

Undertones in “Little Red Riding Hood”:

The Relationship Between Childhood Innocence and Adult Knowledge

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The story of Little Red Riding Hood is not just one of a little girl bringing simple biscuits and wine to a sick grandmother. Rather, the tale chronicles a young girl’s trip into adulthood, the woods functioning as the hazy middle ground between being an innocent child and a knowing adult. Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, examines the story of Red Riding Hood’s trip as culminating with her loss of virginity. As Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf in the forest, she is presented with the hurdle of entering adulthood—losing her virginity and reaching sexual maturity.

Two of the best-known versions of the story represent Red Riding Hood’s entry into adulthood differently. In Charles Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood,” the line between Red Riding Hood as a child and an adult is clear; as soon as she is consumed by the wolf and loses her virginity, and she is no longer a child. This switch into adulthood comments on the non-negotiable relationship between the world of the adult and the world of the child; the roles of child and adult are clearly defined, unrelated stations in society. However, in the Brothers Grimm’s “Little Red Cap,” the transition is not as defined. While Red Riding Hood reaches sexual maturity when the wolf eats her, her transition into adulthood does not end there. She must continue the journey with new experiences and gained knowledge after she is cut out of the wolf’s stomach. The Grimms’ version portrays childhood and adulthood as somewhat overlapping spheres, merging as the child matures and eventually becomes an adult. Both versions emphasize cultural beliefs about childhood innocence being dependent on sexual

innocence; however, each version explores the boundary between childhood and adulthood differently.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim argues that “Little Red Riding Hood” is a story about the loss of virginity. Bettelheim adheres to a Freudian psychoanalytical approach to analyze the story by looking at ideas of oral fixation, Oedipal conflicts, the id, and the ego. Bettelheim refers to the opening, before Red Riding Hood has completed her trip to her grandmother’s house, saying, “Little Red Cap’s danger is her budding sexuality, for which she is not yet emotionally mature enough” (173). In the beginning she is still a child, and it is only after her walk through the forest that she leaves childhood and is ready to become an adult. Bettelheim acknowledges that depending on which text is read—Grimms’ or Perrault’s—the message of loss of virginity will be altered.

Red Riding Hood represents the perfect innocent childhood. She is described as “sweet,” “pretty,” “little,” and a “maiden” as she skips serenely through the forest to her grandmother’s house. But how innocent is Little Red Riding Hood, and does she need to be protected by her mother from the big bad wolf? Red Riding Hood epitomizes society’s conception of the child being innocent, untouched, and undisturbed. However, this image is mainly a projection of adults onto the world of children. As pointed out in “The Concept of Childhood and Children’s Folktales” by Zohar Shavit, “Up to the seventeenth century the child was not perceived as an entity distinct from the adult, and consequently he was not recognized as having special needs” (131). Shavit explains that childhood innocence did not always exist but was born with the Industrial Revolution, when children were no longer relied upon as a main part of a family’s workforce (134). Childhood is not inherently a time of innocence; rather, Shavit argues, adults who seek to shield children from the pains of the world concoct this stage of growth.

Henry Jenkins discusses “childhood innocence [as] a cultural myth” in his introductory essay to *The Children’s Culture Reader* (2). He sees the concept of childhood innocence mainly as a tool used by politicians to build platforms that appeal to people’s belief that the innocent child needs protecting (3). Jenkins reviews our culture’s misguided views on childhood as follows:

Too often, our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults. (3-4)

This author identifies aspects of childhood on which the story of Little Red Riding Hood capitalizes. As Red Riding Hood leaves her house and enters the woods, she moves into this “utopian space, separate from adult cares.” She travels through the woods, “free from sexuality,” only becoming sexually aware when she reaches her grandmother’s house and, symbolically, has sex with the wolf. She is also “closer to nature” as she frolics off the path, picking flowers and enjoying the purity of her environment. In Perrault’s version of the story she is “corrupted” by the wolf at the end, whereas in the Brothers Grimm’s version of the story she is “protected” by the warnings of her mother.

While Jenkins maps out this view of what adults perceive childhood to be, his underlying message is that “the innocent child is often a figment of adult imaginations,” with children’s culture being “shaped by adult agendas and expectations” (23, 26). Although stories such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and other pieces of children’s literature are aimed at children, they are written *by* adults and represent not childhood itself, but the adult version of it (23). Adults

position children as their opposites; children exist in an untouched and protected state, while adults are scathed and vulnerable. Therefore, becoming an adult entails an enormous change for children. These views on childhood innocence only reinforce the contention that puberty and entering adulthood will be a tumultuous experience for all children.

The Little Red Riding Hood story portrays this jolting and rough transition from childhood into adulthood. In both the Perrault and Grimms versions, becoming an adult is marked by the loss of virginity, with childhood innocence equated to sexual innocence, and the maturity and knowledge of the adult equated to knowledge of sexuality and experience. “Little Red Riding Hood” conveys the idea to children, specifically to young girls, that growing up involves an inherent change in their lives and their bodies. It suggests that their first sexual experiences will catapult them into the world of adulthood, and through the image of the vicious and fierce wolf, shows children that this change is sure to be scary, violent, and unfriendly.

While both the Perrault and Grimms versions illustrate this idea, both do so differently, placing different emphasis on the role of sexuality and virginity in growing up. “Little Red Riding Hood” by Perrault is more direct in its connection between the loss of virginity and entering adulthood, as it displays the transition as abrupt and unconditional. As Red Riding Hood deduces that the wolf is not her grandmother (commenting on his big arms, ears, eyes, and, finally, teeth), the story ends with her being eaten by the wolf. Following this critical moment, Red Riding Hood’s innocence is forever gone, as she is completely transitioned into womanhood and her image as a child is killed as she is devoured. Red Riding Hood is not allowed to ease into her new role as an adult and is given no help in making the jump from being a little girl to being a woman. Because she has become a woman, she is not allowed by Perrault to exist anymore in her child-like state. Bettelheim concentrates out the way Perrault chooses to end the story,

pointing out that “[t]here is neither salvation nor redemption, as in later versions of the story that children know today” (25). Red Riding Hood gets no chance to explore her switch to becoming an adult because her sexual encounter with the wolf is the beginning *and* the end of that change.

While Red Riding Hood is traveling to her Grandmother’s house after speaking with the wolf, she is still a child and has not yet lost her virginity. Therefore, she still exists in her “utopian space” and is easily distracted by child-like indulgences—playing with flowers and running in the forest (Jenkins 3). Perrault describes Red Riding Hood as existing in a state of nature: “the little girl took the longer path, and she enjoyed herself by gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and making bouquets of small flowers which she found” (92). Perrault’s reference to her as a “little girl” highlights her youth and innocence in contrast to her fallen state at the end of the story.

Nothing is more overt about Perrault’s intentions of warning children about sexuality than when he speaks of Red Riding Hood’s preparations for sex, revealing that “Little Red Riding Hood undressed and went to get into bed” (93). As soon as the character is fooled into thinking the wolf is her grandmother, she enters the house and gets into her grandmother’s bed, following the wolf’s instructions. Having shown Red Riding Hood as an innocent child, Perrault’s description of her removing her clothes is disturbing and appears to be a violation of her youth. However, this version, unlike that of the Brothers Grimm, shows how she removes her clothes willingly, conveying the idea that her loss of virginity is something that must happen and is a process she must facilitate. She cannot avoid her inherent growth, and she cannot stop her entrance into adulthood, however horrifying the vicious wolf may appear.

The comment and response dialogue between Red Riding Hood and the wolf about his big arms, legs, and ears reflects her curiosity at her first encounter with a nude man. Whenever a

child comes across something new and different, she will want to figure out what it is, paying close attention to all the details. This same curiosity is reflected here, as Red Riding Hood analyzes the physique of the wolf; at this point in the story she has yet lost her virginity, so she still questions her surroundings with a child's curiosity. She is using her five senses to analyze the wolf's body, just, as Bettelheim says, "the pubertal child uses them all to comprehend the world" (172). Her curiosity also suggests that she is evaluating how different the man is from any boy she has encountered.

It is clear that Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" is meant to teach a moral to children who read it, conveying the importance of the heightened awareness young girls must have of men. Perrault states his message under the heading "Moral" at the end of the story, saying that when girls pay attention to the wolves in the forest—symbolic of the men who enter their lives—"it is not so strange/ When the wolf should eat them" (93). Perrault is trying to teach girls that they need to be self-aware and protect themselves from the men who will attempt to take their virginity. Bettelheim acknowledges the clear intent behind Perrault's version of the story, arguing that "Perrault wanted not only to entertain his audience, but to teach a specific moral lesson with each of his tales." In *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*, Catherine Orenstein elaborates on Perrault's message. She discloses the French phrase used for a girl losing her virginity: "*elle avoit vû le loup*," which translates into "she'd seen the wolf" (26). During Perrault's time, children and adults would have had no problems extracting the meaning from his story of Red Riding Hood.

As the story closes, Red Riding Hood disappears as the wolf "threw himself upon [her] and ate her up" (93). The death of Red Riding Hood represents the metaphorical death of her as a child. Her innocence has been taken, so Perrault conveys that everything has ended for Red

Riding Hood; childhood and adulthood exist as polar opposites. This version of the tale exemplifies conceptions about children and adult's roles in childhood, seeing the two spheres as incompatible. Children are diametrically opposed to their parents, whom they will one day become. In "Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence," Henry A. Giroux expresses this message: "Within the myth of childhood innocence, children are often portrayed as inhabiting a world that is untainted, magical, and utterly protected from the harshness of adult life" (31). Giroux recognizes the incompatible worlds of children and adults maintained by the "myth of childhood innocence." Rather than acknowledging a link between the worlds of children and adults, the concept of childhood innocence ignores any relationship that may exist between being a child and being an adult. By portraying Red Riding Hood's growth into a woman as absolute with her loss of virginity, Perrault upholds this conventional idea about childhood.

"Little Red Cap" by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, alternately, relays the transition as more of a gradient of experiences, showing Red Riding Hood's growth into a woman as less defined than Perrault depicts. Both the Perrault and Grimms versions are similar in that the wolf initially tricks Red Riding Hood into thinking he is her grandmother, then eats her when she approaches him. However, in the Grimms version, Red Riding Hood's struggle to enter adulthood does not end there; she is cut out of the wolf's stomach, gaining the necessary experience to protect herself during future encounters. Rather than ending the story with Red Riding Hood's loss of virginity and death when the wolf eats her, she is cut out of the wolf's stomach and goes on to have other interactions with him (as he again tries to follow her when she brings her grandmother food). The Grimms version illustrates that losing one's virginity is not the only factor involved in becoming an adult, and the authors suggest that it is not necessarily the first step to adulthood.

Rather than an instant transformation from being a child to an adult, the transition happens because of cumulative experiences that occur over an extended period of time. Some of these experiences for Red Riding Hood are developing secondary sex characteristics and having future encounters with the wolf, as she matures physically and emotionally. In Grimms' version, unlike in Perrault's, Red Riding Hood is given guidance and is not forced to walk to her grandmother's house ignorant of the dangers in the wood.

Red Riding Hood gets support and direction when her mother warns her not to "tarry on your way, and don't stray from the path, otherwise you'll fall and break the glass" (135). Her mother is telling her about the possibility of losing her innocence as she walks through the forest, cautioning her not to "break the glass," meaning, lose her virginity. This cautioning does not appear in Perrault's version, where Red Riding Hood is given no counseling on her impending loss of childhood. Soon after being warned, Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf upon entering the forest. The step towards her loss of innocence occurs as soon as she comes of age and steps onto the path to adulthood. In this depiction, the home is shown as Red Riding Hood's "safe space" (Giroux 37). As soon as she abandons this "safe space," her innocence is threatened as she travels farther away from her home and closer to the wolf.

The wolf asks Red Riding Hood, "What are you carrying under your apron?" (135). This question suggests Red Riding Hood has budding breasts or adult features underneath her red cape. Red Riding Hood's loss of virginity may not be the first thing that transforms her childlike body into the body of a woman. Instead, the changes in her figure may precede her loss of virginity, and the combination of both may relate to her growth into adulthood. Her developing breasts may be a hallmark of her growth and serve as another experience in her life, adding to her transformation during puberty. This staging is firmly contrasted to Perrault's Red Riding

Hood, in which the act of sex decisively marks her entrance into adulthood, with no other developments in Red Riding Hood aiding this entrance.

Although there is more involved in her growth into womanhood, certain aspects of Red Riding Hood's character can be clearly labeled as existing pre-sexually and post-sexually. The first time Red Riding Hood meets the wolf she is easily distracted by him and readily "plunge[s] into the woods and look[s] for flowers" when he suggests she should focus more on the nature around her (136). She still exists as a child and is therefore easily influenced by his suggestion. Red Riding Hood meets the wolf for a second time later in the story, after she symbolically loses her virginity to him, having learned from a previous encounter. This time she does not easily stray when he "[seeks] to entice her to leave the path" (137). During this second encounter, though she is not yet completely a woman, she has gained experience that led to her maturation. It is through an accumulation of these experiences that Red Riding Hood will eventually become a complete adult.

The use of experience to build on Red Riding Hood's formation as a woman causes her to have deep self-satisfaction. Red Riding Hood in the Grimms' story is not thrust violently into becoming a woman as the Red Riding Hood of Perrault's story is. Instead, the Grimms' Red Riding Hood builds on her self-assurance with each of her encounters with the wolf and each lesson she learns. The closing sentence of this version—"Little Red Cap went merrily on her way home"—concludes the story quite differently from Perrault's story (137). Rather than an unsatisfied, deceased Red Riding Hood, here, the character becomes comfortable with her transformation into a woman, and "merrily" derives pleasure from her growth.

In the Grimms' version, the self-satisfaction Red Riding Hood accumulates from her experiences challenges the traditional ideas about childhood innocence. Unlike in Perrault's

telling, the boundary between childhood and adulthood ceases to be an absolute threshold as is typically taught by the myth of innocence. As discussed by Giroux, ideas about childhood innocence see adulthood not overlapping with childhood. The Grimms' version of "Little Red Cap" acknowledges that adulthood and childhood coexist during the transition that all children must go through to become a full adult. The Grimms' version recognizes the idea that a period of togetherness exists as children become more adult-like and leave their childhood behind.

The questions raised by the conflicting versions of Little Red Riding Hood mirror many of the same conflicts that exist in today's society. The adult world is still uncomfortable viewing children as anything but innocent, preferring to maintain the myth of innocence rather than have the sphere of the child overlap with that of the adult. Adults' top priority remains protecting childhood purity and ensuring children remain ignorant of the hardships and disappointments inherent in adult life. Because Perrault's version was written prior to the Grimms' version, their textual differences may suggest evolving ideas on childhood innocence. However, since both versions come from authors who represent different cultures, they also represent different mindsets. Reflecting the importance of female purity, Red Riding Hood must be a young girl facing the traumas of growing up, since it is girls' development and loss of virginity that remains important for the sanctity of marriage in many parts of the world. The way a young girl moves into adulthood varies across cultures and across families. Maturation is confounded with messages from the public on appropriate behavior and changing beliefs on childhood innocence and how a child will become an adult. Recorded folktales, such as Little Red Riding Hood, provide evidence on cultural beliefs about this issue of female development at the time.

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