The Many Faces of Red Riding Hood

“No folk or fairy tale has been so relentlessly reinterpreted, recontextualized, and retold over the centuries as Little Red Riding Hood,” asserts Beckett in Recycling Red Riding Hood (xv), and Kiefer supposes that the wolf of the tale is “perhaps the best-known wolf” in German folklore (Kiefer 294). While Perrault was the first to commit the story to text, the Grimm version is the more well known today. In Perrault’s “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge,” the wolf eats the young girl in her grandmother’s house, and there the story stops with no happy ending. The Grimm brothers’ version seems to be derived from the French version, except that in their telling, “Rotkäppchen,” the young girl and her grandmother are rescued by a nearby woodcutter who slices the wolf’s belly open to rescue them (Bettelheim 167-170). Critics and scholars have quite a bit to say about the girl in red: Freudians say the color of Red’s cloak indicates her sexual desires and posit that she was willingly seduced by the wolf. Feminists reject this and insist that the story is about men as womanizers. Gardner himself paints the story as an allegory about good and evil that tackles the question of how innocents can suffer if God exists (Gardner 179-184). No matter what meanings we find in the story, there is no disputing how widely it has spread and how many ways one can look at it.

Michael Hague’s interpretation of “Little Red Riding Hood” appears in his collection Cinderella and Other Tales from Perrault. Like every tale in the collection, the title page features a figure central to the story—here it is a long, lean wolf in human clothing. Every few pages of text there is a full-page illustration. The first shows on a forest trail a young girl with curls and a red hooded cloak innocently contemplating a scheming wolf wearing a jacket. The other illustration depicts Red suspiciously peering at the wolf, now dressed in her grandmother’s clothing and tucked under the quilt in her grandmother’s bed. The watercolor illustrations seem dreamy and old-fashioned, showcasing the tale as one of our collective heritage that is centuries old.
The plot of Hague’s version follows Perrault’s. It begins, “There was once upon a time a little village girl […]” and describes how Red’s hood was made by her grandmother. This grandmother has fallen ill, so Red’s mother sends her with a cake and some butter, but no warning about proper behavior, to the grandmother’s house on the other side of the wood. On the way Red meets a wolf who asks her where she’s going. Red tells him, even giving specific instructions for how to get there. The wolf says he was planning to visit the grandmother, too, and suggests they take different routes to see who arrives first. The wolf picks the shorter path and runs the whole way while Red dawdles and picks flowers. The wolf arrives at the grandmother’s house, impersonates Red, is admitted by the grandmother, and immediately eats her and gets into her bed. When Red finally arrives at her grandmother’s house, she identifies herself and is admitted by the wolf. She marvels at his long arms (“the better to hug you with!”), his long legs (“the better to run with!”), his long ears (“the better to hear with!”), his large eyes (“the better to see with!”), and finally his long teeth (“the better to eat you with!”) and is promptly eaten by the wolf, and there the story ends.

The language of James Marshall’s version is a bit more updated (rather than Red’s grandmother being ill, her mother tells her that “Granny isn’t feeling up to snuff today”) and is illustrated “in his characteristically humorous way” (Kiefer 295) with a cartoon-like style. It is also presented as a picture book with many more illustrations. This version begins, “A long time ago […]” and does not describe the origin of Red’s hood. Red is to take her Granny’s favorite custard and go straight to Granny’s, not to tarry along the way, and not to talk to any strangers. When she first meets the wolf, she does not speak with him, but the wolf is charming and Red eventually tells him where she is going, again describing Granny’s house. This time the wolf at first offers to escort her, but runs off to Granny’s house when Red stops to pick sunflowers. Granny, more developed in this version, is upset that the wolf is bothering her; he eats her, dons her clothing, and hops into bed. When Red shows up, she notes fewer characteristics: he has big eyes to see her, long to hug her, and big teeth to eat her, this last observation deserving its own page of text (all capitalized) and illustration. The wolf eats her and falls asleep, but his snores draw the attention of a passing woodcutter, who jumps through the window, kills the wolf, and cuts him open, rescuing Red and
Granny, who is irritated that it was too dark in the wolf’s stomach to read. Here the moral is delivered explicitly: “Red Riding Hood promised never ever to speak to another stranger, charming matters or not. And she never did.” And the humor of the story carries through, too: the very last page shows a determined Red pushing away a toothy crocodile holding a hat and cane.

The Grimm version, on which Marshall’s version is based, is more forgiving than Perrault’s, offering the chance of a lesson learned and better behavior in the future. Marshall also treats the story more humorously with his cartoon drawings, updated language, feistier grandmother, and the appearance of the crocodile at the end. Although it is not quite the classic that Hague’s is, it is more palatable and more modern. It will probably have the widest appeal during storytelling of all of the books considered in this paper.

Even further from the traditional versions is “Red Ridin’ in the Hood” from Red Ridin’ in the Hood and Other Cuentos, written by Patricia Santos Marcantonio and illustrated by Renato Alarcão. This collection is “eleven classic tales […] with an injection of Latino culture” (dust jacket). Kiefer recommends these tales for late elementary students who will be able to appreciate the story on its own and see its connection to the classic tales (39). It would also work well read aloud to children old enough to appreciate it as an adaptation of the original tale but perhaps too young to tackle the entire collection on their own. The illustrations—there are three showing key moments in the story—are black-and-white pencil drawings that give the story a slightly dark feel.

“Red Ridin’ in the Hood” is the second cuento in this collection and jumps right into the action with no “once upon a time.” Unlike the other tales, it is told from the point of view of Roja, the protagonist, whose mother is preparing food for Roja’s sick abuelita. Roja turns up her nose at the “tin of chicken soup, heavy on cilantro, along with a jar of peppermint tea, peppers from our garden, and a hunk of white goat cheese that smelled like Uncle José’s feet.” She would rather go see a movie, but her mother insists she put on the red dress her abuelita made for her—though Roja does not like how old-fashioned it is with its long hem and high collar—and take the food to her. Her mother gives her bus fare and cautions her to go straight there and warns her away from Forest Street. Roja decides to pocket the bus fare and walk, but gets tired partway there and takes a
shortcut along Forest Street. A flashy car pulls up next to her and the driver, Lobo Chávez, engages her in conversation—though Roja never gives directions to her abuelita’s—and suggests she stop at a nearby panadería to get calabaza empanadas. Roja does and it is nearly dark by the time she arrives at Abuelita’s. She notices right away that the figure in bed wearing Abuelita’s clothing is Lobo Chávez, but decides to play along for the time being. They engage in the usual observation of his features: big orejas to hear her with, big ojos to see her with, and big dientes to eat her with, but this time Roja shoves the stinky cheese into his mouth when he pounces and calls for the police. They arrive and subdue Lobo Chávez and Roja’s abuelita returns from a game of bingo. She scolds Lobo Chávez, the police give Roja the keys to Lobo’s car for her bravery, and upon hearing about the food Roja has brought, Abuelita suggests they go out for Chinese instead.

The moral here is that “this is a dangerous world, and it’s best to keep your ears and eyes wide open, even if they aren’t as big as a wolf’s,” and Roja’s disobedience and lack of caution is overcome by her perception and resourcefulness and she actually comes out better in the end. She is no do-eared innocent like the children in the previous versions and in the illustrations is shown as an older child or even a young teen. This telling also adapts the tale to a Latino culture and, with the careful use of a few Spanish words, can even serve as a bridge to non-Latino children.

An entirely different version but with many similar elements can be found in the Caldecott Medal-winning picture book Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story From China by Ed Young. A mother leaves her three children to go visit their grandmother on her birthday. The mother instructs them to lock the door and not let anyone in, but after she has gone, a wolf appears, pretending to be their grandmother. He explains his way into the house where he blows out the lights and coaxes the children into bed. They note his strange physical characteristics: the wolf’s tail feels like a bush on Po Po’s foot but is explained as hemp strings to make a basket; the wolf’s claws feel like thorns on Po Po’s hands but are explained as an awl to make shoes. Upon noticing the wolf’s hairy face, the eldest asks the wolf if he has ever had ginkgo nuts, which grow on the tree just outside the house. She describes them as soft and tender and granting eternal life. The wolf wants one and sends the children out to get one. They hide in the tree, though, so the wolf follows to find out where they
have gone. They insist that one must pick the ginkgo nuts oneself to reap their benefits, and the oldest child offers to pull the wolf up into the tree on a basket. But the first time, she drops the wolf halfway. The second child joins in and they pull the wolf up higher and drop him again. The third time, all three children pull the wolf almost all the way up before dropping him; he falls on the ground and bumps his head and “breaks his heart to pieces”. The children return to the house and when their mother comes back the next day, they relate to her their adventure.

While Young’s story shares elements of the Western “Little Red Riding Hood,” it has distinctly Chinese elements and varies in important ways as well. The illustrations blend the Chinese panel format with watercolors and pastels, “creat[ing] a mysterious nighttime setting illuminated by candles, moonlight, and the shining eyes of the wolf” (Kiefer 303). The dark, soft illustrations also contribute to a sense of closeness and familiarity—genuine on the part of the sisters and emphasizing the wolf’s status as an interloper. Here the moral is still to mind one’s parents and not talk to strangers, but the possibility for cleverness and teamwork to trump danger is reinforced. Interestingly, the exchange regarding the un-grandmotherly characteristics of the wolf appears here as well. Most importantly, although the character of Red Riding Hood does not even appear in this tale, the universal elements—a wolf in grandmother’s clothing, the peril of the children, and the scrutiny of unusual characteristics—remain and are enough to identify this tale as a cousin to “Red Riding Hood,” though it comes from all the way across the world. This tale would also be popular at storytime, especially for its beautiful illustrations.

Other versions of “Red Riding Hood” stretch the story even further: Toby Forward has written The Wolf’s Story: What Really Happened to Little Red Riding Hood, Jon Scieszka included “Little Red Running Shorts” as a counterpart in his collection The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales, and Jack Zipes’s The Trials & Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood includes “Little Red Riding Hood as a Dictator Would Tell It” by H. I. Phillips. The original tale appeals to our sense of danger, to parents’ desire for their children to mind them, and to our collective fear of the unknown and the alien. The story of the little girl in red on her way to her grandmother’s who meets a wolf is an old tale, a well-known tale, a widely-discussed tale, and an often modified tale.
Works Compared


Bibliography


Selection Sources


MacDonald, Margaret Read and Brian W. Sturm. The Storyteller’s Sourcebook: A Subject, Title, and Motif Index to Folklore Collections for Children. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001.
Little Red is about to go on a mission along with the big bad wolf and their team of fairy tale characters. There’s no silver lining in this fairy tale. Because things are about to get bloody. Little Red Riding Hood has just turned 18, and like most women her age, can’t help but think of boys and marriage and what married couples do. However her parents often fret over her naivety and they never allow her to be alone with men. However, one day her mother tasks her with bringing a basket of goodies to her sick grandmother’s house in the woods. On her way there, Little Red will have an encounter with a man who is like no man she has ever met. In fact he seems more like a beast to her than a man. When Little Red Riding Hood reached the cottage, she entered and went to Grandma’s™s bedside.

"My! What big eyes you have, Grandma!" she said in surprise. "All the better to see you with, my dear!" replied the wolf.

"My! What big ears you have, Grandma!" said Little Red Riding Hood. Little Red Riding Hood screamed and the woodcutters in the forest came running to the cottage. They beat the Big Bad Wolf and rescued Grandma from the cupboard. Grandma hugged Little Red Riding Hood with joy. The Big Bad Wolf ran away never to be seen again. Little Red Riding Hood had learnt her lesson and never spoke to strangers ever again.

The grandmother was most assuredly NOT locked in a cupboard. Why did you change it? Reply.

No folk or fairy tale has been so relentlessly reinterpreted, recontextualized, and retold over the centuries as Little Red Riding Hood (Beckett xv). There are many versions of the tale, one of which is a pioneer postmodern feminist writer Angela Carter’s retelling called The Werewolf. Angela Carter is a writer, famous with her novels and reworking of fairy tales writing with a feminist and postmodernist discourse. Arguing that fairy tales implement patriarchal ideas in the readers’ minds, she takes a hold of those tales in her own twisted way. She tries to subvert gender roles by giving Little Red Riding Hood - A Politically Correct Fairy Tale. There once was a young person named Red Riding Hood who lived with her mother on the edge of a large wood. One day her mother asked her to take a basket of fresh fruit and mineral water to her grandmother's house -- not because this was womyn's work, mind you, but because the deed was generous and helped engender a feeling of community. Furthermore, her grandmother was not sick, but rather was in full physical and mental health and was fully capable of taking care of herself as a mature adult. So Red Riding Hood set off with