wolf, she embraces the wolf as an experience beyond anything she has known or been taught. Red Riding Hood is coming into herself as a young woman; she is going through puberty which often signifies changes in sexual interest and curiosity. Her family took the time to preach to the little girl that there are beasts outside of her protected bubble that are dangerous and not suitable to interact with at such a tender age. Since she is the youngest and the prettiest child, her mother and grandmother put forth mass efforts to ensure she remains as innocent as possible. However, when the little girl makes her way into the woods, she finds that she is not interested in being innocent. She discovers that she wants to explore her sexual desires which are not civilized. Sexual desire is something wild and natural, something that civilized and cultured girls should never want to explore. Women are often discouraged from exploring their sexual desires because it is a behavior that is not normally characterized as feminine. The heroine of *The Company of Wolves* rejects her civilized lifestyle in order to experience animalistic sexual desire.

The Company of Wolves starts out with an old wives' tale and a warning. A little girl is told stories of beasts that make "you" quiver in fear and are untrustworthy. She is told these stories by her grandmother to ensure the little girl would remain innocent and pure. However, Red Riding Hood is told these old wives' tales about these wolves and how they preyed on innocent townspeople; she took this and, instead of cowering to him like prey, she asserted her dominance when in front of the wolf. The old wives' tales are

meant to scare her into obedience; in order for her to remain a little girl, her mother and grandmother make an effort to kill any inkling of curiosity. They tell her to “ Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems” (Carter 111). This resonates closely with the implication that boys will be boys; they do not know how to control themselves. Women take it upon themselves to teach their daughters stereotypical behaviors of men and that good women are not supposed to engage in such behaviors. The women in this story, with the exception to the heroine, could almost be characterized as the antagonists. They discourage her from exploring her sexuality and sexual desires by using scare tactics in hopes that their youngest and prettiest child will remain civilized and innocent. However, by doing this, there is a disconnect in their care for her; the heroine does not seem to care that her grandmother has been eaten by this wolf. She is actively rejecting her teacher of how good girls should act. Without her grandmother, there is no one to force her to conform to the rules of their society but even in the death of her grandmother, the rattling of her bones is meant to act as a warning against the wolf.

The red shawl not only symbolizes her coming into her womanhood but it is also physically shielding her body from the wolves. As a developing young woman, “ her breasts have just begun to swell” and she has started her period; her grandmother makes the cape to shelter her granddaughter from being preyed upon (Carter 113). She burns her cape to show how she is unafraid of the wolf. She burns her clothes to reject her civilized lifestyle and to be accepted into an animalistic lifestyle. Carter says, “ She bundled her shawl and threw it on the blaze, which instantly consumed it” (Carter 117).

Once she throws the shawl into the fire, she has immediately relieved herself of the pressures of being in a civilized society. She does not want that life for herself; instead, she is allowing for the wolf to introduce her to the world of sexual desire and acting on natural instincts rather than learned behaviors. The shawl is the first thing she burns because it is the antithesis of what she wants to be and what the wolf can teach her. After the shawl burns, she begins to undress herself to embrace her natural body. “ The thin muslin went flaring up the chimney like a magic bird and now off came her skirt, her woolen stockings, her shoes, and on to the fire they went, too, and were gone for good” (Carter 118). She undresses herself to slowly show she is willing to shed herself of everything she has been taught. Then she undresses the wolf to put them on a level playing field. Neither has an advantage and she is not in immediate danger because they are the same kind of exposed in front of each other. This story is not about love; it is purely about lust and a biological hunger for sex. The description of the heroine makes it clear she has no intention of loving the wolf. Rather, she is looking forward to exploring the sexual desire in herself. Their roles have reversed; she is supposed to be afraid of the wolf because his intention is to eat her. In the end, the act of having sex and consuming another being are closely aligned. She “ burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat” when the wolf said he was going to eat her (Carter 118). It ended up being about two hungry beings consuming each other instead of being a predator devouring its prey.

Often, nature has acted as the place to find one’s truth. Carter placed Red Riding Hood in the woods because she is meant to begin to seek her sexual

truth. While the wolf is interested in pursuing her in a sexual manner, it would have been a different story if the wolf purposely sought her out in the comfort of her nurturing community. Red Riding Hood finds herself in the woods without the protection of her mother or grandmother; she finds herself wanting to explore sexual desires and is in a perfect position to do it. Instead of following what people have told her to do when she goes into the woods, she acts on her animalistic instincts and sexual desires. The wolf is dirty and untrustworthy while she is pure and clean by continuous grooming and sheltering from her family. She loses her virginity to the wolf; she sheds her blood and immediately loses the innocence her family had been protecting her from. Her instincts told her she needed to experience her sexual awakening because she did not have any other opportunity to do so. Since losing one's virginity is often paired with marriage in a civilized society, Red Riding Hood found herself making some kind of commitment to the wolf by having sex with him. " She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony" (Carter 118). Lice is the quintessential telling that someone is not clean; Red Riding Hood says she would perhaps put the lice in her mouth in order to show she is willingly becoming unclean. She did not catch lice from the wolf while they were engaging in sex; she takes them inside herself enthusiastically as part of her new life.

The Company of Wolves was a story about embracing sexual liberation and rejecting social norms and expectations. Red Riding Hood aggressively goes against everything she is taught by her civilized family to explore her natural

desires as she is coming into her womanhood. The wolf, a wild animal, seeks to murder the heroine's grandmother in order to silence her voice of reason and conformity. Anticipating a girl that would be afraid of the wolf's predatory antics, the wolf asserted his dominance only to be met with equal power from Red Riding Hood. Instead of listening to the antagonistic voices of her mother and grandmother to fear the wolf, Red Riding Hood embraced him and his animal behaviors; she engaged in those same behaviors in order to shed her clothes from a forced, civilized life. By going into the woods, she entered a natural environment where she would not be pressured to conform to women's ideals regarding femininity and what behaviors are acceptable for a girl to be involved in.