

Young Women and Wolves: Themes of Sexuality and Identity in Charles Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" and Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves"

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Charles Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" (1697) and Angela Carter's "The Company of Wolves" (1979) are two contrasting depictions of a young girl's encounter with a wolf. In both cases, the encounter symbolizes the loss of the girl's virginity. While, in Perrault's work, this sexual encounter leads to the young girl's demise, Carter associates it with her fulfillment. These varying depictions of pleasure, which both hold valuable insight on the expression of female sexuality, are made evident within the stories through the young girl's identification with her cape, the extent to which homogeneity exists between man and wolf, and the power dynamic between beast and child. Perrault's message is a cautionary one, warning young girls to repress their carnal desires, associating sexuality with danger. Contrary to this, Carter plants the more feministic idea that females should not be afraid to satisfy such desires, and encourages them to explore this aspect of themselves, implying that the true danger lies in sexual repression. Through these opposing themes, it becomes evident that Perrault holds conservative views regarding sexuality and its impacts on moral identity, while Carter takes a more liberal stand on the matter.

In his work, Perrault consistently refers to the young girl as Little Red Riding Hood. She is given this name upon receiving a little red hood made by her grandmother, an item that holds significant figurative meaning. The hood is symbolic of Little Red Riding Hood's virginity, serving in the protection of what Perrault describes as her "innocence." In removing the cape during her encounter with the wolf, Little Red Riding Hood rids herself of this innocence, allowing for the loss of her sexual purity. In addition, because the hood that "...became her so well..." (619) is done away with, Little Red Riding Hood loses a vital part of her identity. As her name shows, the young girl was defined by the hood, and becomes "naked" when it is cast aside. This exposure ultimately leads to her demise, as she immediately becomes vulnerable to the threat of the wolf and is violently swallowed whole. Through this depiction, Perrault gives the impression that maturing girls who let go of their "innocence" fall apart: not only by ruining their sexual purity, but by undermining their overall integrity as human beings. This overlying message acts as a warning for young girls to protect their virginity, preserving both the innocence and worth that makes up their moral identity.

While the hood also represents virginity in Carter's work, it does not form the entirety of the young girl's identity like it does in Perrault's. In "The Company of Wolves," the young woman is never referred to as Little Red Riding Hood, but rather as "[t]he flaxen-haired girl..." (646). This shows that the young girl's hood is not a crucial part of who she is, implying that she is not defined by her virginity and that there is

more to her than just innocence. In Carter's depiction, once she "...[takes] off her scarlet shawl, the color of poppies, the color of sacrifices, the color of her menses..." (649), she does not die, but rather grows as a human being. Poppies, which are often associated with death, are symbolic of the young girl's sexual inexperience coming to an end. The death of this ignorance is also represented through the idea of sacrifice, the offering of one thing in order to attain something of greater value. In Carter's story, the thing of value is the girl's newly developed fertility, the bleeding that symbolizes her entrance into womanhood. Here, lost virginity is not something to mourn, but a natural step, as her body is now biologically prepared for reproduction. Unlike Perrault, Carter creates the overall implication that the young girl is right in her decision to engage in sexual activity, as she is physically ready for it. Carter's choice of images portrays women as in control of their own sexual choices and the consequences these choices will have. In this case, virginity loss does not diminish a female's worth, but is instead a new experience that allows for maturation.

In both stories, Perrault and Carter use wolves to symbolize men in search of sex. However, the extent to which men are portrayed as animalistic differs between the two works. In "Little Red Riding Hood," Perrault identifies man and wolf as one entity. The "...wicked wolf [that] threw himself on Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up" (621) is given no human characteristics that would explicitly show that he is a man with a moral consciousness. Instead, his unchanging state of what is described as a "wicked wolf" completely associates him with a malevolent, corrupt nature tainted by sexual desire. His need to eat is presented in a way that makes readers feel little sympathy, as his attack on Little Red Riding Hood is depicted as inhumane. Part of this is due to the deceitful behavior he uses when he crosses paths with the girl in the forest, shown when he compels "[t]he poor child..." (620) to tell him "...where she [is] going" (620). This act of deception implies that men will do whatever they can to fulfill their sexual compulsions, as it is in their nature. Such behavior includes immorally persuading young women to "give up" their virginity, or in other words, their "innocence." Since males are depicted as being too animalistic to repress these carnal desires, Perrault cautions young girls to avoid the danger of being tricked into losing their virginity by controlling their own erotic feelings and refraining from sexual activity.

In contrast, Carter's work presents man and wolf as somewhat distinct. She transforms Perrault's simplistic characterization of male identity into a more complex one, describing men as multidimensional beings that are more than their instinctive sexual behavior. Carter first depicts the wolf encountered by the flaxen-haired girl as being a dangerous "...carnivore incarnate" (648). The implied meaning, as a primal meat eater embodied in human flesh, is representative of males and their powerful carnal desires, its sexual connotations further symbolized through the "carn" portion of "carnivore." However, this animalistic representation is put into a new perspective when a group of wolves are shown "...howling as if their hearts would break" (649). This ironic image of seemingly dangerous creatures facing the threat of heartbreak gives the impression that, despite how malicious they may seem on the outside, wolves are just as susceptible to loneliness as anyone else. This allows readers to feel sympathetic toward the males depicted in Carter's work, as they possess other basic human qualities which prevent them from being entirely defined by sexually compulsive behavior. The wolf's hunger for the flaxen-haired girl in this depiction is a result of its greatly emaciated state. This

hunger can be interpreted as a strong desire for her attention due to a lack of love and intimacy generally available to the wolf. Rather than consuming the girl completely and causing her demise at the end of the story, the “...tender wolf” (650) described in Carter’s work instead holds her in his arms, showing that all he needs is a bit of affection to bring out his gentle nature. Additionally, Carter allows the males portrayed in her story to shift between wolf and human form, enabling them to be viewed as beings that possess more than just a primal side. This depiction sends the overall message that young girls should not avoid men who are in touch with their sexuality just because they are often stereotyped as malicious beings that follow their carnal instincts above anything else. An additional implication is that young girls are really only in danger once they allow this stereotype to get in the way of their own sexual self-discovery.

In order to further convey their understandings of sexuality, Perrault and Carter also put power dimensions into play between the girl and wolf. However, the power between these two characters is distributed differently within each story. In “Little Red Riding Hood,” Perrault creates a dynamic in which the young girl falls victim to the wolf’s manipulative nature. This imbalance is shown especially when Little Red Riding Hood naively puts her trust into the malicious creature by telling him where her grandmother lives, ultimately helping him form the conniving plan that eventually leads to her surrendered virginity. The young girl’s sexual purity forms her moral identity, as it is the only way in which she is able to control how others view her level of respectability. Once this is gone, she is left powerless. Perrault sends the message that young girls “[a]re wrong to listen to just anyone...” (621) if they want to prevent this from happening. By doing so, he stresses the importance of using awareness and distrust as a means of avoiding such danger, placing the onus specifically on girls when it comes to the preservation of purity.

On the other hand, the young girl depicted in Carter’s work has a much greater awareness of danger. Her decision to carry “...a carving knife in [her] basket...” (646) when passing through the woods indicates her resistance against someone else holding power over her. In addition, once the protection of her cape is willingly surrendered, the young girl does not grow afraid of the wolf. Her courage prevents the male creature from establishing dominance over her, as “...she [knows] she [is] nobody’s meat” (650). This abolition of fear enables her to survive her encounter with the wolf. Through this depiction, she is characterized as a person who has the strength to overcome social norms by ensuring that her moral identity depends on more than just her virginity. The overall implication here is that young women should not fear the loss of their own autonomy as a result of having sex, but should instead feel liberated by their ability to break through social constructs.

Through their works, both Perrault and Carter raise important intellectual considerations of moral identity, gender categorization, and power imbalances in relation to sexual activity. By comparing these contrasting depictions, readers are able to extract different concepts involving sexuality from each story and apply them to greater society. Opposing ideas concerning these issues remain prominent, in the conflicting values held by conservatives and liberals across the world. Perrault’s ideas around preserving sexual purity coincide with common conservative beliefs today, while Carter takes the liberal standpoint

of sex positivity. Contrasting perspectives like these play a vital role in modern day discourse involving sex and morality, making “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Company of Wolves” great tools for analytical thought.

Works Cited

Carter, Angela. “The Company of Wolves.” *Retellings: A Thematic Literature Anthology*, eds. A. G. Clarke and M. B. Clarke. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004. Print. 644-650.

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