NOTES OF A FRINGE-WATCHER

MARTIN GARDNER

Little Red Riding Hood

Little Red Riding Hood
Went walking through a wood.
She met a wolf and stopped to chat.
Don't ask what happened after that!

—Armand T. Ringer

One of the funniest of all games played by Freudian literary critics is that of finding sex symbols in old fairy tales. It is a very easy game to play. Freud is said to have once remarked that a cigar sometimes is just a cigar, but psychoanalysts who write about fairy tales seem incapable of seeing them as just fantasies intended to entertain, instruct, and at times frighten young children.

Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH), in his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976) is a prime example of Freudian symbol searching. But first, a brief history of this famous fable.

The story began as a folk tale that European mothers and nurses told to young children. The fable, in its many variants, came to the attention of Charles Perrault (1628–1703), a French attorney turned poet, writer, and anthologist. He published one version in a 1697 collection of fairy tales—a book that became a French juvenile classic.

Perrault opens his story "*Le Petit Chaperon Rouge*" (Little Red Cape) by telling about a pretty village girl who is called Little Red Riding Hood because she loves to wear a red cape and hood given to her by her grandmother. Her mother hands her some biscuits and butter to take to the sick grandmother in a nearby village. Walking through a wood, LRRH encounters a friendly wolf who asks where she is going. After she tells him, the wolf says he'll go there too, but by a different route and they'll see who gets there first.

The wolf arrives ahead of the girl, devours the grandmother, then crawls into bed. When LRRH shows up he simulates the grandmother's voice, telling her to put the biscuits and butter aside and climb in bed. LRRH undresses and does as she is told. A famous dialog follows: "What great arms you have, grandma! The better to embrace you, my child. What great legs you have! The better to run with, my child. What great ears! The better to hear with. What great eyes! The better to see with. What great teeth! The better to eat you with."

The wolf then gobbles up LRRH and the story ends! I have been told, though I strongly doubt it, that French children find this ending amusing, and are not in the least disturbed by it. Andrew Lang, who reprinted Perrault's version in his *Blue Fairy Book*, severely criticizes Perrault for choosing a version with such a gruesome ending.

When the German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm later published in 1812 their collection of more than 200 traditional fairy tales, many taken from Perrault, they gave the story a less grim ending. In their version (you'll find it in the Modern Library's *Tales of Grimm and Andersen*), LRRH's mother gives her cake and a bottle of wine to take to the ailing grandmother. LRRH is not afraid of the wolf when she meets him in the forest. He persuades her to pick some flowers to take to her grandmother. While she is doing this (disobeying her mother who told her not to dawdle) the wolf hastens to the grandmother's house, finds the door unlocked, enters, and promptly eats the grandmother.

When LRRH arrives she is surprised to find the door open. She thinks it is her grandmother in bed because the wolf has pulled a nightcap over his face, and sheets over his body. LRRH stands beside the bed while the familiar dialog occurs about the wolf's body parts. The wolf then springs out of bed and eats LRRH. He now goes back to bed and falls asleep. A passing hunter hears the wolf's loud snores. He goes inside to investigate and is about to shoot the wolf until he realizes it may have eaten the grandmother. So he pulls out a knife and cuts open the wolf's belly. Both LRRH and the grandmother emerge as unharmed as Jonah when he was vomited out of the whale's belly.

LRRH brings some big stones into the house to put inside the wolf, who is still asleep. When he awakes and tries to get

Martin Gardner's two-volume Annotated Alice *has recently been reprinted in a one-volume edition.*

away, the heavy stones drag him down and he drops dead. The hunter skins the wolf and takes the skin home. The grandmother can hardly breathe, but she feels much better after eating the cake and drinking some wine. LRRH says to herself, "I will never again wander off into the forest as long as I live, when my mother forbids it."

The tale is short and simple. Its obvious moral is that children should obey their mothers when they walk through dangerous areas, and to beware of seemingly friendly strangers. I suppose it is the linking of LRRH's beauty and innocence with her grisly experience that has led to her capturing the hearts of so many adults everywhere, especially in Germany, France, Sweden, and England. "Little Red Riding Hood was my first love," declared Charles Dickens. "I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss."

Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, by Gustave Doré. This picture is on the front cover of the 1989 paperback edition of Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment.*

Bruno Bettelheim devotes eighteen pages of his book on fairy tales to LRRH.[1] In his eyes the girl is not as innocent as she seems. She is at the nymphet stage when her premature "budding sexuality" is creating deep unconscious conflicts between her id (animal nature) and her superego (conscience), as well as between her allegiance to what Freud called the "pleasure principle" and the "reality principle." Unconsciously, she wants to be seduced by her father. The wolf's eating her represents that seduction.

The red color of LRRH's hood, according to Bettelheim, symbolizes her unconscious sexual desires. He sees the gift of the hood by the grandmother as representing a transfer of sexual attractiveness from an old sick woman to a young healthy girl. The grandmother is a symbol of the little girl's mother. When the wolf eats the grandmother it represents the little girl's wish to get rid of her mother so she can have her father all to herself.

In Grimm's version, Bettelheim sees the hunter as another father symbol. When he cuts open the wolf's belly it indicates "the idea of pregnancy and birth," thus coming "too close for comfort in suggesting a father in a sexual activity connected with his daughter."

Bettelheim, of course, is not the only Freudian to read dark sexual meanings into the story. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, in *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths* (1951) is also convinced that LRRH is experiencing unconscious sexual impulses and really wants to be seduced by the wolf. The red cape symbolizes her menstrual blood as she enters womanhood. When the mother warns her not to leave the path or she might fall and break the wine bottle, it represents the mother's fear that her daughter might lose her virginity by breaking her maidenhead.

"The male is portrayed as a ruthless and cunning animal," Fromm writes. The sexual act becomes a "cannibalistic act in which the male devours the female." Fromm sees this as an expression of a deep antagonism toward men by frigid females who do not enjoy sex. The male wolf is "made ridiculous" by showing "that he attempted to play the role of a pregnant woman, having living beings in his belly." The stones that LRRH puts in the wolf's stomach are "symbols of sterility" that cause him to collapse and die. The stones "mock his usurpation of the pregnant woman's role."

"The story," Fromm concludes, "speaks of the male-female conflict; it is a story of triumph by man-hating women, ending with their victory, exactly the opposite of the Oedipus myth, which lets the male emerge victorious from this battle."

Jack Zipes, who teaches German at the University of Minnesota, is the author of *The Brothers Grimm* (1986), a two-volume edition of Grimm's stories, a collection of French folk tales, and other books on folklore. One of his books is titled *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983, updated in 1993). The book is a marvelous scholarly history of the LRRH fable and its many versions and interpretations.

Zipes covers all the oral variations that preceded Perrault, as well as the many retellings by writers from the Grimm brothers to 1993. Some of the oral tales are even more morbid than Perrault's version. In several versions the Wolf slices up the grandmother and pours her blood into a bottle. LRRH then eats and drinks what she thinks is meat and wine before the wolf eats her. In other versions LRRH escapes by telling the wolf she has to go outside to relieve herself.

Thirty-eight variations of the tale are reprinted in Zipes's anthology, along with a raft of illustrations from books and advertisements. At the back of the book he lists 147 published versions of the story, including retellings by Walter de la Mare and James Thurber, as well as comic parodies, poems, plays, recordings, musicals, and films. His bibliography of critical references runs to 153 items!

Zipes takes both Fromm and Bettelheim to task for not recognizing the story's male bias, namely the view that girls secretly want to be raped, and may even encourage it, and that they need a good strong man to shield them from such desires. "It is because rape and violence," Zipes writes in his preface, "are at the core of the history of Little Red Riding Hood that it is the most widespread and notorious fairy tale in the Western World."

Zipes greatly admires today's feminist

writers who analyze the story from a female perspective. Most of them deny that LRRH had unconscious impulses to be raped. They give her the strength and cleverness to take care of herself. An amusing example, though not by a feminist, is Thurber's burlesque in *Fables for Our Times and Famous Poems* (1939). In this brief account, when LRRH approaches the wolf she sees at once he is not her grandmother, "for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her pocket and shot the wolf dead. Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be."

Views similar to those of Fromm and Bettelheim are advanced in greater detail by Carl-Heinz Mallet, who runs a school for retarded children in Hamburg. A dedicated Freudian, he has written a study titled *Grimm's Fairy Tales,* and another book, *Fairy Tales and Children.* Mallet sees LRRH as a nymphet who is curious about sex. "Behind a sweet, pure facade," he writes in the second mentioned book, "nature dominates, and a primal life seethes." He finds LRRH's sex appeal brought out more vividly in a version of the tale told by Ludwig Bechstein, another German folklorist.

"Once there was an absolutely darling, charming little slip of a girl," is how Bechstein opens his version. When the wolf sees her he thinks, "Oh, you dearest, appetizing hazelnut, you—I have to crack you." Mallet thinks the red hood is the girl's signal that she wants to be raped. "For all her innocence, Little Red Riding Hood turns men on." Why is she so friendly with the wolf? Because, writes Mallet, she subconsciously wants him to attack her.

What about the grandmother? Mallet believes she is a symbol of the mother's sublimated longing for fresh sexual experiences, symbolized, of course, by the grandmother being eaten by the wolf. Oral sex with a vengeance! Part of the mother "is worried about her daughter. Another part wants this very thing for herself."

The wine and cake, for Mallet, represent "bodily pleasures." The grandmother leaves her door unlocked because she secretly hopes a man will invade the house and rape her. Mallet puts it this way:

> The mother dares not seek out the wolf for herself, much as she might like to, and so dresses her daughter attractively and sends her out into the forest, the home of the wicked wolf. Simultaneously innocent and sexy, the child will exert a powerful attraction; the wolf will not stop at voicing polite compliments, and the mother knows it.

Of course the mother is not consciously aware of her motives. She really wants her daughter to seduce the wolf for her (the mother's) vicarious pleasures! The various parts of the wolf's body that LRRH sees and feels represent, for all Freudian critics, the one male organ that she envies and most desires. They suspect that if the truth were known, LRRH finally exclaimed "What a big thing you have between your thighs!" LRRH's death—you guessed it—is a symbol of her orgasm as she is raped. Why is the tale so universally popular? "Not even the most graphic book or movie," Mallet assures his readers, "could outdo the sensuous scene in the grandmother's bed."

The identification of the wolf with a male human womanizer is the basis of a 1966 hit song by Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs. The music is by Ronald Blackwell, and I assume the lyrics were written by Sam. The song opens with a wolf howl followed by, "Who's that I see walking in these woods? Why, it's Little Red Riding Hood!"

The song's first and final verses are the same:

> Hey there, Little Red Riding Hood!
> You sure are looking good!
> You're everything a big bad wolf
> could want.

The song goes on to say that LRRH has big eyes of the sort that drive wolves mad, and "little big girls" should not go strolling through "spooky old woods" alone.

Sam then offers to protect LRRH by walking with her each time she goes through the forest. He hopes she will trust him. Although he yearns to hold her, he won't try because she might suppose *he's* a big bad wolf. However, even bad wolves can be good, and he has a big heart, the better to love her with. He'll be happy to accompany her on walks through the woods until she realizes he's no threat.

Wolf calls are interspersed between the song's stanzas. The recording ends with a wolf howl and Sam repeating, "I mean baaaad!"

Two poems by James Whitcomb Riley are worth mentioning. His three-stanza tribute, "Red Riding Hood," opens:

> Sweet little myth of the nursery
> story—
> Earliest love of mine infantile breast,
> Be something tangible, bloom in thy
> glory
> Into existence, as thou art addressed!
> Hasten! appear to me, guileless and
> good—
> Thou art so dear to me, Red Riding
> Hood!

Riley's other poem, "Maymie's Story of Red Riding Hood," is a lengthy ballad told in an annoying dialect. After the wolf eats the grandmother, a wood-chopper saves LRRH by killing the wolf with a blow on his head, but the poor grandmother remains unrecovered.

Let's try a non-Freudian interpretation of the fable—one that could be made by a theologian. The story is an allegory about good and evil. LRRH is the child, innocent of sin, who is slain by the irrational evil of the universe. Like Moby-Dick, the wolf represents this inescapable aspect of our lives. Every year millions of beautiful children are either slain by a dreadful disease or by slow starvation. In the end, we are all killed by the big bad wolf. In the German Protestant version, the hunter is God. He slays the monster Satan, and restores LRRH and her grandmother to everlasting life.

But enough of such baloney. My next column will recount the sad life of Bruno Bettelheim, how his views about autistic children did terrible harm both to the children he treated and their parents, and about his eventual suicide.

Note

1. Alan Dundes, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, in an article in *The Journal of American Folklore,* accused Bettelheim of shamelessly cribbing from *A Psychiatric Study of Fairy Tales* (1963), by Stanford psychiatrist Julius Hauscher. Not only does Bettelheim take up the tales in the same order, but there is what Dundes calls "wholesale borrowing of key ideas." Nowhere in his book or in a long list of references does Bettelheim mention Hauscher. See "Was He Really Borrowheim?" in *Newsweek,* February 18, 1991, p. 75. □