

Body Writing and the Construction of Female Subjectivity in *The Company of Wolves*

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Different from the classic “Red Riding Hood” story, the girl in *The Company of Wolves* gives us a new image of how a woman is like in a patriarchal society. Carter’s portrayal of this girl withdraws from gender roles and cultural impressions in traditional works of literature and puts forward new ideas of sexuality, empowerment of women, and virginity. This essay intends to discuss that on the one hand, women can use their bodies as weapons against imbalanced power. On the other hand, Carter describes women’s desire for sex and love through body writing to show their awareness of sexual liberation and to break the male-dominated vision of gender and sexuality so that female gender subjectivity is rebuilt.

Keywords: *The Company of Wolves*, body writing, gender subjectivity

Introduction

The Company of Wolves is one of the most famous stories of Angela Carter’s 1979 collection of short fiction, *The Bloody Chamber*. The girl in this story is adapted from “Little Red Riding Hood”. Under Carter’s rewriting, the girl was given many new features to express the author’s feminist thoughts. The girl won the battle against the wolf and got the mastery of her own fate by using her wisdom and bravery and also her body and chastity.

Little Red Riding Hood: A New Image

The heroine in this story is *Little Red Riding Hood* who lives in a society in which the worship of virginity is universally accepted and men had absolute power since their judgments and opinions are the truth. And in such a society, women have to behave obediently. It’s not hard to understand why the girl’s mother asked her not to disobey her father’s will. As a mother and a wife, she subconsciously thinks that the girl’s father and her husband may forbid her to go out and that not only she should listen to her husband, but her daughter should do as well. Besides, her grandmother also holds a conservative view that “keep the wolves outside by living well” (Carter, 1993, p. 164). Other female characters like the woman in the kitchen, the girl looking after the sheep in the story, one died and one saved by men with rifles, are also passive and weak as usual in literary history.

However, *Little Red Riding Hood* has the virtues of bravery, rationality, and initiative that are absent in the conventional damsel. She dares to walk out of her warm house and go off through the wood alone regardless of her mother’s objection. She also knows how to protect herself and has a much greater awareness of danger, it’s

her decision to carry a knife. When the wolf disguises himself as a handsome guy and makes a bet that he will arrive at her grandmother's house if he plunges off the path into the forest, although she's appealed to the wolf, she does not readily believe him but insists not leaving the path she now walks on. And when she sees some details at her grandmother's house, unlike her grandmother who was holding a bible when confronted with the wolf, instead she quickly gets the whole situation and seeks a way to save herself. She chooses not to be afraid of the ferocious wolf because she is so rational and she knows "her fear did her no good" (Carter, 1993, p. 166). She thinks she has her own dominance, as she knows she is "nobody's meat" (Carter, 1993, p. 167). She will not be a victim of something bad, as she is the only one that can decide her own fate.

Female Body as Power

Biological differences between the sexes are the foundation that has served to ground and legitimize gender inequality, thus a notion of the body is central to the feminist analysis of the oppression of women. Michel Foucault's treatment of the relations between power, the body, and sexuality has a great significance for feminists. Foucault believes that the body becomes a target and object of power operation and he states in his book that "The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault, 1995, pp. 25-26). In a patriarchal society, the female body has always become the focus of power to control, so the body has become a cultural characterization in the mechanisms of power and knowledge. Men have power at all points and they can naturally decide the value of a woman's body and virginity. It's universally acknowledged that sexual purity forms young girls' moral identity, as it is the only way in which they can control how others view their level of respectability. Once this is gone, they are left powerless. Therefore, in Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*, the sexual encounter is described as the direct reason for the young girl's death. Contrary to this, Carter argues that a girl's power is not only refined by the virginity but a complete herself. Virginity is just a part of the body and she is the owner of her body, so she can totally decide what she's going to do to it.

In the story, virginity is referred to as "an unbroken egg", "a sealed vessel", "a closed system" (Carter, 1993, p. 161), signifying its fragility and delicacy. And when the girl steps into the wood, the forest "closed on her like a pair of jaws", implying that danger lurks everywhere for women who lived in a male-oriented society. And all her physical features including "swollen breasts", "fair hair" and "scarlet and white cheeks" (Carter, 1993, p. 161) establish her as an object of obsession. This state of virginity will naturally become a strong temptation to the male characters and brings her problems and difficulties.

However, the "pure" nature not only gets the girl in danger but also gets her out of her plight. As Lau notes, "Little Red Riding Hood is, ultimately, a sexual agent", as evidenced by the desire she recognizes within herself and subsequently uses to conquer the wolf. Through the description that "she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity" (Carter, 1993, p. 161), it seems like that the purity of her body gives her power. Perhaps she thinks that God will protect her for she has both pure body and soul, so "she does not know how to shivers ... and she is afraid of nothing" (Carter, 1993, p. 161) with a knife in her hand. In the end, when the wolf threatens to eat her, she uses her virginity as a pawn to struggle with him and she finally gets survived. The reason why her virginity can function as a weapon is that "carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh appeases him" (Carter, 1993, p. 168). The loss of her virginity does not mean that she will be recognized as a

powerless and immoral woman but that she has achieved growth in identity, one kind of growth of more significance. The overall implication here is that young women should not fear the loss of their autonomy as a result of having sex, but should instead feel liberated by their ability to break through social constructs.

Free Body: Desire for Love and Sex

Traditional images of female characters are usually depicted as the obedient and passive party, waiting to be pursued and loved by men in romantic relationships. But the girl is also different from them. She is forthright about her preferences and behaves actively in a romantic relationship. She thinks the wolf in disguise is “handsome” and “dashing” that she has never seen before, so she is willing to walk with him and soon she can start “laughing and joking like old friends” (Carter, 1993, p. 162) with him along the path. As she is a young girl, her parents may tell her not to let her guard down when facing strange men. But from her behavior of refusing her mother’s suggestion of staying at home, we can clearly know that she has her own opinions. It’s her decision to expose herself in the forest alone, to get close to the strange man, and make a bet with him. She even “dawdles on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager” (Carter, 1993, p. 163). She seems to take control in the game of love, she may have a chance to arrive faster than him, but she chooses not. All she done has her reasons: she wanders the path purposely at nightfall because she likes this man and wants to win his affection and she also looks forward to being kissed or hitting their relationship a new level; she gives her kiss “freely” and takes off her shawl, skirt, woolen stockings and shoes willingly for seducing him.

In this story, Carter associates the color red with innocence, the sexual encounter with female fulfillment. The red shawl that her grandmother gave her indicates childhood innocence. But the girl is never just referred to as *Little Red Riding Hood*, which indicates she is not defined by her virginity and there is more to her than just innocence. Therefore, it’s reasonable that she chooses to take off her scarlet shawl, “the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses” (Carter, 1993, p. 166) to seduce the wolf. Poppies, which are often associated with death, are symbolic of the young girl’s sexual inexperience coming to an end. She removes the shawl, and at the same time, she removes the fear instilled by the society of the consequences of loss of virginity. And when she “bundled up her shawl and threw it on the blaze, which instantly consumed it” (Carter, 1993, p. 167), it does not mean she has died spiritually but shows that she has realized she is now becoming a woman that she discards her innocence as a child and intends to reach sexual maturity. “One of the primary and most resonant metaphors provided by the female body is blood” (Gubar, 2014, p. 259). Virgin blood will stimulate women to grow mature in all respects including mind, mentality, ideolog and help them form their consciousness. In the story, the thing of value is the girl’s newly developed fertility, the bleeding that symbolizes her entrance into womanhood. Here, lost virginity is not something to mourn, but a natural step, as her body is now biologically prepared for reproduction. From the end of this story, we can know the girl is right in her decision to engage in sexual activity, as she is physically ready for it. Virginity loss does not diminish a female’s worth but is instead a new experience that allows for overall integrity as a human being.

The Pursuit of a Harmonious Relationship

One thing to notice here is that when it comes to women, Carter doesn’t ignore men, instead, she uses wolves to symbolize men in the story and describes men as multidimensional beings that are defined more than

their instinctive sexual behavior (Mia, 2015). “Carnivore incarnate” is the first word that Carter uses to depict wolves or men. Here, men’s powerful carnal desires to have sex are the same as wolves’ desire to prey and kill. The wolf is “cunning” and “ferocious”, but the reason for its feature is that “there is now nothing for the wolves to eat” in the cold winter. And when a group of wolves is shown “howling as if their hearts would break” (Carter, 1993, p. 166), this gives us an image that despite how ferocious they may look on the surface, wolves are just as susceptible to loneliness as anyone else. The wolf’s hunger can be interpreted as a strong desire for her attention due to a lack of love and intimacy. Once she gives him a tender touch and kiss, “the tender wolf” holds her in his arms. His change shows that all he needs is a bit of affection to bring out his gentle nature.

In the end, the girl not only tamed the ferocious wolf but also gained a leading position in the relationship between the sexes (王腊宝, 黄洁, 2009, p. 97). Besides, she doesn’t choose to kill the wolf, which reveals that the conflicts between the girl and the wolf are not entirely absolute. Instead, there is a possibility that men and women can live together harmoniously only if women are no longer passive but they can get equal positions and rights in society. The opening ending of the story shows that Carter advocates a harmonious relationship between men and women.

Conclusion

The girl is shown nameless but her actions are never invisible in this story. She is an Everywoman and by no means, becomes universal as every woman can become someone like her. She is a new woman who is able to think, act, confront, and question. She leaves the safety and shelter of the family home, representing an escape from the patriarchal structure. She takes a knife to protect herself and never plunges off the path, showing women have a strong sense of self-awareness and they are never just puppets of men. Her voluntary acts when seducing the wolf, indicating the growing subjectivity of her position and relation to a masculine world. And the story ends “see! Sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf”, reflecting the girl is also able to tame the wolf not just the huntsman.

Through body writing, Carter takes the liberal standpoint of sex positivity and proves the rationality and necessity of women’s sexual liberation. She hopes women could become the girl in “The Company of Wolves”: they could be active when getting in touch with men, free when talking of virginity and sexual desire, brave when running into difficulties; they should not be tied down by domesticity, femininity; they are their own person and they make their own decisions.

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