

Sexual Innuendoes in *Little Red Riding Hood*

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Abstract: Fairy tales have maintained an endearing relationship with society and the tropes and leitmotifs used in them have become subjects of common discourse. The story of *Red Riding Hood* has been read for centuries by children, and various versions of it exist around the world. On the face of it, the tale presents the story of a little girl who meets a ‘bad wolf’ who, disguised as her grandmother, tries to eat her up. However, this tale, like almost all fairy tales has subterranean messages that go beyond the ‘once upon a time’ and ‘they lived happily ever after’ configuration. This examines the many messages that the story presents, proving that fairy tales go beyond the story to ‘depict metaphorically opportunities for human adaptation and the conflicts that arise when we do not establish civilizing codes for society’ (Zipes). Sexual messages are replete in the story and the red hood that she wears has often been interpreted as a symbol of sexual awakening. The dangers of sexual predators to young women, sexual barricades for the female, sexual experimentation (Red Riding Hood going to the forest in the dark after disobeying her mother) and the sexual act itself (the wolf swallowing her and the dialogues (“what big eyes, big hands...you have”) have been variously interpreted by critics over the centuries. This essay examines these and other sexual cues in order to understand that there is much more to the fairy tale than its apparent innocence.

Keywords: Fairy tales, sexual messages, cautionary tale, sexual initiation.

Fairy tales have been the staple diet of children when they are bored, before they go to bed or just anytime. Arthur Frank insists in his highly stimulating book *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio- Narratology*, that stories have “lives of their own, which we then embody” (Zipes xii). The fairy tale cannot be examined as something that possesses a one-dimensional meaning; “adults have always read, censored, approved and distributed the so-called fairy tale for children” (Bacchilega 3). Fairy tales have risen above merely being a genre and have transformed themselves into commentaries on life, socialization of children, sexuality and perpetuation of “values”. Jack Zipes in his book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* says that as long as there is discontentment with the civilizing process, there will be fairy tales that will project “alternatives to the status quo or that will reconcile us to social conventions and religious beliefs” (xii). A fairy tale therefore has a life that goes beyond the chimera it presents to the little and not so little readers. It allows them to construct a reality of their own based on the perceptions that the tales build around the incidents and characters of the story. Until the 17th and 18th centuries, fairy tales were centres of civilization. In Europe they used to be the chief form of winter entertainment. In agricultural populations, telling fairy tales became a kind of essential spiritual occupation.

One may ask why the story of *Red Riding Hood* is suitable for “little” children. A young girl is attacked by a wild beast and is saved just in time. The animal has already

eaten her grandmother. “Does this present an antique parallel to modern media violence?” (Douglas 3). The more interesting part of Charles Perrault’s story is the poem that comes at the end of it which points to the real message of the story which is not related to little girls but to adolescents perhaps:

The Wolfe, I say, for Wolves too sure there are
Of every sort and every character
Who tame, familiar, full of complaisance
Ogle and leer, languish, cajole and glance;
With luring tongues, and language wondrous sweet
Follow young ladies as they walk the street
Ev’n to their very houses, nay, bedside
And artful, tho’ their tru design they hide
Yet ah! These simpering Wolves! Who does not see
Most dangerous of Wolves indeed they be. (Perrault 25)

The message of the tale echoes in the poem. Ogling, leering, cajoling of young ladies by ‘Wolves’ on the street and into their houses and not to forget in their beds form a forewarning to young ladies. So sexual messages are replete in the story and the ‘teaching’ and ‘socializing’ of a young woman is evident. In a similar vein, Jack Zipes in his famous book *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* talks of stereotypes enunciated in the story. He says that the tale reinforces the notion that “women want to be raped” (4). He also points out that when his book first appeared it caused a great deal of “commotion” because the study was based on the premise that literary fairy tales were consciously cultivated and employed in 17th century France to “reinforce the regime of sexuality in modern Europe” (xi, xii). He makes a strong statement when he says that because rape and violence are at the core of the history of the tale, it is the most widespread and notorious fairy tale in the Western world, if not in the entire world.

Fairy tales and their subterranean messages have been the subject of much debate and research, with critics arguing ceaselessly about how much and how far one can go while unmasking these “innocent tales”. In the interview “Are Fairy Tales still Useful to Children,” Jack Zipes says that on an unconscious level, fairy tales bring together “subjective and assimilatory impulses” that dispassionately mimic a social milieu, thus intriguing readers and allowing latitude of interpretations in keeping with one’s ideology (*The Art of Storytelling Show – Brother Wolf Storytelling*). Again, Zipes also says in *A Fairy Tale is more than just a Fairy Tale* that fairy tales are closer to real life experiences and are filled with desire and optimism... brutality, bluntness, violence and perversity. They expose untruth, and the best are bare, brusque and concise (96).

The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* has been dismembered countless times, each dissection throwing up a new element at every instance. Several versions of the story exist around the world but most versions in modern popular culture are based on the classic literary tale published by Charles Perrault in 17th century France. In fact, the story is so popular that Barnes and Nobles sells more than hundred different editions including

one diagrammed in American Sign Language (Orenstein 4). Charles Dickens famously said, “I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss” (Orenstein 3). It is widely believed that Perrault based his text on an old folktale known simply as *The Story of Grandmother*, versions of which have survived in the oral traditions of rural France, Austria and Northern Italy (Tehrani 7). Just as there are many versions of the story around the world, there are also multifarious ways of reading the tale. Tellers have consciously and subconsciously “manipulated the plot to portray a seduction by a temptress, the rape of a virgin or the passage of a young girl into womanhood” (Orenstein iv). *Little Red Riding Hood* like *The Little Mermaid* is often read as a story of sexual initiation replete with cues that convey this subtext.

Red as a colour is known to have sexual connotations. Red has been used across time and culture to symbolize female sexuality in ritual, folklore, and literature; red means “open for business” in red-light districts...these societal uses of red are posited to emerge from and extend a biologically-engrained propensity, shared with our primate relatives, to link red and sex (Elliot and Pazda 1) The red colour in the story appears to have symbolic and sexual significance. The red colour which the girl wears on her cape refers to menstruation and her journey into the forest has been interpreted as a journey of sexual initiation. Although it is not clear why Perrault added the red hood, we know that red was generally associated at that time with sin, sensuality and the devil (Zipes 26). Fairy tales often act as warnings to children about exacting standards of behavior expected of them. Red Riding Hood is sternly warned by her mother about wolves and strangers, in other words, men who could rape and men who could violate the female body. But Red Riding Hood wishes to take risks and talks to a stranger, thus exhibiting risqué conduct for which she is “adequately punished”. Jack Zipes, in his book and subsequent essays repeatedly posits that “Little Red Riding Hood” is a “rape tale, one in which the heroine survives or dies after violation – a cautionary tale about dealing with predatory males in animalistic form”. Zipes traces the origin of this literary fairy tale to violent male sexual fantasies about women (Reid 10). The common notion that women often invite being raped is strongly advocated in the story as Red Riding Hood stops in the woods to look at the beautiful flowers and in doing so disobeys her mother. While she is tempted to stop, she encounters a stranger who happens to be the wolf. Colleen Ward in her book *Attitudes towards Rape - Feminist and Social Psychological Perspectives* points at an instance of an American woman’s guilt towards her rape, “Maybe it was my fault. See that’s where I get when I think about it. My father always said whatever a man did to a woman, she provoked it” (3). Red Riding Hood is also warned but she does not listen and so it implies that she deserves it.

The references made to the size of the grandmother’s body parts are significant. “What big eyes you have, what big hands, what big teeth you have....” Red Riding Hood goes on until the Wolf replies “Better to eat you with.” The act of eating or swallowing is also seen as a sexual act in which the girl would be eaten by the wolf – the man – and in the process loses her virginity. Fairy tales that have sexual overtones do not deal with sex per se, but with precocious sexuality - “sex before its time”. The messages are indirect (Cashdon). For example *The Little Mermaid* never makes explicit the connection between the heroines’ lack of legs and the absence of the vagina, even though this constitutes the

underlying dynamics of the play. So to explore sexuality and gender in the fairy tale is to probe more general questions of how the genre represents the “real” (Seifert 12). To explore what a fairy tale means in and to modernism, the history that had influenced their status has to be acknowledged. While these tales are often read as “the character of a people” or “collective truths,” individual stories often reflect historically specific versions of gender, class and sexuality (Martin 13). Red Riding Hood has often been used as a tale of firm warning; thus unwittingly exposing a child to the dangers of sexual assault and sexual predators who violate virginity and destroy the innocence of a child.

Red Riding Hood has been used in advertisements and pornography to represent a seductive woman all in red luring her victims. She has the features of the femme fatale oozing passion and deception. Disneyfication of the story has not taken place yet and whatever little charm of the story that remains would be miserably sanitized because of the fact that the story is essentially about violence. “The strong appeal of Little Red Riding Hood for so many contemporary authors and illustrators is no doubt explained partially by the fact that ...she does not owe her cult status to Disney...with the result children are likely to remember it more accurately than other popular fairy tales that have been “contaminated” (Beckett vii), (read sanitized, rarefied and brutally Americanized). Perrault has often been criticized for making the “sexual parable” too explicit in his version of the tale although the “sexual innuendoes” in his version are not limited to the moral. Bettelheim, the psychologist who worked on Red Riding Hood accused Perrault of “turning a naïve little girl into a fallen woman” (Beckett 11).

An interesting fact of the story is that Red Riding Hood’s mother allows her to go into the forest despite the fear of wolves. Wolves were common predators in those times and instilling a fear in the minds of children against them was not uncommon. Several stories had a fearful wolf which could devour children, and mothers warned them not to wander into lonely places. Perrault probably had something menacing in mind when he sends Red Riding Hood all alone into the forest that day. Her journey can be seen as an initiation into sexual life and her ability to risk her honour. Red Riding Hood stops to see some beautiful blooming flowers (like her own blooming youth?) and the beauty of the flowers ironically act as a trap for her to be accosted by the wolf. She is punished for giving into her desires and she knows she has to be good if she wishes to be treated as good. The quest for the chaste woman has been an age old pursuit and fairy tales have always looked at the “good woman” for the perpetuation of incorruptibility. If a girl is not chaste, she will be chased and that’s what happens to Red Riding Hood. Charles Perrault had no trouble explaining his tale to the readers:

From this story one learns that children
Especially young lasses,
Pretty, courteous, and well-bred,
Are wrong to listen to any sort of man. (Tartar 39)

For generations, parents have used the story as a cautionary tale. Several other cues in the story have also been noted for sexual interpretation. The butter which melts in the pot has been appropriated with semen and the filled basket of cakes and butter is the

gift of virginity that a girl carries with her in her “youth and naiveté”. Some critics swear by the veracity of such interpretations while others pledge by their inadequacies. *Little Red Riding Hood* has been the favourite of such bastardization (read improvisation) and Red Riding Hood is now a porn star too with all her oomph and snazzy razzmatazz. In fact, a book *Little Red Riding Hood Eats the Wolf* published by a Chilean writer Pablo Quintano in 2012 was banned in 2015 as it attempted to show erotic stories with Red Riding Hood as the main character. Fairy tales continually modernize themselves and replace older cultural features with more recent ones (Bottigheimer 4) and *Little Red Riding Hood* continues to attract and intrigue readers of all ages. The plain and simple girl trotting along the forest is just one of the many tropes of the story, while the meta-narrative and the hypertext go far beyond, flooding the researcher’s mind with their numerous interpretations.

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