

Artemis Pados

Dr. Hendrickson

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The New Little Red Riding Hood

Charles Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" and Grimm Brothers' "Little Red Cap" transform the oral tale "The Story of Grandmother" about a young girl being stopped by a big bad wolf on her way to visit her grandmother by manipulating some of the plot of the story and using violence to superimpose an "edifying moral" or word of caution (Tatar 6). A more recent version of the myth by Roald Dahl titled "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" further reinterprets and reshapes the story harnessing violence in a different way to convey a new message. Dahl, using Perrault and Grimm as pre-texts in the textual network of Little Red Riding Hood tales, changes some descriptions to remove emphasis from the attractiveness and naiveness of Little Red Riding Hood as a young female character, while also utilizing violence to convey a near opposite understanding of what it is to be a young girl, showing competence and cleverness rather than ignorance and helplessness as the pre-texts present. In addition, Dahl draws upon the intertextual knowledge that the reader has of the script of the story and the object of the pistol to, in the end, show that young girls can be powerful and controlling if properly prepared and equipped.

The four versions of the story create a textual network where "The Story of Grandmother" is the first and oldest pre-text of oral tale origin, Perrault's and Grimms' tales follow after, and Dahl's poetic version is the most modern. All interpretations of the myth share

essential plot features which include a young girl making a journey to her sick grandmother's house to deliver some goods. She is stopped by an ill-intentioned wolf who diverts her path in order to arrive at grandmother's before her, planning to devour both her and grandmother! Although the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood are core characters in all the versions of the story, their descriptions and actions (actions related to violence mainly) are altered by each author to add a different moral message to the tale. In fact, in the original oral tale "The Story of Grandmother" there seems to be arguable no significant moral besides the broader conclusion that young girls (and their grandmothers) make poor decisions and are ignorant, foolish, and naïve, while in the following renditions of the story more nuanced messages become evident.

The three stories of focus by Perrault, Brothers Grimm, and Dahl introduce the wolf as an evil character full of malicious intentions. Perrault writes for example that the wolf "wanted to eat her [Little Red Riding Hood] right there on the spot" and later devoured "her in no time" (Perrault 12). Similarly, in Grimms' version the wolf reassures himself that his craftiness will allow him to "get them both [Little Red Riding Hood and her grandma]" (Grimm 14). In Dahl's rendition, just as the other tales do, the wolf presents himself and his ill-intentions and wishes right at the start of the story. Violent nature and actions are central, but not necessarily unique, to the wolf character in each of the stories. The description of the wolf in each of the myths compares differently with the nature of the description of other characters, namely Little Red Riding Hood, across the texts.

Perrault and the Grimms portray Little Red Riding Hood in a similar way to each other, but Dahl alters this character and creates a new, opposite understanding of young girls. Perrault and Grimms, the pre-texts that is, introduce Little Red as a kindhearted, rather ignorant girl who is "the prettiest you can imagine" (Perrault 11). She is described chasing butterflies and picking

flowers while the wolf is executing his devious lunch plans to emphasize her foolishness and naiveness. Grimm and Perrault's plot of butterfly chasing, bird watching, and flower picking for her grandma simply show "a dear little girl [who] if you set eyes on her you could not but love her" which, in conjunction with being drawn into obvious manipulation, presents Little Red Riding Hood as thoroughly dull and gullible (Grimm 13). Dahl's version, however, omits an introduction of Little Red Riding Hood and removes attention on the young girl as a good looking, innocent female character. Dahl, instead, demonstrates the young girl's quick wits by having her immediately notice that her 'grandma' is truly a wolf in disguise and puts forth a plot (the little girl grabbing "a pistol from her knickers" and shooting the wolf) which helps classify the girl as intelligent, independent, prepared, and purposeful, rather than mindless and naïve (Dahl 22).

The three post-oral-tale versions of the Little Red Riding Hood story use violence in a different way to each arrive at a distinct moral message. Perrault incorporates violence by having the wolf character eat both the grandmother and Little Red. The explicitly stated bad intentions in addition to the savage acts creates a contrast between the wolf's malicious nature and the young girl's pre-established kind disposition. Similar to Perrault, in the Brothers Grimm version the benevolence and malevolence of the two main characters, Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf, creates a contrast that is at the forefront of the tale. This is explicitly seen in the scene where the wolf coaxes the ever so caring young girl to spend some time picking flowers for her grandmother, convincing her that grandmother "will be overjoyed" (Grimm 14). The Grimms employs violence not only in the wolf's cruel plan for a meal and his generally deceptive nature, but also for good deeds: A huntsman appears who cuts open the stomach of the wolf to save both the girl and her grandmother. Dahl on the other hand completely changes the meaning and effect

of violence from the pre-texts. Little Red Riding Hood pulls out a pistol and shoots the wolf before he can eat her. Knowledge and understanding of the plot of the pre-texts amplifies the unexpected, almost comical nature of this scene, since in all the previous tales Little Red is defenseless, clueless, and become eaten. Dahl's poetic style and rhyme also seem to add a sort of playfulness and frivolity to the situation. The violence that Dahl incorporates this way into the tale not only contrasts the pre-texts' conceptions of a young girl's character, but also shifts the control in the story from the wolf to the girl. In Dahl's scene, Little Red aggressively and so confidently puts herself in a position of power. The shift in power is pre-announced when Little Red 'breaks script' and instead of mentioning the big teeth as the wolf expected, she draws attention to his furry coat exposing his disguise. Considering the dialogue in the poem as a script for the characters (which the reader is familiar with from the pre-texts of the Little Red Riding Hood textual network of stories), the young girl breaking script asserts her intelligence and power to the wolf who is evidently lost in confusion. Further celebrating confirmation is offered at the end of the story in humorous fashion once again when Little Red Riding Hood abandons her "silly hood" for a luxurious coat made of the villainous wolf's skin (Tatar 22).

The moral of the story and the way it is developed is different in each version of the tale, but the message of Dahl's "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" places young girls in a distinctly different frame of view than its predecessors by Perrault and Grimm. In "Little Red Riding Hood" by Charles Perrault, the opposing descriptions of the wolf character and Little Red Riding Hood lead to a word of caution for girls, especially pretty and sweet ones, to be wary that just anyone, even the tamest looking wolf, can manipulate and take advantage of an innocent child. The moral that Brothers Grimm offer in their version of the myth is two-fold: violent means can be used to do good as well as bad and young girls, although naïve, do learn their

lesson from past mistakes (when another wolf arrives, they will know how to stay safe)! Dahl on the other hand provides a message to the reader that establishes a different perspective of the traits of girls. He shows that young girls are observant and leery, also clever, astute, and independent. Young girls have power and can handle even the most threatening and malevolent wolf they encounter in their path of life.

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