

Little Red Riding Hood

“**Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married [her] I should have known perfect bliss.**”
– Charles Dickens

Unlike many of the other fairy tales, no written version of Little Red Riding Hood existed before Charles Perrault published his in 1697. Little Red Riding Hood meets a wolf in the woods whilst taking food to her ailing grandmother. Arriving at the grandmother's cottage first, the wolf devours the old lady and then the little girl. Here Perrault's version ends. Perrault was very clear that the story was a cautionary tale about charming men who would lure innocent young women to bed and ruin them.

The story has been traced to earlier, darker European oral traditions.

In some versions Little Red Riding Hood is tricked into cannibalising her grandmother when the wolf offers her 'wine' and 'meat', and into throwing her clothes, item by item, into the fire

before climbing into bed. Not fooled by the excuses why “grandmother” looks so different, she escapes by persuading the wolf she must go outside to defecate. This intelligent, courageous heroine is far removed from the passive girl of Dickens's dreams.

In the Brothers Grimm version, *Little Red-Cap*, the warning became the peril of parental disobedience. In the changed ending, a passing forester cuts open the wolf, releasing grandmother and granddaughter unscathed, giving Red-Cap a chance to reflect on lessons learnt.

The classic exchange of “what big eyes and teeth you have” remains a constant and is rooted in Norse mythology, when a suspicious groom wonders why his 'bride' (actually the god Thor in disguise) has such masculine traits.



Blocks used in Red Riding Hood, from *Banbury chap-books and nursery toy book literature*, E. Pearson (1890). Briggs Collection Z1037.67.P4 barcode 6001932940.

The MORAL.

From this short story easy we discern
What conduct all young people ought to learn.
But above all, young, growing misses fair,
Whose orient rosy blooms begin to appear :
Who, beauties in the fragrant spring of ages,
With pretty airs young hearts are apt to engage,
Ill do they listen to all sorts of tongues,
Since some incant and lure like Syrens songs.
No wonder therefore 'tis, if over-power'd,
So many of them has the Wolf devour'd.
The Wolf, I say, for Wolves too sure there are
Of every sort, and every character.
Some of them mild and gentle-humour'd be,
Of noise and gall, and rancour wholly free ;
Who tame, familiar, full of complaisance
Ogle and leer, languish, cajole and glance ;
With luring tongues, and language wond'rous
sweet,
Follow young ladies as they walk the street,
E'en to their very houses, nay, beside,
And, artful, tho' their true designs they hide :
Yet ah ! these simpering Wolves who does not
see
Most dang'rous of all Wolves in fact to be ?



Tales of passed times by Mother Goose, written in French by M. Perrault and englished [sic] by R.S. Gent (1796). Briggs Collection PZ6.1.P4 barcode 6001920272.

Perrault ended his tales with rhyming morals, leaving no doubt as to his intentions. Little Red Riding Hood is not a warning of the literal wolves that roamed seventeenth-century France's forests, but of predatory men after 'beauties in the fragrant spring of age.'



The True Story of Little Red Riding Hood, Her Grandmamma, and the Wicked Wolf (1896). EMSC Pamphlet Not 3.Y16 LIT barcode SC8944.

The morals added in the Grimms' version are disconnected from the plot. Little Red Riding Hood is warned to stay on the path, else the jars will break and her grandmother will have no food, and to mind her manners. The advice actually hinders her: politely answering the wolf's questions was her downfall, and the consequence of leaving the path is to be eaten alive, not breaking the jars.



'Little Red Riding Hood' by Fedor Flinzer, 1881, from *Mein Vöglein mit dem Ringlein rot: hundert Illustrationen aus zwei Jahrhunderten zu Märchen der Brüder Grimm*, compiled by Heinz Wegehaupt (1985). Magdeburg Collection PT921. G7.Z barcode 1001635380.

In the 1880s, when folklorists began publishing the oral traditional tales, Perrault's and Grimms' versions were firmly established, with any details from the source material deemed inappropriate for middle-class nurseries removed.