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## Different Shades of Red: From Prostitution to Purity, the Evolution of Little Red Riding Hood

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**Different Shades of Red: From Prostitution to Purity,  
the Evolution of Little Red Riding Hood**

By

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A Senior Thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California  
in partial fulfillment for the requirements for the degree of  
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Dominican University of California

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## Abstract

The Little Red Riding Hood tale is one of the most popular, beloved, and recounted fairytales ever. It is rare to find someone unfamiliar with the little girl in the woods, meeting the “Big Bad Wolf,” and their subsequent encounter. This comparative essay will analyze the sexuality or innocence in the versions of Little Red Riding Hood through the antagonist, the wolf, sensuality, and symbolism. The three oldest versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the oral tale, “The Story of Grandmother,” Charles Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimms’ “Little Red Cap” will be analyzed. Each story offers unique characteristics and portrays Little Red Riding Hood differently. In “The Story of Grandmother,” she can be seen as a prostitute; in Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” she is raped, and in the Brothers Grimms’ “Little Red Cap,” she is an innocent child. No matter which version is studied, Little Red Riding Hood faces the challenge of escaping from the wolf.

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

“What Path are you taking.” said the bzou, “the path of needles or the path of pins?”

“The Story of Grandmother”  
as transcribed by Paul Delarue



Figure 1: W.H. Beard. *Red Ridinghood and the Wolf*, 1867  
[Library of Congress](#)

Once upon a time, a little girl walked through an ominous forest on her way to her grandmother’s house. She wore a red hood, cloak, or cap and carried a cake or bread, and milk or wine. On the path to Grandmother’s, she met a wolf, or possibly a werewolf, who persuaded her to stray from her original destination. Depending on the version of the story one reads, it is here that the plot diverges.

Little Red Riding Hood is a well-known fairytale that has been retold and adapted by numerous authors over hundreds of years. The true origins of the tale of Little Red



Riding Hood (LRRH) are one of the most debated in literature, and since folktales are shared orally, tracing their cross-cultural evolution can be problematic. Anthropologist Jamie Tehrani author of “The Phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood,” points to a 2004 phylogenetic analysis, a method biologists use to map the diverging evolutionary branches of species, which traces the origins of Little Red Riding Hood. The study consisted of fifty-eight versions of the tale collected from around the world, plotting seventy-two different story motifs, such as characteristics of the protagonist and villain, tricks and disguises, and the victim’s ultimate fate. Based on the conclusions, Tehrani speculates that the Red Riding Hood story began in Asia and spread westwards to Europe between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries during a time of extensive trade and cultural interactions (Tehrani 6). Storytellers during the Middle Ages fabricated these tales for numerous reasons. Some provided simple entertainment, while others gave meaning to daily life; however, some were shared to issue a warning or reinforce moral responsibility. These oral tales of a little girl and a wolf ultimately became the fairytale we know today.

“The Story of Grandmother” is one of the oral stories in Tehrani’s study that descends from a common ancestry dating back to the twelfth century (5). In 1956, Paul Delarue, a renowned folklore specialist, published the first rendition of the anonymous author’s “The Story of Grandmother,” as told to A. Millien from an oral tale circa 1884. (Delarue 14). In Delarue’s interpretation, the little girl<sup>1</sup> is a cunning, intelligent, and self-reliant peasant who outwits the wolf by pretending to go along with him as she plans her escape.

French author Charles Perrault published the first known written version of fairytales in the Western world in 1697, titled *Histoire ou contes temps passé* (*Stories of Tales from Past Times*). It is commonly believed that Perrault based “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge” (“Little Red Riding Hood”) on the “The Story of Grandmother;” however, unlike the oral story, Perrault’s adaptation was no longer a warning for peasants, but as children’s literature scholar Jack Zipes explains in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, “[Perrault] borrowed elements from popular folklore and recreated “Little Red Riding Hood” to suit the needs of an upper-class audience whose social and aesthetic standards were different from the common folk” (2). In creating a story for a more sophisticated audience, Perrault changes LRRH’s appearance by dressing her in a red cape. He also portrays her as a helpless young girl who is lured into the wolf’s trap. Not able to save herself, the wolf violates her, and the girl soon meets her demise. Perrault’s version is more moralistic, with an explicit warning against the dangers of men’s sexual desires and the consequences of giving in to temptation.

By far, the most popular telling of the fairytale is by the Brothers Grimm. In 1812, they published their first edition of “Rotkäppchen” (“Little Red Cap”) in a compilation of fairytales entitled *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*). Little Red Cap<sup>2</sup> appears as a naïve and immature young girl who is easily taken in by the devious wolf. Fortunately, a huntsman in the forest comes to her rescue. Like Perrault’s version, this story provides a warning; however, since the Grimms wrote their fairytales specifically to appeal to children, they emphasized the dangers of talking to strangers and the need to obey parents and other authority figures. The authors also removed any

references to eroticism or impropriety, although this indication has been open to interpretation.

A close study of the three most famous version of the story, written by the anonymous author of “The Story of Grandmother<sup>3</sup>, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm, will show similarities, but also notable differences, in the way Little Red Riding Hood and her nemesis, the wolf, are portrayed. Additionally, the analysis will reveal how each author emphasizes the themes of danger, desire, and naivete.

## The Crimson Cloak

*“Which became the girl so well that everywhere she went by the name of Little Red Riding-Hood.”*

Charles Perrault



Figure 2: Jessie Willcox Smith, *Little Red Riding Hood*, 1911

Fairytales often rely on costumes and accessories to create a character's image; Snow White's smothering corset, Cinderella's glass slippers, and Rapunzel's long flowing hair support each tale's storyline, but in "Little Red Riding Hood," fashion takes a leading role. Most interpretations of the famous fable depict a little girl wearing a bright red hood, cloak, or cap. This specific garment is known worldwide as the protagonist's trademark. In Western literature, LRRH first appears wearing a red hood in the 1697 story primarily written for adults, "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge," by author Charles Perrault.

Much speculation exists as to why she wears red; however, no one knows with certainty.

Perrault may have dressed the protagonist in red because of what the color represented during his time. In *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Jack Zipes proposes that when Perrault was a member of King Louis XIV's court, red represented "sin, sensuality, and the devil. Because Little Red Riding Hood stopped to talk with the wolf in the woods, she ultimately pays for her transgression with her life" (26). Perrault included LRRH's encounter as a metaphor that demonstrates to the aristocratic young ladies that there will be punishment for any unacceptable behavior with lustful men. Catherine Orenstein, author of *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy*, agrees with this assessment, claiming that red represents the color of "harlots, scandal and blood, symbolizing her sin and foreshadowing her fate" (36).

Another explanation for why Perrault may have cloaked Little Red Riding Hood in red was to give her a unique identity. He explains in the story: "Her mother doted on her. Her grandmother was even fonder and made her a little red hood, which became her so well that everywhere she went by the name of Little Red Riding Hood" (4). This lends distinctiveness to LRRH because the contemporary fashion for common women of the late seventeenth century, according to Jack Zipes, in "Little Red Riding Hood as Male Creation," was the wearing of small hats or bonnets made of simple cloth, "whereas aristocratic ladies wore velvet. Bright colors were preferred, especially red, and the skull cap was generally ornamental" (122). A young girl dressed in red would be

an uncommon sight within Red Riding Hood's village, where she would stand out amongst her peers.

Unlike Perrault, the Brothers Grimm wrote "Little Red Cap" as a children's story, removing any sexual innuendos for their young audience. Nevertheless, the Grimms' version draws speculation about the sexual implications of the heroine's red cap. Psychologist Eric Fromm argues that red is associated with sexual maturity, such as puberty and loss of innocence. He suggests that the fairytale "represented a riddle from the collective unconscious; easily decipherable, in which the red cap symbolized the onset of menstruation, the heroine's bottle of wine symbolized her virginity" (qtd. in Orenstein 70). To support this argument, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, comments, "Red is the color symbolizing emotions, including sexual ones. The red velvet cap given by Grandmother to Little Red Cap thus can be viewed as a symbol of a premature transfer of sexual attractiveness." He elaborates that her name, Little Red Cap, refers not only to the color of the cap she wears but also because she is too immature to don clothing that symbolizes sex. Bettelheim explains that by reaching maturity, one must understand that with adulthood comes sexual consequences (173). Perhaps it was unforeseen by the Grimms when they dressed their protagonist in red that the color would be associated with multiple sexual connotations.

Unlike Perrault's and the Grimms' version of "Little Red Riding Hood," the principal character does not wear red in Delarue's transcription of the original oral tale, "The Story of Grandmother." In fact, the heroine is simply known as a "little girl," with no mention of what she is wearing. Nevertheless, Conny Eissfeld, author of *How Fairy Tales*

*Live Happily Ever After: (Analyzing) The Art of Adapting Fairy Tales*, posits a theory about color and its relationship to sexuality. In the story, when the little girl tricks the wolf into letting her go outside to relieve herself, the wolf ties a rope<sup>4</sup> around her foot to keep her from escaping. Once outside, the heroine frees herself and ties the rope to a big plum tree. Eisfeld correlates red with the plums, which are a deep purple, representing the injuries or death she may have suffered had she not escaped. She states:

The girl's near sexual union is thus transferred outside to this secondary color, which itself presents the union of the fervid masculine red and feminine cool blue, once she ties her fate around the plum tree, which is also a tree of justice and salvation in its pigmentation. (72)

Interestingly, Eisfeld managed to include red in "The Story of Grandmother" despite its nonexistence.

When Perrault dressed LRRH in red, this color identified her forever, and is essential to understanding and interpreting the purpose and meaning of the fairytale. Whether the red hood was simply a gift from a doting grandmother, a sign of sin and sensuality, or a symbol representing the onset of maturity and adulthood, red will always characterize "Little Red Riding Hood."

## The Big, Bad Wolf

*"The better to eat you with!"*

Charles Perrault



Figure 3: Paul Gustave Doré, *Little Red Riding Hood Meets Old Father Wolf*, 1862 from *Les Contes de Perrault*, an edition of Charles Perrault's fairytales. [Wikipedia Commons](#)

The villainous wolf is the antagonist in all renditions of “Little Red Riding Hood.” Although he appears as a werewolf in the earliest oral tradition, he is later known as the wolf. No matter in what form he appears, the wolf is a predator who tries to deceive LRRH into believing he is honorable, although the reader is readily aware that he only wants to satisfy his gluttony, lust, and cruel needs.

In countries such as Italy and France, storytelling was a means to warn of the threats of the fabricated werewolf devouring children in the fields as they worked. As the peasants performed domestic chores or gathered around a fire, they shared folklore,



legends, and fables. A major objective of these stories was to warn those listening to avoid the perilous forest and stay away from the nefarious wolf.

“The Story of Grandmother” is a macabre example of these stories, in which tales of werewolves, commonly called *bzou* in French, allegedly hunted and killed adults and children in the forests, fields, and towns. In her article, “Into the Woods: Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf,” Cynthia Jones suggests that “because of famine, wolves came from the woods searching for food, and a great fear of wolves and wolf attacks developed.” She further explains the symbolism that the wolf/werewolf “carries this image of man, broken down to his most savage stage, living off pure animal instincts” (138). The peasants believed the *bzou* represented the evils men can render upon the unsuspecting community, causing considerable uneasiness and anxiety.

A common thread in these oral stories is the violent nature of the wolf. In “The Story of Grandmother,” the *bzou* convinces the girl to take the longer path to her grandmother’s house so that he has time to get there first and murder the grandmother. Not only does he kill her, but he puts her flesh in the cupboard and her blood in a wine bottle. Not satisfied enough with his evil actions, he later tells her to “eat the meat that is in [the pantry] and drink a bottle of wine that is on the shelf” (Delarue 15). Not knowing that her grandmother is dead, she does as the *bzou* requests. As she eats, a little cat nearby says, “A slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her grandmother!” (15). Conny Eisfeld asserts that this cannibalistic act and the cat’s slur symbolize a rite to adulthood, as the heroine has engaged in an “imminent sexual encounter that will eventually destroy the little girl’s blissful ignorance ... taking another one’s flesh and fluids into one’s own body. Hence, although the sexual encounter has not yet taken

place, the 'little girl' is already accused of no longer being little and virtuous but a 'slut.' (71). By eating her grandmother's flesh and drinking her blood, the girl has been condemned, even though she has yet to commit a sexual act.

In Perrault's, "Little Red Riding Hood," LRRH suffers the most extreme viciousness: death. Professor Theresa de Lauretis believes Perrault added violence to educate his audience about the dangers the wolf could manifest. In her essay, "The Violence of Rhetoric," Lauretis states that "Perrault 's writing is engendered violence because he conceived a strategy that violated an oral (female) perspective and fostered notions of violence through this strategy by treating the girl in the tale as a sadomasochistic object" (qtd. in Zipes 8). Since the wolf completely dominates Little Red Riding Hood, she can do nothing to stop the brutality and ravishment. Much like his audience, Perrault is trying to warn that LRRH will suffer the repercussions of engaging with the wolf.

Unlike the two earlier stories, the Grimms wrote their tales specifically for a children's audience. Nevertheless, evidence of the wolf's wickedness is present. When Little Red Cap first meets the wolf in the forest, he thinks to himself, "That tender young thing is a juicy morsel. She'll taste much better than the old woman. You'll have to be really crafty if you want to catch them both" (9). Not satisfied with eating the grandmother, he devises a plan to devour the younger, more delicious Little Red Cap. His unacceptable thoughts and ideas about devouring Little Red Cap and her grandmother reveal that only a sadistic mind would consider it.

In the earliest renditions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” the wolf reveals his savageness when he first murders the grandmother, then tricks LRRH into performing cannibalism. In Perrault’s version, the wolf also kills the grandmother, then displays his depraved and predatory nature before devouring LHHR. Finally, in Grimms’ “Little Red Cap,” he reveals his desire to eat LHHR and eventually swallows both her and the grandmother, but they are saved by a passing huntsman. No matter what the author’s adaptation, the wolf appears as a self-serving, violent adversary seeking to satisfy his selfish desires.

### Pins or Needles?

*“Undress yourself my child, and come lay down besides me.”*

“The Story of Grandmother”  
as transcribed by Paul Delarue



Figure 4: Little Red Riding Hood, n.d., [Kellscraft.com](http://Kellscraft.com)

In “The Story of Grandmother,” the anonymous storyteller describes the heroine much differently than in later versions. The most obvious distinctions are that she is not given a name, nor is there any mention that the girl wears red. More importantly, the protagonist is quick-witted and resourceful; she is willing to use any means necessary, including offering her body, to outsmart the wolf and save herself.

The idea of Red Riding Hood as a prostitute originates with the “path of pins and needles,” a motif that neither Perrault nor the Grimms included in their adaptations of the tale. When the heroine comes across the bzoou on the way to her grandmother’s, he

asks, "What Road are you taking ... the Needles Road or the Pins Road?" She replies, "The Needles Road" (Delarue 15). The bzhou agrees she should take the longer needle path, so that he can use the shorter path of pins. Academic specialists have long postulated the specific representation of these paths. For instance, Richard Chase and David Teasley contend in "Little Red Riding Hood: Werewolf and Prostitute" that each character's chosen path represents their destiny; the girl's choice of the path of needles "is synonymous with her decision to become a prostitute" (3). Catherine Orenstein explains that the path of pins and needles may date back to the seventeenth century, when spinning rooms could be found everywhere, including orphanages, jails, and hospitals. Even prostitutes "were expected to produce a certain number of bobbins in their off hours. Prizes were awarded to women who spun the most" (82,83). A reference to this interpretation can be found in a nineteenth century medical text by George Fort. He writes that because "women of doubtful virtue abounded, bargains were struck on the basis of a package of bodkins or lace-needles, or aiguillettes, which they usually carried as a distinctive badge upon the shoulder" (337–38). Because these awards were pinned to a prostitute's bodice, men (the wolf) would easily know her occupation. If this is the case, the wolf would be readily aware of what the girl could offer him.

The bzhou's choice of the path of pins also symbolizes his nature. Chase and Teasley believe his selection revealed his identity as a witch. Early Europeans believed that a devil's mark on a witch meant that she was a follower of Satan. Witch hunters would use pinpricks to locate the mark, as it was usually found on sensitive skin (3). Thus, claim Chase and Teasley, "The girl defies the social order by selecting prostitution, a non-procreative act ... the wolf's choice of the path of pins is a similar threat to

creation through the attack of witches.” The authors add that “the wolf and the girl enter into an unnatural pact from whence the rest of the story is told” (3). This scenario of the girl making a deal with the wolf/witch may sound perverse, but it is the only option she has if she wants to escape death.

Contrary to claims that the girl’s choice of path is symbolic of prostitution, some scholars propose that her selection represents her level of maturity. For example, Conny Eisfeld asserts that the girl makes her own decision, signifying her maturation: “The symbolic language of needles and pins has been passed down through folklore, and peasant women were well aware of the connotations. In the past, needlework was usually done by adults while children ‘only’ pinned things together.” By choosing the needles road, the little girl is approaching adulthood. The wolf, on the other hand, “retreats back into childhood” by his choice of the path of pins, for he cannot see beyond his own greed and sexual cravings (68).

Anthropologist Yvonne Verdier agrees that the path of needles is symbolic for adulthood. In her article “Little Red Riding Hood in Oral Tradition,” Verdier points to the tradition of villages girls who spent winters apprenticing with a seamstress. This training “had less to do with learning to ‘work,’ to sew or to use needles, than with refining herself, with polishing herself and learning to adorn herself, to dress up.” The seamstress would say of her young trainees, “They have been gathering pins.” As for the needle, “threaded through its eye, in the folklore of seamstresses it refers to an emphatically sexual symbolism: the seamstresses who sew “run” (*qui cousent* “*courent*,” that is, chase after men)” (106). Accordingly, this tradition compares with “The Story of Grandmother” in that a girl who picks the path of pins is still learning and

lacking in maturity, while the girl who chooses the needles path is transitioning to womanhood and all it encompasses.

Scholars such as Cynthia Jones believe that the path of pins or needles is neither a reference to prostitution nor a path of maturity; instead, it is simply a symbol for the path of life. Jones reveals that the path of needles is one of pain and suffering:

In any other world, this would seem strange, but at the threshold, all that is strange becomes normal. Neither path seems better than the other: both are painful, one with needles and the other pins, indicating that no matter which path you choose in life, there will be pain. (134)

While the girl may have chosen the path of needles, interpretations vary as to the reason. Whether prostituting herself, coming of age, or just experiencing the world's agony, she has chosen the wrong path and will have to find a way to save herself.

A second premise relating to prostitution in "The Story of Grandmother" involves the girl performing a striptease for the wolf. Seeing whom she believes is her grandmother, she approaches the bed; the wolf suggests she remove her clothes and jump into bed with him. She agrees but asks, "Where should I put my apron?" The wolf responds, "Throw it in the fire, my child; you don't need it anymore" (Delarue 15). She takes off each article of clothing, one at a time: her bodice, the dress, the skirt, and the stockings. Each time she inquires as to where to put these items, the wolf tells her to throw them into the fire, where the flames consume them. By performing this seductive act, Chase and Teasley contend:

Red Riding Hood has burned her bridges: the clothes, like her vagina, are unrecoverable. Although she feigns ignorance, believing that her grandmother awaits, it is dear that she knows the truth. One does not strip for one's grandmother, nor does one's grandmother urge the impractical and bizarre act of burning one's clothes. (774)

After the girl willingly crawls into bed with the wolf, she taunts him promiscuously. When commenting on the wolf's appearance, for example, she accepts his carnal retorts. She proclaims, "Oh, Granny, how hairy you are!" ... "what a big mouth you have!" The wolf replies, "The better to eat you with, my child!" According to Chase and Teasley, it is apparent that "the girl willingly and knowingly selects prostitution and her partner. These sexual connotations suggest that the act of eating the girl would have implied an oral sex act that most likely would have been considered so unnatural and filthy as to be fit only for devilish enjoyment" (1). At this point, there is little doubt that the girl is aware of the wolf's identity. Comprehending the gravity of the situation, she acquiesces to the wolf.

Finally, unlike later variants of the story, the girl escapes from the wolf. She realizes that she must flee, or she will die. She cries, "Oh, Grandmother, I need to go outside to relieve myself," indicating she needs to use the toilet. The wolf replies, "Do it in the bed, my child" (Delarue 16). She finds this too disgusting and insists she must go outside. The wolf then ties a rope to her foot to prevent her from fleeing. Once outside, the girl unties the rope and attaches it to a plum tree. She successfully outmaneuvers the wolf and safely makes it home.

Author Elizabeth Marshall, in "Stripping for the Wolf: Rethinking Representations of Gender in Children's Literature," explains that by using her body, the girl controls her escape and destiny, stating that "her unruly body and its functions provide her an avenue of escape...Little Red's feminine body invites the sexual advances of the wolf; however, it is that same excessive body through which she frees herself" (263). Marshall views this type of behavior in fairytales as "gender through the lens of sex-role



theory, a paradigm in which social roles are allocated to men and women on the basis of biological sex” (1). Although the male wolf is the antagonist and seems to control the situation, the female emerges as a strong girl willing to use her body, intellect, and sexuality to undermine the wolf.

## Deflower and Devour

*“Alas! Who does not know that these gentle wolves  
are of all such creatures the most dangerous!”*

Charles Perrault



Figure 5: Paul Gustave Doré, *Little Red Riding Hood in bed with the Wolf*, 1862  
from *Les Contes de Perrault*, an edition of Charles Perrault's fairytales. [Wikipedia Commons](#)

It is widely accepted that in “Little Red Riding Hood,” Charles Perrault borrowed elements from “The Story of Grandmother.” While the setting and characters may differ, the story’s theme and Red Riding Hood’s personality take a departure from the oral tale. Whereas the peasant girl in “The Story of Grandmother” is cunning and resourceful, Perrault “appears to have a low opinion of women and of the superstitious customs of the peasantry ... his ‘contaminated’ upper-class version of the ‘pure’ lower class version makes the little girl helpless” (Zipes, *The Trials*, 25). Perrault depicts LRRH as naïve and helpless, similar to the vulnerable young women of King Louis’ XIV’s court. Perrault bolsters this belief to “reinforce the prestige and superiority of bourgeois-aristocratic

values and styles;” thus, “the tales perpetuated strong notions of male dominance.” (30). Perrault’s story served as a warning to these fair maidens to beware of uninvited male interference or else suffer the ramifications of masculine authority and sexual control.

Catherine Orenstein explains in greater detail: “The age of seduction was also an age of institutionalized chastity ... girls were raised in convents. A 1673 ordinance gave a father the right to confine his daughters until the age of twenty-five, or marriage” (36). Young women were made aware of the dangers of ruthless suitors. Perrault, impacted by aristocratic customs, warned the ladies of the court to beware of lascivious men who lurked everywhere: no young lady was safe. Perrault stressed this message with his inclusion of a moral about an anthropomorphic wolf. Interestingly, when a girl lost her virginity, the French had a saying: “*elle avoit vû le loup*”—“she has seen the wolf” (26):

From this story one learns that children,  
 Especially young lasses,  
 Pretty, courteous and well bred,  
 Do very wrong to listen to strangers,  
 And it is not an unheard thing  
 If the Wolf is thereby provided with his dinner.  
 I say Wolf, for all wolves  
 Are not of the same sort;  
 There is one kind with an amenable disposition  
 Neither noisy, nor hateful, nor angry,  
 But tame, obliging and gentle,  
 Following the young maids  
 In the streets, even into their homes.  
 Alas! Who does not know that these gentle wolves  
 Are of all such creatures the most dangerous! (Perrault 6)<sup>5</sup>

Angela J. Reynolds, author of “The Better to See You With: Peering into the Story of Little Red Riding Hood, 1695-1939,” clarifies that Perrault warns “of the very happenstance, yet the legal definition of rape in Perrault’s time pertains more to the “owner” of the girl (her father) than to the girl” (16). Because an unmarried girl was her

father's property, should she lose her virginity, she would lose value and be ineligible to marry above her social status.

Perrault characterizes the wolf as a violent, aggressive predator lurking in the woods to seize an innocent, helpless young girl. It is unmistakable why Perrault portrayed the wolf as a ferocious animal. An example of the wolf's malicious and scheming nature is detected during his first encounter with LRRH as she walks through the woods on her way to her grandmother's house: "[he] would have very much liked to eat her, but dared not to do so on account of some woodcutters who were in the in the forest" (Perrault 4). The wolf does not devour her immediately because he wants to first have his way with her. Bruno Bettelheim speculates that "it makes sense that an older man (the wolf) might be afraid to seduce a little girl in the sight and hearing of other men" (Bettelheim 175). The wolf is anxious to do away with LRRH, but rather than pounce on her immediately, he waits for a more suitable time.

Later, when LRRH arrives, the wolf invites her to get into bed with him. In contrast to her character in "The Story of Grandmother, she does not perform a striptease; however, she does take off her clothes and climbs onto the bed. In "Charles Perrault and the Evolution of Little Red Riding Hood," Dr. Francis Vaz da Silva explains, "Perrault insinuates that when the naked girl gets into bed, she meets the wolf's male nakedness" (176). Since both LRRH and the wolf are in bed, a sexual encounter is inevitable.

Surprised to see how her "grandmother" looks, LRRH and the wolf have a conversation filled with sexual innuendo:

“Grandmother dear! What big arms you have!”  
 “The better to embrace you with my child!”  
 “Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!”  
 “The better to run with, my child!”  
 “Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!”  
 “The better to hear with, my child!”  
 “Grandmother dear, what big eyes you have!”  
 “The better to see with, my child!”  
 “Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!”  
 “The better to eat you with!” (Perrault 6)

In this final declaration, the wolf displays his absolute power over LRRH and devours her. According to Jack Zipes, “The eating or swallowing of Little Red Riding Hood is an obvious sexual act, symbolizing the uncontrollable appetite or chaos of nature” (LRRH as Male Creation” 123-24). LRRH appears to do nothing to fight off the wolf’s advances, leading Elizabeth Marshall to assert that “modes of behavior suggest that the girl is responsible for her violation and that to avoid physical harm (in this case, rape, and murder), a young girl must dodge the advances of suave wolves (men)” (263). LRRH may be guilty of knowingly climbing into bed with the wolf; however, much like a lesson in obedience, Perrault’s aim was to teach the ladies of the court; should they stray and give in to temptation, like LRRH, they will be punished for their defiance.

Throughout history, society has blamed rape victims for their own violation because they are unsuccessful in fighting off the aggressor. The same holds true for LRRH. Zipes explains, “The blame for the diabolical rape is placed squarely on the shoulders of naive young girls who are pretty and have correct manners ... the seduction would not have occurred had Little Red Riding Hood not stopped to listen to a stranger” (“LRRH as Male Creation” 124). He adds that “Perrault transformed a hopeful oral story about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic one of violence in which the girl is blamed for her own violation” (*The Trials* 7). Through the moral of his story, Perrault

wanted to illustrate that LRRH should behave as a well-mannered and obedient girl who does not talk with strangers, especially men. Little Red Riding Hood deviates off the path and must pay the price through rape and death.

Not only did Perrault titillate his audience with his fairytale, but his first published version also contained illustrations, including a provocative etching of Little Red Riding Hood in bed with the wolf (Figure 6). The artist depicts the wolf (without his usual grandmother disguise) as he straddles LRRH while she lies on a pillow stroking the wolf's muzzle. Orenstein remarks, "Any courtier who read this tale or saw the accompanying image would have readily understood this meaning" (23). Sadly, the outlook for LRRH does not appear positive.



*Figure 6. Antonine Clouziet, Red Gravure.  
from Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités by Charles Perrault*

The sexual overtones in Perrault's rendition may have been shocking for readers of the time. Zipes believed that "The irony of his narration suggests he sought to appeal to the erotic and playful side of adult readers who took pleasure in naughty stories of

seduction” (Zipes 9). However, the primary feature of Perrault’s tale was to caution the powerless young ladies of the court. Like them, Perrault’s protagonist is simple and unsophisticated, as she does little to fight off the wolf’s brutal advances. It appears that with the addition of the crimson cloak, LRRH loses her tenacity.

## Purely Simple

*“But, Grandmother, what a terribly large mouth you have!”*  
*“The better to eat you with!”*

The Brothers Grimm



Figure 7: Charles Folkard. *Grimms Fairytales*, 1911

In 1697, Charles Perrault borrowed from the ancient oral tale “The Story of Grandmother” to pen “La Petite Chaperon Rouge.” In 1812, the Brothers Grimm used Perrault’s rendition to create “Rotkäppchen.” This, however, was not the version of the fairytale read today. Jack Zipes, in “Two Hundred Years After Once Upon a Time: The Legacy of the Brothers Grimm and Their Tales in Germany,” explains the unfamiliar versions: “Indeed, the complex format of the first and second editions of the *Children’s and Household Tales* indicates that the Grimms sought primarily to address adults ...” (66).



It was not until 1819 that the brothers began a revision of the tale that was suitable for children. One reason for this was that books were becoming more affordable, so a market for children's books materialized. Additionally, Catherine Orenstein writes that "the sense of the nuclear family strengthened. Increasingly, a concept of childhood emerged as a distinct period of life with its own characteristics and needs-play, education, and particularly moral instruction" (Orenstein 50).

Unlike earlier versions of the fairytale, the brothers wrote "Little Red Cap" specifically for a children's audience. Because of this, the story was simplified and void of blood and erotic references, and the story includes a happy conclusion. Jack Zipes remarks that the Grimms "felt it necessary to clean it up for the bourgeois socialization process of the nineteenth century and adapted it to comply with the emerging Biedermeier or Victorian image of little girls and proper behavior" (*The Trials* 32). Although some scholars may disagree, the Brothers Grimm removed the sexual implications and warnings to fair maidens about the lustful nature of men.

The Grimms also dismissed any decisive and shrewd behavior by Little Red Cap, for she is now an innocent and more refined young girl growing up in the burgeoning Victorian era. She cannot take care of herself and needs a man to rescue her from the wolf. Zipes explains that the Grimms "made the stories more pure, truthful and just" and "eliminated those passages which they thought would be harmful to children's eyes"(qtd. In Marshall, 263). This revised version became the story that adults and children will read for generations.

A significant addition in "Little Red Cap" is the warning by LRRH's mother: ... "be nice and good and don't stray from the path." Little Red Cap replies "I'll do just as you

say” (9). The Grimms added this to help teach children to obey their parents, otherwise they will receive a punishment. Orenstein explains this is a “patriarchal lesson in female obedience” (60). She continues, “It also served the Grimms’ overarching aim to clarify their lessons, teach morality to children, and promote their German middle-class values for the new Victorian family: discipline, piety, the primacy of the father in the household, and, above all, obedience” (55).

Shortly after she enters the woods, she comes across the wolf. Because she had never seen one before, she did not understand how dangerous he could be. The wolf questions where she is going, and Little Red Cap answers, “to Grandmother’s.” The wolf then asks her where her grandmother lives. She reveals her simple nature when she freely provides the specific details of where the old woman lived. The wolf suggests that Little Red Cap take her time along the way to look at the beautiful flowers. Without much thought, she took his advice and “ran off the path and plunged into the woods to look for flowers ... going deeper and deeper into the forest” (10). Meanwhile, the wolf headed straight to the grandmother’s house. Little Red Cap’s trust in the wolf demonstrates her gullibility; unfortunately, her naivete will soon seal her fate.

Another example of Little Red Cap’s childlike behavior takes place when she arrives at her grandmother’s house. Rather than announcing herself, she pauses, and speaking diminutively, she says, “Oh, my God, how frightened I feel today, and usually I like to be at Grandmother’s” (Grimm 10). Even though she feels anxious, she goes into the house. As she approaches the bed, she sees who she thinks is her grandmother with “her cap pulled down over her face giving her a strange appearance” (10). In the Brothers’ version, the wolf does not ask Little Red Cap to remove her clothing or get into

bed with him. Instead, she stands by the bedside and questions his appearance. When she finally states, "But, Grandmother, what a terribly large mouth you have!" The wolf replies, "The better to eat you with!" No sooner had the wolf said that than he jumped out of bed and gobbled up poor Little Red Cap" (Grimm 10). The Grimms might have felt that the wolf swallowing Little Red Cap rather than eating her may have sounded more appropriate.

Zipes explains that "Little Red Cap" contains sexual innuendos, stating, "Clearly, what had formerly been a frank oral tale about sexuality and actual dangers in the woods became ... a coded message about rationalizing bodies and sex" (*The Trials* 34). Zipes also argues that "Little Red Riding Hood as Little Red Cap is transformed even more into the naive, helpless, pretty little girl who must be punished for her transgression, which is spelled out more clearly as disobedience and indulgence in sexual pleasures" (*The Trials* 33). Although the Brothers intended to remove all sexual implications to make their rendition suitable for a children's audience, it was apparently an impossible feat.

Unlike previous versions of the fable, the Grimms included an additional character, the huntsman. As he passes the house, he thinks, "How the old woman is snoring! I must see if she wants anything." He goes inside and sees the wolf lying in the bed. The hunter obviously knows the wolf, as he exclaims, "Do I find you at last old sinner! I have been looking for you for a long time" (11). He then cuts open the wolf's belly and pulls out Little Red Cap and her grandmother, saving them both. As the girl and her grandmother enjoy their freedom, Little Red Cap thinks to herself, "Never again, will you stray from the path by yourself when your mother has forbidden it" (11). Little

Red Cap learns her lesson in obedience; consequently, she becomes a role model for misbehaving children everywhere.

The Grimm Brothers wrote a lesson of obedience for children growing up in the refined Victorian era. "Little Red Cap" and the entire volume of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* became so popular that in the 19th century, "Grimms' collection took second place only to the Bible as the most widely read book in Germany" (Zipes, *The Trials* 36). Because of the innocence and simplicity of their story, Grimms' version of "Little Red Riding Hood" continues to be one of the most beloved stories of all time.

## Conclusion

*“He jumped out of bed and saw that the little girl had escaped.”*

“The Story of Grandmother”  
as transcribed by Paul Delarue



Figure 8: Dave Cooper. *Red Riding Hood*, 1812. [Getty Images](#).

Readers of all ages are familiar with the tale of the little girl dressed in red. When she is tasked with taking food to her ailing grandmother, she meets an antagonist who becomes known as “The Big Bad Wolf.” While few people are familiar with earlier, more erotic renditions of the fairytale primarily written for adults, most would recognize the story by the Brothers Grimm about the innocent child who is saved by a hunter.

Throughout her history, Little Red Riding Hood has played distinct roles. She is sometimes portrayed as a strong-willed girl using her body and wit to save herself. Other times, she is helpless, unable to outmaneuver the wolf, and meets a dreadful end. However, most often she is seen as an innocent, naive little girl unable to escape the

depravity of the wolf on her own. Whether she is depicted as a prostitute who controls her destiny as in “The Story of Grandmother,” a spoiled, helpless girl raped and devoured by the wolf in Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” or simply a gullible little girl who disobeys her mother in The Brothers Grimms “Little Red Cap,” readers have silently encouraged her for centuries to succeed in her journey to her grandmother’s house and have a “happily ever after” fairytale ending.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original tale of “The Story of Grandmother” the “little girl” had no name, yet she is often referred to as Little Red Riding Hood.

<sup>2</sup> “Little Red Cap” will later become commonly known as “Little Red Riding Hood.”

<sup>3</sup> This paper will refer to Paul Delarue’s rendition of the oral tale, published in 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the tale’s version, the rope may also be referred to a string or thread.

<sup>5</sup> In later adaptations, the poem was removed from the tale, perhaps because it was too evocative.

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