

# The Plight of the Wolf: A Rereading of “The Company of Wolves” from the Perspective of Literary Ethics

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Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” is a provocative retelling of the classic fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood,” delving into complex themes of sexuality, violence, and human nature. This paper examines the story’s ethical implications through a literary ethics lens, focusing on the wolf as a symbol of both danger and desire. It explores the wolf’s dual nature, the power dynamics between rulers and the ruled, and the ethical choice between conflict and coexistence.

*Keywords:* “The Company of Wolves,” Angela Carter, literary ethics

## Introduction

Angela Carter, a leading 20th-century writer, is renowned for her feminist, postmodern, and magical realism styles. Her 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* includes “The Company of Wolves,” a reimagining of Grimm’s “Little Red Riding Hood.” Unlike the traditional tale, where the wolf is a pure symbol of evil, Carter’s wolf is complex and multidimensional. This shift reflects Carter’s broader themes of challenging traditional narratives and exploring human morality through symbolic imagery. While many studies focus on the story’s postmodernism, Gothic elements, feminism, or eco-feminism, few examine its ethical dimensions, especially from the wolf’s perspective. This paper aims to fill this gap by analyzing the ethical complexities in Carter’s work and promoting a more rational ethical order in society.

## Half-man and Half-beast: The Ethical Dilemma of the Wolf

Ethical dilemmas in literature arise when characters face moral entanglements at the spiritual and ideological levels, often due to conflicting emotions, relationships, and external pressures (Nie, 2014, p. 15). These dilemmas force characters to make difficult choices. In an ethical sense, humans are defined by the “Sphinx factor” (Nie, 2014, p. 38), a combination of human and animal factors. The human factor represents adherence to ethical principles, while the animal factor embodies instinctual desires. This duality lies at the core of ethical expressions in literature.

In “The Company of Wolves,” the wolf embodies this duality, challenging traditional ethical boundaries. As a wild animal, the wolf follows natural laws of survival, driven by hunger and instinct. In the story, the wolves’ hunger forces them to prey on humans, blurring the line between natural behavior and ethical

acceptability (Carter, 1979, p. 112). However, the wolf also exhibits human traits such as loyalty and bravery, suggesting a more complex nature. For example, the werewolf's curse—imposed by a witch—adds a sympathetic dimension to his character, highlighting the tension between his animal instincts and human qualities (Carter, 1979, p. 113).

Literary ethics criticism examines the ethical order between people, society, and nature. In Carter's story, the wolf's half-human, half-animal identity creates an ethical gray area. Physically, the wolf is described with human characteristics, and the use of the pronoun "he" blurs the boundary between human and animal (Carter, 1979, p. 111). Psychologically, the wolf desires connection with humans but is met with fear and rejection due to his ferocious nature (Carter, 1979, p. 110). This duality challenges traditional binaries of good and evil, suggesting that ethical judgments are not clear-cut.

Carter's work deliberately blurs the line between civilization and savagery, presenting the wolf as a symbol of humanity's internal struggle between instinct and morality. The werewolf's ability to transform from man to beast underscores the tension between individual desires and societal expectations. This duality raises ethical questions about the true nature of human relationships and the facade of civility in society. Ultimately, the wolf's struggle reflects the complexity of human nature and the ethical dilemmas that arise when instinctual desires conflict with moral principles.

### **Rulers and the Ruled: The Ethical Conflicts of the Wolf**

Ethical conflicts arise when adherence to one ethical principle requires violating another, often in situations where no clear right or wrong answer exists (Nie, 2014, p. 49). In "The Company of Wolves," these conflicts are explored through the power dynamics between the wolves and humans. Wolves, as rulers of the forest, possess power but struggle to survive, while among humans, they are marginalized and hunted. This duality creates a sense of helplessness and a longing for acceptance, as seen in the wolf's lament over its own condition (Carter, 1979, p. 112). The wolf's actions, such as attacking the grandmother, challenge traditional norms and authority, while its relationship with the girl suggests a new ethical order based on mutual respect and equality.

The werewolf's connection to his pack symbolizes a broader natural order that contrasts with human civilization. His invitation to the girl to see the wolves reflects a call to acknowledge the primal instincts within human nature, which are often repressed by social norms (Carter, 1979, p. 117). This duality highlights the tension between natural instincts and societal expectations, emphasizing the werewolf's sense of alienation and the marginalization of those who do not fit into mainstream society.

The werewolf's role also challenges traditional gender roles by embodying both masculine strength and feminine tenderness, breaking the binary opposition and proposing a more fluid understanding of gender. His interaction with the girl subverts the traditional predator-prey dynamic, as the girl exercises agency and engages with the wolf on her own terms. This shift reflects Carter's broader themes of female empowerment and the rejection of passive femininity (Carter, 1979, p. 114).

The wolf's interactions with other characters further illuminate the ethical complexities of power dynamics. As a ruler, the wolf challenges established authority, while as the ruled, he experiences oppression. This cyclical nature of power underscores the fluidity of ethical positions within the narrative. The wolf's

journey becomes a metaphor for the struggles of marginalized groups, who must choose between submission and rebellion. Carter's narrative suggests that true liberation can only be achieved through collective action and solidarity, reflecting the ongoing struggles for justice and equality.

### **Fight or Coexist: The Ethical Choice of the Wolf**

The core of ethical narratives lies in the choices characters make, whether towards good or evil (Nie, 2014, p. 77). These choices drive ethical dilemmas and shape the ethical order of the narrative. In "The Company of Wolves," the wolf faces a central ethical choice: to fight against societal constraints or seek coexistence with others. This dilemma reflects broader questions about balancing individual freedom with collective harmony. Carter explores these universal concerns through folklore and mythology, suggesting that true ethical wisdom lies in balancing self-expression with social responsibility.

Throughout the story, the wolf must choose between following its instincts (such as hunting) and adhering to human moral norms (such as not harming others). Initially, the wolf succumbs to instinct by attacking Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, abandoning human morality. However, in the end, the wolf chooses coexistence with the girl, symbolizing a reconciliation between human and beast. This choice reflects the triumph of the wolf's human qualities over its animalistic nature and suggests that coexistence is possible when both parties respect each other's nature. The story concludes with the girl sleeping peacefully "between the paws of the tender wolf" (Carter, 1979, p. 118), highlighting a harmonious and ethical relationship. Carter implies that embracing, rather than suppressing, the "beast" within can lead to a more authentic and harmonious existence.

When choosing to fight, the wolf adopts a Darwinian view that the strong should dominate the weak, overlooking the potential for cooperation and mutual benefit. In contrast, choosing coexistence emphasizes harmony and balance, recognizing the value of each species and the importance of mutual respect. This perspective aligns with ecological ethics, which prioritize the integrity and sustainability of ecosystems. By cooperating rather than competing, wolves and humans can create a better world.

Despite its depiction of conflict, the story also suggests the possibility of harmonious coexistence. Wolves can resolve differences through communication and negotiation, rather than force. This concept extends beyond the wolf pack to broader social relationships, advocating mutual respect and understanding as a means to reduce conflict and promote stability. Achieving this vision requires effort and compromise from all parties, but it remains a worthy goal.

### **Conclusion**

Analyzing the wolf's role in "The Company of Wolves" highlights the significance of literary ethics. This work transcends the simplicity of a fairy tale by delving into profound ethical issues in human society. The wolf's half-human, half-beast identity, the power dynamics between rulers and the ruled, and the choice between conflict and coexistence all touch on fundamental moral questions. Reinterpreting this classic tale not only enhances our appreciation of its literary value but also provides valuable insights into life and morality. The wolf, no longer a simple villain, embodies complex motivations, illustrating that morality is nuanced and often gray. This complexity prompts readers to reconsider traditional notions of good and evil.

In conclusion, "The Company of Wolves" is a nuanced exploration of power, sexuality, and violence through the metaphor of the wolf. Carter's reimagining challenges traditional narratives and invites readers to reflect on the ethical choices we make in our relationships and within ourselves. The wolf, once a symbol of fear, now serves as a catalyst for ethical reflection and personal transformation. Examining the story's ethical dilemmas deepens our understanding of human nature and the potential for ethical growth. This analysis, rooted in literary ethics, reveals the depth of Carter's storytelling and underscores literature's power to challenge societal norms and explore the complexities of human nature.

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