

Creating Little Red Riding Hood :
Morality, Sexuality, and the Evolution of a Classic Tale

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Little Red Riding Hood is a classic tale commonly known about a young girl in a red cape and a big, bad wolf. The story's simple plot however, has given it way to considerable changes and adaptations depending on cultural beliefs, regional dialects, and personal interpretations.

For my final Honors Program assignment, I would like to create a creative thesis in the form of a short film that incorporates my personal interpretations surrounding the tale. I will be researching themes and motifs that explore Little Red as an older character struggling with the thresholds of innocence and womanhood, lust and seduction, and the relationship between the sexes.

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1. Introduction

In 1697 French writer, Charles Perrault, published the earliest known printed version of *Red Riding Hood*. The invention of the tale cannot be credited to Perrault however, for many scholars have insisted *Little Red Riding Hood* has ancient origins as a spoken folklore shared by local peasants in Europe as early as the 10th century. Nonetheless, Perrault set the precedent for a story that will later be told, retold, and remade for centuries to come, with her perennial popularity accredited to her ability to adapt to the times.

In present day, the story of *Red Riding Hood* is a staple in childhood literature. In its structure the narrative is powerfully simple- a girl who is sent to her grandmother's house to deliver goods encounters a wolf in the woods and opposites collide- good and evil, beast and human, male and female. Over time, her story has become a quintessential moral primer as well as a playground for experimentation in theme, structure, motif and moral. *Red Riding Hood* has been told as a tale of childhood naivete in colorful picture books, as a bawdy adult tale of innocence lost in the woods, and a coming of age story that deals with themes ranging from morality, the boundaries of culture, social expectations and the relationship between the sexes.

What I sought to accomplish with my creative thesis was to compile the rich history, symbolism and evolution of the classic folklore, analyze the overarching interpretations, and create a new version of *Red Riding Hood* in the form of a short film that reflects personal translations of the story, characters, and motifs. My final product focuses on the fascinating relationship between Red and the wolf, and the complexities involved with maturing sexuality. With the abundance of content relating to the tale, I decided to focus on two classic, written

stories, and two modern cinematic recreations. Later in this essay I will analyze my short film and explain my creative choices.

2. Perrault & Brothers Grimm

The two most popular, written versions of *Red Riding Hood* is the original by Perrault, and the modified version by the Brothers Grimm from 1812. Both tales begin by describing their protagonist: a sweet, young girl in a red cloak or cap, making her way through the forest to deliver food to her ill grandmother. She meets a wolf along the way that encourages her to explore the forest, which distracts Red and allows the wolf to find grandmother first and eat her. In Perrault's version, when Red finally arrives and makes several surprised exclamations about grandmother's appearance, the wolf throws himself at Red and eats her up. Perrault concludes his story on a grim note with a moral warning, stated in its entirety:

Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say "wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all (Perrault 53).

The version that Charles Perrault constructed stemmed from the social and sexual politics of the seventeenth century French upper class. Catherine Orenstein explains in her book titled, Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked, that conservatives in France at the end of the 17th century believed that the modern woman “was destroying family life and social values” (Orenstein 31). French historian Carolyn Lougee further clarifies that at the time, women had been granted access to education and conservatives feared that women would gain too much knowledge and independence, as their intention was for girls to be schooled, but not assume and political

responsibility (Lougee 87). Perrault, being a prolific advocate of Court society, used the fairy tale to illustrate courtly morals. He warns of female promiscuity and the social dangers of “elle avoit vu le loup”, which translates to “seeing the wolf”- a phrase commonly used to describe the loss of a girls virginity (Ornstein 26).

The Grimm Brothers gave little Red a second chance to walk a straight path in their version. They offered her salvation in the form of a masculine Huntsman that saves both Red and her grandma from the belly of the beast. The Grimm Brothers also made Red more discreet, with all the references to seduction removed. Additionally, they included a prominent voice of a mother telling her child “not to stray from the path”, which implied both the literal meaning of staying on the path, as well as refraining from acting outside of social norms. The presence of the two adult figures reflects the value of the nuclear family during the Victorian Age. The story, which is now aimed more at small children rather than young women, presents a “patriarchal lesson in female obedience” (Ornstein 60). Interestingly enough, the Grimm Brothers included an alternative ending to the story. In this epilogue Little Red meets another wolf on the path, but having learned her lesson, kills the animal with the help of grandma. The imagery of resourceful, independent female characters stands in sharp contrast to the original tales. This ending is still rarely known even in present times which demonstrates the power of male influence in the framing of societal norms.

3. Freeway & Red Riding Hood (2011)

Red Riding Hood has been recreated in various ways since its inception. Since I was producing a short film, I decided to pick apart two films that borrowed from the classic story and were made within the last ten years. The first is *Freeway*- a 1996 crime film written and directed

by Matthew Bright. Film critic Lawrence Van Gelder wrote that, “If Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were resurrected, it would be no surprise to find them in Hollywood, making films like *Freeway*. It features an illiterate 15-year-old named Vanessa with a sort of family commonly associated with “white trash”. After her drug addicted parents are arrested and Vanessa faces yet another foster home, she chains her parole officer and escapes in the family car to seek shelter with her grandmother. After her car breaks down she is kindly given a lift by Bob Wolverton, a seemingly friendly child psychologist until he is revealed as a serial killer. Being the street-smart girl that she is, she conjures up ways to outsmart his schemes which ultimately leads to his demise. *Freeway* reflects a more feminist perspective of the classic tale and a perspective I wanted to mirror in my own rendition. Vanessa is given agency, aggression, and is a victim of a system that is set up against her, but she doesn't let herself be victimized. She cannot rely on anyone besides herself and therefore is never a damsel in distress. She has a brutal sense of morality, but it is not perfect which shows the personal growth that many young women experience on the threshold of womanhood.

The second film I analyzed was Catherine Hardwicke's 2011 *Red Riding Hood*. Unlike *Freeway*, this version of the story keeps its medieval roots. Our main protagonist, named Valerie, lives in a village that is haunted by a werewolf. She falls for an orphaned woodcutter, but begrudgingly finds out her family has arranged her marriage to a different man. While made in modern day, the retold story seems to be taken a step back in the progression of female individuality and mature thematic explorations. New York Times film critic Manohla Dargis writes, “[Hardwicke] takes on the story's grown-up themes of sex and death but weakly. This might be because the movie has been pitched at young adults, as evidenced by its pretty leads,

electronic soundtrack, contemporary vibe and veneer, and caution.” Valerie’s character is also constantly assisted or persuaded by her male counterparts, reflecting the structure of the Grimm’s Brother’s version.

4. Meanings and Symbols

The symbolism of *Red Riding Hood* is one of the richest of all classic fairy tales. This is one of reasons for its popularity and its transformation throughout history. I used many of these symbols in my own rendition to solidify the foundation of the story’s universal themes. Originally, the story is about the tribulations of sexual awakening and rape. Red Riding Hood has been seen as a parable of sexual maturity with a young girl braving the “dark forest” of womanhood. In many cases the wolf threatens the girl’s virginity, personifying him as a sexual predator. It is also a story about ritual and rebirth. A girl leaves home, enters a liminal states and is transformed into an adult woman. This theme is illustrated in the act of coming out of the wolf’s belly in the Grimm’s version. By being saved by the Huntsman, she has found redemption from her endeavours. The red cloak is one of the most prominent symbols. In many cultures wearing a cloak that covers the head and hairs send a message that the girl is not available yet. Its red color can be associated with blood- menstrual, which initiates a young woman’s sexual maturity. Red can also be read as the color of sin of promiscuity. The forest is the most popular setting for Red Riding Hood’s journey. It provides not only beautiful scenery, but forests also symbolize the subconsciousness. It is common in folklore for heros and heroines to go through major transformations in the forest. Lastly, the disguised wolf in grandma’s clothing translates a clear message- be careful who you trust. Even those who you think you know may not be who they appear to be.

5. Personal Interpretations & Creating My Story

After anthologizing sources from both literary history and modern cinema, I compiled elements of the Red Riding Hood story that I wanted to incorporate and reinvent in my own version of the story. First and foremost, I wanted to create a story that reflected some of my own personal tribulations and use that as a way to create a character that young women could relate to. *Red Riding Hood* is very much a story about a young woman on the threshold of maturity. She struggles with the complexities of personal growth, sexuality and independence. I wanted to avoid certain points from the tale's older roots that implied 1) women are willing to participate in their own defeat; 2) women obscure the true nature of rape and sexual deviance by eagerly being seduced or controlled; 3) males assert the supreme rightness as protector. I aimed to crush the imagery of an ignorant girl, easily tricked and defenseless against her own fate. Aesthetically, I wanted to pay homage to the classic tale with a forest setting and medieval wardrobe, unlike the modern environment of *Freeway*.

The plot of my film begins similarly to the original- Red's mother sends her out through the forest with goods for grandmother. She warns her of the dangers of straying from path. As she strolls, Red notices a bush with bright red berries standing out from the otherwise bleak forest surroundings. For a moment she hesitates, but her curiosity and wonder take over as she goes to pick a few. Meanwhile, a Huntsman stalks prey in the distance. Before long he discovers Red and confronts her. Admiring her beauty, the Huntsman teases her- stealing her basket and rummaging through its contents. The playful encounter with the charming Huntsman soon turns aggressive as his dark intentions surface. Alone and in desperation, Red has to figure out a way to overcome the Huntsman. She uses the berries, knowing they are poisonous, to immobilize her

antagonist. While Red comes out triumphant from her challenging encounter, she is changed. Her red cloak is torn but replaced by a new pelt- the pelt of the wolf.

The relationship between Red and the Huntsman encompasses the themes of independence, anxiety and misconception- emotions that every young woman struggles with on the threshold of womanhood. Combining the Huntsman and Wolf characters allowed me to personify various portrayals of sexuality and the emotions related to it- intrigue, fear, curiosity, charm, playfulness and aggression. By calculating her own solutions to conflict, I gave Red the opportunity to have control over own decisions and over her own fate. Acquiring a new cloak was an idea borrowed from Catherine Orenstein who writes in her book, “By switching her garb and/or trading skins, Red Riding Hood sheds the historical associations of her own red cloak- sin, scandal, blood, sexual availability- and acquires a new set of meanings. These revisions may empower the heroine, enhance her animal instincts, or give her a richer identity” (Ornstein 163). Implementing these core elements to the story's structure, along with a talented crew of film artists, I was able to create a movie that borrows from the original tale but with a new, dark twist.

6. Conclusion

Since my childhood, Little Red Riding Hood has intrigued me with her mysterious persona and her strange relationship with the wolf. It was this intrigued that pushed me to explore why the story is so fascinating not only to me, but to scholars, critics, historians and artists. The final product of my thesis film intends to parallel some of the classic and modern motifs of the classic tale, as well as explore renewed themes based on personal interpretation and experience. Exploring the story of *Red Riding Hood* has deepened my understanding of the complex and fundamental human concerns revolving around the story. The tale is so adaptable to

the time and her character can be so malleable. Her tale speaks of enduring themes of family, morality, growing up, and the relationships between the sexes. It brings together opposites, tests boundaries of culture, class and gender. The girl, the wolf and the forest can embody spaces beyond the confines of a story book and touch spectrums of the human psyche.

A link to my short film Red Riding Hood can be found at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0IkpJxgIeU2bEpwV2dnUnNBbEE/view?usp=sharing>

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