

A Summary and Analysis of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' Fairy Tale

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The meaning of a classic story

'Little Red Riding Hood' was, Charles Dickens said, his first love. It is one of the most universally known fairy tales: if you were to ask 100 people to name a fairy tale, 'Little Red Riding Hood' would be one of the most popular answers. And much like a number of other fairy tales, which seem to have grown up around older oral tales ('Rumpelstiltskin', for instance, is reckoned to be a whopping 4,000 years old), 'Little Red Riding Hood' can be traced back to the 10th century when it was circulating as a French oral tale, and also existed as a fourteenth-century Italian story named 'The False Grandmother', though it only became popular under this name in the 1690s, when it appeared in the work of the French fabulist Charles Perrault. It rapidly established itself as one of the best-loved and familiar fairy stories in the western world. Yet what is the meaning of 'Little Red Riding Hood'? Before we venture an answer to this – via an analysis of the story's key features – it's worth recapping the plot in a brief summary.

A young village girl who lives with her mother is given a little red riding-hood to wear, and everyone starts to refer to her as 'the Little Red Riding-Hood' on account of it. One day, the girl's mother asks her to go and visit her grandmother, who lives in the next village, through the forest. Little Red Riding-Hood is given some food to take with her to give to her grandmother. She sets off, and on the way, while travelling through the woods, she meets a talking wolf, who asks her where she's going. Little Red Riding-Hood tells him that she's going to visit her grandmother, and the wolf asks where her grandmother lives. Little Red Riding-Hood tells him she lives in the first house in the village, on the other side of the mill. The wolf says he'll head there himself, taking a different route, and they can have a competition to see who can get there first.

While Little Red Riding-Hood takes her time walking to her grandmother's house, picking nuts and flowers in the forest, the wolf legs it as fast as he can. When he gets there, he knocks at the door and pretends it's the woman's granddaughter bearing food for her. The grandmother, who is in bed unwell, tells the wolf, believing him to be Little Red Riding-Hood, to pull the latch and come in. The wolf does so, and immediately falls upon the grandmother, devouring her. Then he gets into bed and pretends to be the woman he's just so rudely gobbled up.

When Little Red Riding-Hood eventually hobbles into view, and knocks at the door, the wolf pretends to be the girl's grandmother, whose voice sounds hoarse because 'she' has a sore throat. Little Red Riding-Hood pulls the latch and enters the house, and is surprised by her grandmother's big arms ('all the better for embracing you, my child!' her 'grandmother' replies), her deep voice ('all the better for greeting you'), her big ears ('all the better for hearing you'), her big eyes ('all the better for seeing you'), and her big teeth ('all the better to eat you with!'). And with that, the wolf eats Little Red Riding-Hood, and that's the rather less-than-happy ending of this classic fairy tale.

Or rather, that is how many versions of the tale of Little Red Riding-Hood end. But Little Red Riding-Hood doesn't always die. Should the wolf be allowed his dessert (he has, after all, already devoured the grandma), or should he get his just deserts? Should 'Little Red Riding-Hood' have a happy ending, or should Little Red Riding-Hood meet a grisly end?

Surprisingly, it was the Victorian Dinah Mulock Craik who allowed the poor girl to be eaten up, while the Brothers Grimm – hardly queasy about the idea of children meeting a gruesome death – have the wolf fall asleep after he's lunched on Little Red Riding-Hood and her grandmother, only for a huntsman to turn up and cut open the wolf's stomach, freeing the (remarkably still living) young girl and her grandparent. Other versions let the girl live. One French version from 1868 has her saved at the last minute, thanks to the remarkable *deus ex machina* involving a wasp stinging the wolf's nostril, the sound of which gives a signal to a tomtit, which warns a nearby huntsman that something's up, so he promptly shoots an arrow through the window, ending any further plans for lupine feasting. Some people went to considerable lengths to avoid Little Red Riding Hood ending up as lunch.

But since she does tend to end up being eaten by the wolf, it's worth asking what the moral of this fairy tale is supposed to be – assuming it has a moral. A number of fairy tales are about the dangers of going off into the woods alone and talking to strange men (or, for that matter, talking wolves): compare here 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. Little Red Riding-Hood goes out into the big bad world unsupervised, and is taken advantage of by the predatory wolf, which, thanks to her loose tongue, kills both her and her grandmother. Little Red Riding-Hood is too innocent: she fails to realise that divulging the whereabouts of a vulnerable old woman might put her grandmother in danger, and then fails to run there as quickly as possible, in the hope of warning her grandmother or foiling the wolf's plans (though it could be countered that a little girl would find it hard to outrun a wolf running at full pelt!). The Brothers Grimm made the moral clearer, with Little Red-Cap being told by her mother not to stray from the path. It is the girl's failure to follow this instruction that leads to her encounter with the big bad wolf, and her subsequent fate (though as we've seen, she's brought back from the dead, or at least from the wolf's belly, in the Grimms' version).

But it is that final conversation between the wolf and Little Red Riding-Hood which remains iconic. It turns out that this, too, is older than the 1690s version of the fairy tale published by Perrault. The Opies draw a link between this exchange and one found in the Elder Edda (thirteenth century), which sees the Norse night-god Loki explaining the somewhat unfeminine attributes of the 'woman' who is being offered to the giant Thrym as his bride. The bride is really Thor in disguise (the similarities between this tale and Little Red Riding-Hood are already becoming apparent), so the mischievous Loki has to do some serious sales patter here:

'These maids of Asgard,' said the Giants to each other, 'they may be refined, as Thrym's mother says, but their appetites are lusty enough.'

'No wonder she eats, poor thing,' said Loki to Thrym. 'It is eight days since we left Asgard. And Freya never ate upon the way, so anxious was she to see Thrym and to come to his house.'

'Poor darling, poor darling,' said the Giant. 'What she has eaten is little after all.'

Thor nodded his head toward the mead vat. Thrym ordered his servants to bring a measure to his bride. The servants were kept coming with measures to Thor. While the Giants watched, and while Loki nudged and nodded, he drank three barrels of mead.

'Oh,' said the Giants to Thrym's mother, 'we are not so sorry that we failed to win a bride from Asgard.'

And now a piece of the veil slipped aside and Thor's eyes were seen for an instant. 'Oh, how does it come that Freya has such glaring eyes?' said Thrym.

'Poor thing, poor thing,' said Loki, 'no wonder her eyes are glaring and staring. She has not slept for eight nights, so anxious was she to come to you and to your house, Thrym.'

All the better for conning you with, we might say.

We've been calling her 'Little Red Riding-Hood', but of course that's only a nickname. In the version of the fairy tale included by the Opies in their indispensable *The Classic Fairy Tales*, the Christian name of Little Red-Riding Hood is given as 'Biddy'.

As Dickens recalled in his short sketch 'A Christmas Tree': 'I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding-Hood, I should have known perfect bliss. But, it was not to be.' In summary, Little Red Riding-Hood is one of those fictional characters whom we meet in childhood and who remain as archetypes emblazoned on our imaginations. How we should analyse the story's ultimate moral remains unclear, but it may well have stemmed from that age-old advice parents pass on to their children: don't talk to strange men. Or wolves. But we've somehow lost that last bit.