

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD¹*Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm*

Charles Perrault published the first literary adaptation of “Little Red Riding Hood” in 1697, but few parents choose to read that version of the tale to their children, for it ends with the “wicked wolf” throwing himself on Little Red Riding Hood and gobbling her up. In the Grimms’ version, the young girl and her grandmother are rescued by a huntsman, who dispatches the wolf after performing a caesarian section with a pair of scissors.

“Little Red Riding Hood” has a revealing history. Early versions of her story, told around the fireside or in taverns, show a shrewd young heroine who does not need to rely on hunters to escape the wolf and to find her way back home. In “The Story of Grandmother,” an oral version of the tale recorded in France at the end of the nineteenth century, Little Red Riding Hood performs a striptease before the wolf, then ends the litany of questions about the wolf’s body parts by asking if she can go outside to relieve herself. The wolf is outwitted by Little Red

1. *Little Red Riding Hood*. The French and German titles for the story—“Le Petit Chaperon rouge” and “Rotkäppchen”—suggest caps rather than hoods. Psychoanalytic critics have made much of the color red, equating it with sin, passion, blood, and thereby suggesting a certain complicity on the part of Red Riding Hood in her seduction. But these views have been rebutted by folklorists and historians, who point out that the color red was first introduced in Perrault’s literary version of the tale.

From Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Rotkäppchen,” in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Dieterich, 1857; first published, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812).

Riding Hood, who is more resourceful trickster than naïve young girl.

Both Perrault and the Grimms worked hard to excise the ribald grotesqueries of the original peasant tales (in some versions, Little Red Riding Hood eats the wolf's leftovers, tasting the "meat" and "wine" in her grandmother's pantry). They rescripted the events to produce a cautionary tale that accommodates a variety of messages about vanity and idleness. Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood has a "good time" gathering nuts, chasing butterflies, and picking flowers, and it is not by chance that she falls into the hands of a savage predator. The Grimms' "Little Red Riding Hood" (literally "Little Red Cap") also erased all traces of the erotic playfulness of oral versions and placed the action in the service of teaching lessons to the child inside and outside the book.

Critics of this story have played fast and loose with its elements, displaying boundless confidence in their interpretive pronouncements. To be sure, the tale itself, by depicting a conflict between a weak, vulnerable protagonist and a large, powerful antagonist, lends itself to a certain interpretive elasticity. But the multiplicity of interpretations does not inspire confidence, with some critics reading the story as a parable of rape, others as a parable of man-hating, still others as a blueprint for female development.

"Little Red Riding Hood" taps into many childhood anxieties, but especially into one that psychoanalysts call the dread of being devoured. While Perrault's story and the Grimms' tale may take too violent a turn for some children, for others those same stories will end with a squeal of delight and a cry for more. And for those who are irritated by Little Red Riding Hood's failure to perceive that the creature lying in her grandmother's bed is a wolf, James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf" and Roald Dahl's "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" are healthy tonics to Perrault and the Grimms. In Thurber's version, we learn that a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge, and we watch the girl take an automatic out of her basket and shoot the wolf dead. "It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be," Thurber concludes in the

moral appended to the tale. And Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood* "whips a pistol from her knickers" and, in a matter of weeks, sports a "lovely furry wolf skin coat."

Cinematic adaptations move in many different directions, from Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984), based on a *Little Red Riding Hood* story by the British novelist Angela Carter, to Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1996), but they unfailingly explore the erotic dimensions of the story.

For this first fairy tale, I have selected the Grimms' version for annotation, but included two variant forms in appendix 1 to demonstrate the different inflections, both oral and literary, to the tale. "The Story of Grandmother" is based on an oral tale recorded in nineteenth-century France. Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood," which appeared at the end of the seventeenth century, gives us a literary version of a tale that was widely disseminated in the oral storytelling culture of the time.



ONCE UPON A TIME there was a charming little girl. Everyone who set eyes on her adored her.

The person who loved her most of all was her grandmother, and she was always giving her presents. Once she made her a little hood of red velvet. It was so becoming that the girl wanted to wear it all the time, and so she came to be called Little Red Riding Hood.

One day, the girl's mother said to her: "Little Red Riding Hood, here are some cakes and a bottle of wine.² Take them to your grandmother. She's ill and feels weak, and they will make her strong. You'd better start off now, before it gets too hot, and when you're out in the woods, look straight ahead of you like a good little girl and don't stray from the path.³ Otherwise you'll fall and break the bottle, and then there'll be nothing for Grandmother. And when you walk into her parlor, don't forget to say

2. *cakes and a bottle of wine.* In Perrault's version, Little Red Riding Hood takes some cakes and a pot of butter to her grandmother. Trina Schart Hyman's illustrations for *Little Red Riding Hood* depict a red-nosed, alcoholic grandmother. Recent modern rescriptings, such as Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, use the girl's function as courier to construct a heroic figure who saves lives by making it through the woods with her basket of food.

3. *when you're out in the woods, look straight ahead of you like a good little girl and don't stray from the path.* The Grimms added this warning, along with the behavioral imperatives that follow. Acutely aware that their collection of fairy tales would model behavior for children, they looked for opportunities to encode the stories with morals, messages, and lessons in etiquette.



MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1897

With her wide, flowing cape and white ribbons, the figure of Little Red Riding Hood creates a decorative effect for an image used as a poster. The rigid symmetry of the girl's costume creates the effect of a prim and proper Little Red Riding Hood.



WARWICK GOBLE,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1923

Little Red Riding Hood is not sure what to make of the predator who eyes her as a tasty morsel. Ears perked and tongue hanging out, this wolf may not seem ferocious, but he is ready to pounce.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1909

In a barren landscape with spooky trees and no hint of flowers on the path, an unwary Little Red Riding Hood gives a lean and hungry wolf directions to Grandmother's house.

4. *the wolf*. The predator in this story is unusual, for he is a real beast rather than a cannibalistic ogre or witch. Folklorists have suggested that the story of Little Red Riding Hood may have originated relatively late (in the Middle Ages) as a cautionary tale warning children about the dangers of the forest. Wild animals, sinister men, and the hybrid figure of the werewolf were thought to menace the safety of children with powerful immediacy. In seventeenth-century Germany, shortly after the Thirty Years' War, fear of wolves and hysteria about werewolves reached especially high levels. The wolf, with his predatory nature, is frequently seen as a metaphor for sexually seductive men.

good morning, and don't go poking around in all the corners of the house."

"I'll do just as you say," Little Red Riding Hood promised her mother.

Grandmother lived deep in the woods, about half an hour's walk from the village. No sooner had Little Red Riding Hood set foot in the forest than she met the wolf.⁴ Little Red Riding Hood had no idea what a wicked beast he was, and so she wasn't in the least afraid of him.

"Good morning, Little Red Riding Hood," the wolf said.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Wolf," she replied.

"Where are you headed so early this morning, Little Red Riding Hood?"

"To Grandmother's house," she replied.

"What's that tucked under your apron?"

"Some cakes and wine. Yesterday we baked, and



JESSIE WILLCOX SMITH,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1919

The wolf's red tongue blends in with the hue of Red Riding Hood's cloak. Putting her best foot forward (like the wolf), the girl looks with some trepidation at the sharp canines, which are too close for comfort.



HARRY CLARKE,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1922

"He asked her whither she was going." A cautious Little Red Riding Hood carries an umbrella with her as she walks on a paved path through the woods. The wolf, impressed by the girl's fashion sense, observes her with bared teeth and blue eyes.



MARGARET EVANS PRICE,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1921

Red Riding Hood meets up with a wolf, who listens attentively to what she has to say. The outskirts of the village are still visible from the edge of the woods, where the two meet.

Grandmother, who is ill and feeling weak, needs something to make her better," she replied.

"Where is your grandmother's house, Little Red Riding Hood?"

"It's a good quarter of an hour's walk into the woods, right under the three big oak trees. You must know the place from the hazel hedges around it," said Little Red Riding Hood.

The wolf thought to himself: "That tender young thing will make a nice dainty snack! She'll taste even better than the old woman. If you're really crafty, you'll get them both."

The wolf walked alongside Little Red Riding Hood for a while. Then he said: "Little Red Riding Hood, have you



ANONYMOUS,
"Little Red Riding Hood"

Little Red Riding Hood has strayed from the path and is picking flowers when she encounters a wolf with a hang-dog look.



ANONYMOUS,
"Little Red Riding Hood"

One of the few Red Riding Hood figures in somewhat formal attire, this girl sports a red hat but no cape or cloak. The long-legged wolf eyes her as a tasty morsel.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1861

The wolf and Little Red Riding Hood gaze at one another, each attempting to fathom what is on the mind of the other. Note how the lines of the wolf's body conform to the tree trunk, how his tail and rear haunches face the viewer, and how he peers down at the girl, who seems to be pointing the way to Grandmother's house.

noticed the beautiful flowers all around? Why don't you stay and look at them for a while? I don't think you've even heard how sweetly the birds are singing. You're acting as if you were on the way to school, when it's so much fun out here in the woods."

Little Red Riding Hood looked with eyes wide open and noticed how the sunbeams were dancing in the trees. She caught sight of the beautiful flowers all around and thought: "If you bring Grandmother a fresh bouquet, she'll be overjoyed. It's still so early in the morning that I'm sure to get there in plenty of time."

Little Red Riding Hood left the path and ran off into the woods looking for flowers. As soon as she had picked one, she caught sight of an even more beautiful one some-

where else and went after it. And so she went ever deeper into the woods.

The wolf ran straight to Grandmother's house and knocked at the door.

"Who's there?"

"Little Red Riding Hood. I've brought some cakes and wine. Open the door."

"Just raise the latch," Grandmother called out. "I'm too weak to get out of bed."



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1861

The cat scurries under the bed, and Grandma, whose glasses and snuffbox slide down the bedcovers, becomes the victim of the wolf.

The wolf raised the latch, and the door swung wide open. Without saying a word, he went straight to Grandmother's bed and gobbled her right up. Then he put on her clothes and her nightcap, lay down in her bed, and drew the curtains.

Meanwhile, Little Red Riding Hood was running around looking for flowers. When she had so many in her arms that she couldn't carry any more, she suddenly remembered Grandmother and got back on the path leading to her house. She was surprised to find the door open,



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
 "Little Red Riding Hood," 1861

It seems to be dawning on Little Red Riding Hood that the large nightcap cannot conceal the identity of the figure wearing it. Yet she does not look at all startled and makes no effort to bolt from the bed.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
 "Little Red Riding Hood," 1909

Little Red Riding Hood's cloak builds a powerful contrast to the dark patterns of "Granny's" sheet, blanket, and curtain. The sharp teeth are in clear evidence when Red Riding Hood draws the floral curtain.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
 "Little Red Riding Hood," 1930

The wolf, with nightcap and spectacles, looks quite benign as Little Red Riding Hood approaches with her basket and flowers. The paws, with their long claws, betray the fact that this wolf is up to no good.

5. "Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have!"

In the classic dialogue between girl and wolf, Little Red Riding Hood invokes the sense of hearing, sight, feeling, and taste, leaving out the sense of smell. The inventory of body parts was no doubt expanded by folk raconteurs, who took advantage of opportunities for ribald humor. A parallel dialogue in oral versions of the tale provides an inventory of Little Red Riding Hood's clothes, which she removes and discards one by one.

and when she stepped into the house, she had such a strange feeling that she thought: "Oh, my goodness, I'm usually so glad to be at Grandmother's house, but today I feel really uncomfortable."

Little Red Riding Hood called out a hello, but there was no reply. Then she went over to the bed and pulled back the curtains. Grandmother was lying there with her nightcap pulled down over her face. She looked very strange.

"Oh, Grandmother, what big ears you have!"⁵

"The better to hear you with."

"Oh, Grandmother, what big eyes you have!"

"The better to see you with."

"Oh, Grandmother, what big hands you have!"

"The better to grab you with!"

"Oh, Grandmother, what a big, scary mouth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"



ANONYMOUS,
"Little Red Riding Hood," 1865

This Little Red Riding Hood is clearly aware that the creature in Grandmother's bed is not a human being. Since this is an illustration for Perrault's version of the tale, we know that the girl is doomed.



ROSA PETHERICK,
"Little Red Riding Hood"

The naïve girl seems baffled but not at all terrified of the creature in Grandmother's bed. Note that one of the flowers has dropped on the floor as she ponders the furry face under the nightcap.

No sooner had the wolf said these words than he leaped out of bed and gobbled up poor Little Red Riding Hood.⁶

Once the wolf had stilled his appetite, he lay back down in the bed, fell asleep, and began to snore very loudly. A huntsman⁷ happened to be passing by the house just then and thought: "How loudly the old woman is snoring! I'd better check to see if anything's wrong." He walked into the house and, when he reached the bed, he realized that a wolf was lying in it.

"I've found you at last, you old sinner," he said. "I've been after you for a long time now."

He pulled out his musket and was about to take aim when he realized that the wolf might have eaten Grandmother and that he could still save her. Instead of firing, he took out a pair of scissors and began cutting open the

6. he leaped out of bed and gobbled up poor Little Red Riding Hood. Many critics have viewed this scene as a symbolic death, followed by rebirth, once Little Red Riding Hood is released from the belly of the beast. The connection with biblical and mythical figures (most notably Jonah) is self-evident, though Little Red Riding Hood has also been interpreted as a figure that symbolizes the sun, engulfed by the night and reemerging at dawn. More recently, the swallowing whole of the grandmother and the girl has been seen as a symbolic double rape.

7. A huntsman. Note that the male figures in the story are either predators or rescuers. The huntsman has been seen as representing



EUGÈNE FEYEN,
“Little Red Riding Hood,” 1846

An ailing Granny appears to be enjoying small talk with a well-coiffed Little Red Riding Hood. Teeth and paws signal that this wolf, masquerading as an invalid, can turn at any moment into a murderous predator. The quiet formality of the tableau stands in stark contrast to the violence that will follow.

patriarchal protection for the two women, who are unable to fend for themselves. In oral versions, the girl in the story does not need to rely on a huntsman passing by grandmother’s house.

8. *began cutting open the belly of the sleeping wolf.* Freud and others read this scene as an allusion to the birth process. The wolf, as the poet Anne Sexton wryly notes, undergoes “a kind of caesarian section.” One psychoanalytic critic views the wolf as suffering from pregnancy envy.

9. *fetches some large stones and fills the wolf’s belly with them.* The stones have been read as



ARPAD SCHMIDHAMMER,
“Little Red Riding Hood”

Flowers and basket are scattered on the ground when the ferocious wolf attacks Little Red Riding Hood. This scene adorned a German book of fairy tales for children.

belly of the sleeping wolf.⁸ After making a few cuts, he caught sight of a red cap. He made a few more cuts, and a girl leaped out, crying: “Oh, I was so terrified! It was so dark in the belly of the wolf.”

Although she could barely breathe, the aged grandmother also found her way back out of the belly. Little Red Riding Hood quickly fetched some large stones and filled the wolf’s belly with them.⁹ When the wolf awoke, he tried to race off, but the stones were so heavy that his legs collapsed, and he fell down dead.

Little Red Riding Hood, her grandmother, and the huntsman were elated. The huntsman skinned the wolf and took the pelt home with him. Grandmother ate the cakes and drank the wine that Little Red Riding Hood had brought her and recovered her health. Little Red Riding Hood said to herself: “Never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it.”



THERE IS A story about another time that Little Red Riding Hood met a wolf on the way to Grandmother's house, while she was bringing her some cakes. The wolf tried to get her to stray from the path, but Little Red Riding Hood was on her guard and kept right on going. She told her grandmother that she had met a wolf and that he had greeted her. But he had looked at her in such an evil way that "If we hadn't been out in the open, he would have gobbled me right up."

"Well then," said Grandmother. "We'll just lock the door so he can't get in."

A little while later the wolf knocked at the door and called out: "Open the door, Grandmother. It's Little Red Riding Hood, and I'm bringing you some cakes."

The two kept completely quiet and refused to open the door. Then old Graybeard circled the house a few times and jumped up on the roof. He was planning on waiting until Little Red Riding Hood went home. Then he was going to creep after her and gobble her up in the dark. But Grandmother figured out what was on his mind. There was a big stone trough in front of the house. Grandmother said to the child: "Here's a bucket, Little Red Riding Hood. Yesterday I cooked some sausages in it. Take the water in which they were boiled and pour it into the trough."

Little Red Riding Hood kept taking water to the trough until it was completely full. The smell from those sausages reached the wolf's nostrils. His neck was stretched out so far from sniffing and looking around that he lost his balance and began to slide down the roof. He slid right down into the trough and was drowned. Little Red Riding Hood walked home cheerfully, and no one ever did her any harm.

a sign of sterility, but they are more likely an appropriate retaliation for the incorporation of Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother.