

Owning the Journey: Using Collaborative Revisions of Little Red Riding Hood in Teaching Introduction to Literature at a Historically Black University

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In her article “Fractured Fairy Tales: German Women Authors and the Grimm Tradition,” Jeannine Blackwell notes that the narrative gaps in fairy tales—the unanswered questions that often underlie the stories—represent enticing possibilities for contemporary writers to “infuse their temporal interpretations” into existing stories (162-3). Such unarticulated moments, which comprise latent invitations for writers and readers to engage with fairy tale worlds, become even more apparent in a comparative context. While on the faculty at Alabama State University, I designed a series of assignments for students in my Introduction to Literature course to read and compare three versions of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story [*LRRH*]—by Perrault, the Grimms, and Angela Carter—and subsequently participate in a collaborative group project in which they composed their own revision of the tale (according to guidelines provided by the instructor) that they would ultimately perform as a skit for the class. As part of the project, each student was required to write an accompanying essay analyzing their skit and explaining the rationale for the revisions they had made to the tale. The objective of the project was to doubly engage the students with the texts involved as both writers and critics. Teaching an Introduction to Literature course as a core or general education requirement often means working with a group

of students who question the validity of such a requirement for non-English majors. As a faculty member at a Historically Black University, I designed these collaborative course projects using different versions of *LRRH* in order to help students to engage with material that often seems irrelevant to their cultural and intellectual experience. Encouraging the students to take a hands-on approach to literature by creating their own adaptations and incorporating their contemporary perspectives enhances their understanding of the mechanics of literary texts while concomitantly increasing their level of engagement as “owners” of their literary journey.

In *Making Literature Matter* (3rd Edition), editors Clifford and Schilb group three versions of *LRRH* (by Perrault, the Grimms, and Carter) into a section on literary revisions. In my Introduction to Literature courses, I have used this grouping as a jumping off point for a class discussion on archetypal narratives. Our discussion culminates in a group project in which the students create their own versions of the *LRRH* story that relate the story back to other works that we have read and discussed during the semester while concomitantly relating the tale to their own real-world experiences. We begin by discussing archetypes and narrative topoi in general, focusing on the elements of the journey, the challenges and/or obstacles to be overcome, and the resolutions that represent the journey’s end. We discuss the figural qualities of the landscapes depicted, the functional aspects of the characters as “helping” and “harming” figures, and other elements, such as symbolism and figurative language, that are employed in each text. We begin with a careful consideration of how Perrault’s 1697 version uses the story to construct a message or “moral” about the protection of female virtue and discuss how this moral reflects Perrault’s contemporary preoccupation with the preservation of aristocratic privilege from the upstart aspirations of social-climbing predators. I ask the students to consider how that point is

forcefully driven home by the shocking death of the protagonist at the story's end—a very different conclusion than the one that they are used to. We then move to a comparative consideration of the differences, both apparent and subtle, between Perrault's version of the tale and the more familiar version of the Grimm brothers. In making our comparison, I guide the students to recognize how the differences gradually diverge into very different expressions of tone and theme that ultimately outweigh the more apparent similarities in the common framework of the stories. In the process of these careful considerations, students are able to arrive at interpretations and insights into each text that would likely have gone unnoticed if the stories had not been read against one another.

As the students become accustomed to the methodology of reading comparatively, we then turn to a more radical revision of the *LRRH* narrative, the contemporary, feminist retelling of Angela Carter in her story *The Company of Wolves*. Because this is a much more complex, and for the students a more challenging version, I spend more time introducing the allegorical level of the narrative. Carter's story refashions the fairy tale as an allegorical journey into womanhood, beginning with a protagonist in the process of undergoing puberty and ending with her entry into full adult sexuality. Feminist critics have paid considerable attention to women writers' revisions of fairy tales as they mount challenges the patriarchal ideologies encoded within such texts. Hilary S. Crew, for example, has noted that women writers often revise and redefine the generic conventions of the fairy tale, using different narrative strategies and plot structures to present "other sides" of traditional stories. Crew cites the work of Anne Cranny Francis, who refers to feminist revisions of fairy tales as "metafictions" that function only when the revised tales are viewed in opposition to the more traditional versions. According to Crew,

Cranny Francis's "definition of a feminist text is based on the construction of a reading position from which contradictions within the text . . . are explained if a reader sees them from a feminist perspective" (92-3). Thus, guiding students to see how Carter's revision of the *LRRH* story repositions the tale, prefacing and juxtaposing it with a series of thematically related tales, further illuminates her method of reconstructing the tale from a contemporary, feminist perspective. In one prefacing tale, a wolf is killed by hunters, only to magically transform into a dead man; in another, a jealous witch crashes the wedding of the man who abandoned her and turns the entire wedding party into wolves. The final prefacing story is an extended folktale about a woman who inadvertently marries a werewolf who abandons her on their wedding night and later returns to threaten her family. Each of the preface stories links strong impulses (hunger/lust/jealousy) with violence and/or punishment: in the first, the ravenous wolf preys on the weak (a madman living alone, a young girl); in the second, the witch's curse is retribution for her lover's abandonment of her for another woman; and in the final preface tale, the werewolf/husband who returns and lashes out at his onetime wife for marrying again is matched in his rage and violence by her current husband, who kills the first husband and then beats his wife when she cries. These tales collectively construct a critical comparative framework for the version of *LRRH* that follows, preparing the reader for the thematic yoking of sex and violence that permeates the revised narrative (and that is submerged in the earlier versions of the tale). While I agree with Wendy Swyt's observation that in Carter's story "The move from these old wives' tales to the 'tamed' nursery fable challenges the oppositions of purity and danger" and "thus...reframes the sexual socialization that the nursery tale implies" (316). I would add that, taken as a whole, the *LRRH* adaptation and the prefacing tales also function to construct a

critique of the ways that cultures have historically circumscribed and punished female sexuality. Carter's version of *LRRH* doesn't merely reverse the positions of predator and prey; rather, she deconstructs the opposition to uncover what lies at its base—not a war between the sexes, but the historic and ongoing battle against sexuality itself, particularly women's sexuality. In other words, it is not the “wolf without” that threatens, but the “wolf within,” as the cultural approbation against female sexuality and the concomitant feelings of denial and shame it engenders create a monstrous distortion of the sexual dimension of human nature, historically represented by the wolf figure. Carter's Red Riding Hood “tames” this wolf by refusing to fear it; when the protagonist embraces the wolf at the tale's end, she is embracing her own “becoming” as a woman and the sexual part of herself which is awakened, recognized, and accepted in that moment.

Carter's version of the *LRRH* tale retains the essential structure—a young female setting out on an errand of mercy, taking a basket of goodies to her grandmother, traveling through a dangerous wood, encountering a wolf, discovering at her grandmother's house that she is in peril, as well as emblematic details of the folk tale (a red garment, the mother's instruction, the path through the wood)—details also retained in the versions of Perrault and the Grimms. The students and I compare the versions once more and examine the similarities and subtle (or not so subtle) differences. By this time, they have become more adept at noting the significance of textual variations and easily pick up on Carter's representation of a more mature protagonist than those represented in the earlier versions: “Her breasts have just begun to swell, her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet

and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforth, once a month” (qtd. in Clifford and Schilb 1583).

The representation of Little Red Riding Hood as a young woman on the verge of adulthood makes overt the symbolism of the red cloak that bears her name. Carter describes the color as “having the ominous look of blood on snow.” After discussing with my class how this representation of a more mature protagonist begins to affect the reader’s perception of the tale, and how this perception differs from our perceptions of the earlier versions of the tale, we focus on the representation of the wolf, again in a comparative context. After an in-depth discussion of Carter’s representation of the man/wolf (who the students easily note critiques the traditional male “rescuer” by presenting the wolf in a huntsman’s garb), we examine the sexualized violence of Carter’s description of the wolf’s attack on grandma:

He strips off his shirt. His skin is the color and texture of vellum. A crisp strip of hair runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and dark as poison fruit, but he's so thin you could count the ribs under his skin if only he gave you the time. He strips off his trousers and she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge. Ah! huge.

The last things the old lady saw in all this world was a young man, eyes like cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed. (1585)

Again, we discuss how the descriptive details and the sexual references significantly alter the readers’ perception of the wolf figure and the role that it plays in the overall symbolic landscape of the narrative. As each of these details are noted and discussed, the students begin to understand and comment on the importance of reading for detail and relating critically,

particularly when dealing with literary adaptations. We close our examination of Carter's story with a discussion of the tale's end and debate the meaning of Little Red Riding Hood's conquest of the wolf. Our careful consideration of the details of the story, and the comparison with earlier versions, helps to students to more fully understand how Carter completely transforms the foundation tale into a commentary on cultural fears of female sexuality.

In comparing Carter's version of the story to those of Perrault and the Grimms, the notable absence in Carter's revision of the traces of the tale's oral past, which are retained in both earlier versions, becomes apparent. Carter's carefully constructed symbolism and the multiple narrative layers and intertextual references are crafted in a readerly manner very different from the types of narrative cues and patterns characteristic of the traditional folk or fairy tale genres. Carter's story retains the recognizable structure of the *LRRH* story while utterly transforming the tale into a complex, multilayered narrative celebrating female sexuality even as it condemns the patriarchal tradition of containing and controlling it. Read in conjunction with the versions of Perrault and the Grimms, Carter's story comprises a critical counter-narrative that opens up the latent elements of the classic tale to contemporary interpretation.

When we have finished our discussion of the three versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* in our textbook, we move on to a guided reading analysis of Katharine Mansfield's short story "The Garden Party," a far more subtle adaptation of the *LRRH* archetype that presents the students with yet another model of a literary adaptation. Mansfield's story recounts the rite of passage of a young girl, Laura Sheridan, who confronts her own mortality as a consequence of a tragic accident that has taken the life of a young family man who lives in a poor neighborhood located near her wealthy family's estate. The emphasis of the story is on the very different experiences

of rich and poor, and it culminates with the young girl's awakening to the deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes that have framed and distorted her perception of the world. At the end of the story, Laura is sent on a mission of "charity" to take a basket of leftover food from the titular garden party to the deceased man's family.

Students read Mansfield's story and begin by identifying the archetypal elements: the young female protagonist (Laura Sheridan), the mother's instructions, the basket of goodies, the hat that Laura wears (which symbolizes both her transition into womanhood and also her privileged social class status), and the journey through a dark wood (place of potential danger) to a cottage where death waits. Then we divide the story into stages and class into groups, each group charged with analyzing their section in comparison to the other *LRRH* tales and presenting their findings to the class. Each group considers how their segment retains recognizable elements of the tale, identifies them for the class, discusses subtle differences from the earlier versions (what has been changed and how), and offers their interpretation of how Mansfield's adaptation alters the meaning of their assigned segment. As each group presents their findings to the class, we discuss how the story as a whole has taken on entirely different meaning by incorporating the *LRRH* narrative into a critique of social class discrimination.

After we complete our class discussion of "The Garden Party," the students begin working on their final group projects. Our extensive discussion of the three *LRRH* texts and Mansfield's story prepares the students to begin their own work of revision by making them attentive to shifts in symbolism, tone, and context as they comprise the mechanics of narrative. For their projects, the students work in groups of 4–5 people, and together they write and perform an original scene that incorporates the archetypal elements of *LRRH* into a text or unit

covered earlier in the semester. In this way, the student presentations “comment” on the works we have discussed throughout the semester at the same time as they reinterpret the *LRRH* story. The students draw from earlier units on the poetry of the Holocaust and the Civil Rights movement, the dramas of Sophocles’s *Antigone* and Ibsen’s *A Doll House*, as well as other works that vary from semester to semester. Past students have developed versions of *LRRH* in which the main character was represented by such diverse real-life figures as Anne Frank, Emmitt Till, Rosa Parks, and even the murdered children of the infamous Susan Smith. Other projects have featured fictional protagonists, such as Antigone, Nora Helmer, and Mansfield’s Laura Sheridan in the Little Red Riding Hood role, but set in new contexts.

Conclusion: Examples and Cases

To illustrate the type of results produced by this assignment, I will discuss in detail one particularly effective presentation done by a student group who used the racially motivated 1955 murder of Emmett Till to reconfigure the *LRRH* story, drawing on our class discussion of the Civil Rights era and the poem “Afterimages” by Audre Lorde. The group began their presentation with a narrator who adopts the tone and style of the standard fairy tale: “Once upon a time, there was a naïve boy named Emmett Till. A tuft of hair had just began [sic] to grow above his lips and his legs seemed to grow longer each day.” As the versions of Perrault, the Grimms, and Carter had characterized their protagonists by way of one distinctive trait (Perrault’s “prettiest creature,” the Grimms “sweetest girl,” and Carter’s “strong-willed child”); the students identified the predominant quality of their fictional Till as naïveté. Their description recalls the actual Till’s young age, poised as he was on the cusp of adulthood, and thus heightens the poignancy of his tragic death. Their narrator then goes on to solidify the connection between

their adaptation and its inspiration by highlighting the archetypal quality of Till's journey from his home in Chicago to his destination in Mississippi. Taking up the standard *LRRH* elements of the child setting out from mother's house with instructions to "stay on the path," the student presentation recounts Maime Till's warnings to her young son about the dangers lurking in the Jim Crow South:

After Emmett and his mother agreed that he should go, she sat down with him and warned him about the racial conditions in the South. She told Emmett that he must always address whites as yes ma'am and no ma'am or yes sir and no sir. She warned him to be respectful of whites at all times or they may do something to hurt him.

Rather than using the mother's instruction to tie to a moral about children obeying their parents, the students adapted this part of the story to a different "path"—that of surviving within a historical climate of institutionalized racial violence. After continuing to a description of the encounter between Emmett and a white saleswoman (Caroline Bynum), the students adapt the ending of the story to rewrite the tragedy of Till's death by having Emmett's family and neighbors protect him from the impending violence by lying in wait for the white men who come to take the boy to his death:

Narrator: The men and boys beat the white men, and saved Emmett, who was, for the first time, in tears.

Emmett: Uncle, what big eyes they had.

Uncle: Better to see you with, my son.

Emmett: Uncle, what big hands they had.

Uncle: Better to beat you with.

Emmett: Uncle, what big guns they had.

Uncle: Better to try and kill you with.

Again, the students clearly adapt the familiar language of *LRRH* to fit the context of their skit and to fit in with the realities of the African American experience in the 1950's Deep South. The moral of their story explicitly chronicles the process of composing their adaptation:

Narrator: In the historical context of the 1950's, southern white Americans were the wolves, preying on innocent blacks who desired equality. The wolves, were, for the most part, straightforward in their pursuit. Emmett Till was Little Red Riding Hood. He journeyed from Chicago to Mississippi. However, his real quest was from the store to his uncle's house. It was at his uncle's house that he realized he had let his pride and naïveté lead to what could have been his demise. The huntsmen were black friends. They came to Emmett's rescue and defeated the wolves. However, the actual slaying of Till was a message to all blacks, whether they lived in the South or North, to become huntsmen for each other. The moral is that if we don't stand up for each other, who will?

By revising the ending of the story, the students were able to take ownership of this tragic moment in American history and use their adaptation to convey a moral that resonates today.

This exemplary presentation finished with yet another adaptation of a key course reading, as the students took Martin Niemoller's Holocaust poem "First They Came for the Jews" with its similar moral about the responsibility of each individual to the community of mankind, and they adapted it to the context of the Civil Rights era:

First they came for Samuel Young Jr., a
Student and civil rights activist killed in the South.
And I did not speak out
Because I did not live in the South.
Then they came for Willie Brewster,
Who was killed by nightriders in the South.
And I did not speak out
Because I did not live in the South.
Then they came for Benjamin Brown,
a civil rights worker killed in the South.
And I did not speak out
Because I did not live in the South.
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.

As the example provided above illustrates, the processes of reading comparatively and creating new versions of the *LRRH* story that address situations and literary works of the students' choosing allows them to engage with the literary tradition in an immediate and personal way. The students make their own claim to the *LRRH* tradition through the creation of their narratives while concomitantly honing their critical reading skills and learning to work in a collaborative context. The incorporation of an accessible, yet challenging, group assignment into the course syllabus promotes student interaction as well as increased engagement based on a sense of

responsibility to the group members. In addition, the assignment combines a creative opportunity with a skills- and knowledge-based activity that promotes critical thinking and heightened interest while cultivating a sense of purpose in students who pick issues and stories to work with that they relate to and that are important to them. Thus, the creation and implementation of this project in my Introduction to Literature course effectively achieved the intended objectives of stimulating students' interest in literature and literary studies, as well as advancing their ability to read texts in a more informed and critical manner. I greatly enjoyed the added benefit of watching them present their very creative and unique projects. Ultimately, the incorporation of a popular and engaging assignment into an introductory-level course not only increases student participation, but I believe that grounding the assignment in the context of an ongoing consideration of historical issues of injustice and discrimination encourages students to become more active in pursuing their own solutions to existing social problems as well.

Notes

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