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Little Red Riding Hood in the new age

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Abstract: This study examines how Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves* (1979) and Neil Jordan's 1984 film adaptation, transform the traditional *Little Red Riding Hood* narrative through an interdisciplinary comparative methodology, combining psychoanalytic interpretation, feminist literary criticism, film semiotics, adaptation theory, and historicist analysis, with the poststructural approach for the terms and their significance and/or meaning, and the hermeneutical comparison. Particular attention is given to the changing relationship between human and animal, the symbolic function of the wolf, representations of sexuality and danger, and the transformation of the heroine from passive recipient of moral instruction into an active subject capable of knowledge and interpretation. Traditional versions of the tale are compared with Carter's rewritings and Jordan's composite cinematic adaptation in order to trace how meanings of obedience, desire, fear, and female agency shift across historical and cultural contexts. Hutcheon's distinction between telling and showing provides a methodological framework for examining how Carter's linguistic and narrative strategies are translated into Jordan's visual language through mise-en-scène, costume, sound, dream logic, visual irony, repetition, and nonlinear editing. Historicist comparison further situates these transformations within the cultural climate of the 1980s, while avoiding assumptions that modern feminism represents a simple linear progression from earlier traditions. The red color (or scarlet, or purple) was a synonym for aristocracy in the Byzantine Empire, since it was the most expensive; the dye came from marine sea snails of the Muricidae family, commonly called murex. Later, knights in the Mediterranean region were wearing cloak in this color with hood in same color. The author insists this is the first article claiming Little Red Riding Hood was dressed as a man, because of the red cooler, and because of the time when the first versions appeared, when women were surely not riding.

Key words: eighties, Neil Jordan, screen adaptation, feminism, gender

Introduction

Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984), adapted from Angela Carter's fiction collection of stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), belongs to a particularly productive cultural moment, in which conventional distinctions between masculine and feminine identities, sexuality, danger, and agency were increasingly being questioned. Carter's rewriting of the fairy tale and Jordan's cinematic adaptation transform *Little Red Riding Hood* from a relatively straightforward didactic narrative, into a complex exploration of desire, fear, sexuality, knowledge, and female agency.

Carter's intervention can be understood as a form of what may be termed **magic feminism**: rather than simply reversing the traditional gender hierarchy, she changes the relationship between the heroine and the supposedly dangerous animal. The wolf is no longer merely an external enemy who must be defeated by a male rescuer. Instead, he becomes a figure through which the heroine encounters sexuality, danger, instinct, and the less rational dimensions of human existence. Jordan translates this literary transformation into cinematic language, through visual excess, irony, parody, dream logic, nonlinear editing, and deliberately artificial settings.

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary comparative approach combining psychoanalytic interpretation, feminist literary criticism, film semiotics, adaptation theory, and historicist analysis. It first examines the animal-human relationship in *Little Red Riding Hood* as a structural ambiguity, through which the conventional boundaries between fable, fairy tale, allegory, and short narrative can be reconsidered. It then compares traditional versions of the tale with Carter's rewritings and Jordan's *The Company of Wolves*, focusing on transformations

in the meanings of the wolf, the girl, sexuality, danger, and female agency.

Psychoanalytic theory is particularly useful because the traditional tale disciplines: desires and fears, remain only partially visible on the surface. The wolf can consequently be understood not merely as an animal, but as a symbolic embodiment of sexuality, predation, fear, and instinct. Adaptation theory further clarifies why Jordan's film cannot be evaluated simply according to its fidelity to Carter's prose. As Hutcheon (2006) explains, "Storytelling requires of its audience conceptual work; showing calls on its perceptual decoding abilities" (p. 130). The movement from Carter's prose to Jordan's film therefore entails a transformation in the way meaning is produced: what literature suggests through language and narrative structure, cinema can make visible through image, sound, performance, editing, and mise-en-scène.

The central questions of this study are therefore 2. First, does the narrative ultimately preserve an opposition between the human and the animal, or does it present these dimensions as mutually formative? Second, how does Carter's feminist rewriting become translated into Jordan's cinematic language, as a process through which Little Red Riding Hood acquires knowledge, agency, and the ability to transform the danger that traditionally threatens her?

The advanced argument here is that both Carter and Jordan reject the absolute opposition between the human and the animal. The wolf represents not simply an external threat, but a latent dimension of human desire, fear, sexuality, and instinct. Likewise, the heroine does not become powerful by eliminating this dimension; rather, she becomes powerful by recognizing and negotiating with it. Feminism is therefore a starting point for understanding the transformation, rather than its final interpretive category.

Animals and People in the Narrative: Difference or Mutual Formation?

Traditional classifications frequently distinguish between tales whose characters are human and fables whose characters are animals. Umberto Eco's work on narrative and semiotics is relevant to this problem because it questions the rigid distinctions between apparently different narrative structures and emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning. "The meaning of a proposition embraces 'every obvious necessary deduction. So the meaning is in some way entailed by the premise, and, in more general terms, meaning is everything that is semantically *implied* by a sign. One could thus say that, according to Pierce, the meaning of a sign *inchoatively* contains all the texts within which that sign can be inserted. A sign is a textual matrix."- (Eco, 1979, p. 184). *Little Red Riding Hood* is particularly interesting in this regard because it resists a completely stable classification.

The wolf is simultaneously an animal, a metaphor, a social danger, and a representation of human sexuality. The girl, meanwhile, occupies an unstable position between innocence and knowledge, obedience and curiosity, human rationality and instinct. The narrative consequently approaches the structure of a fable while remaining fundamentally concerned with human behavior.

This ambiguity becomes especially significant when Little Red Riding Hood encounters the wolf. In traditional versions, the encounter is generally organized around a moral warning: the child must remain on the prescribed path and must not trust strangers. The apparently simple instruction conceals a more complex cultural anxiety concerning sexuality, danger, disobedience, and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The traditional narrative therefore operates simultaneously as entertainment and instruction. Its pedagogical purpose is to teach the young listener how to behave in a dangerous world. Yet the very existence of the wolf introduces an element that exceeds rational instruction. The wolf represents something that cannot be completely controlled by rules: desire, curiosity, sexuality, aggression, and the attraction for the forbidden.

This is precisely where Carter and Jordan intervene. Their versions do not simply eliminate the traditional warning. Instead, they expose the desires and fears that the warning attempts

contain. The heroine is no longer merely the object of a lesson. She becomes a participant in the production of meaning.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the wolf can therefore be interpreted as a figure of the repressed. The traditional tale teaches the child to remain on the safe path and avoid the stranger; Carter and Jordan ask what happens when the supposedly dangerous stranger is also the object of curiosity. The result is not a simple celebration of danger, but an examination of the psychological attraction that makes danger narratively and sexually powerful.

Hutcheon's (2006) distinction between telling and showing is particularly useful here. Literature can leave psychological tensions partially implicit, whereas film can make them perceptible through bodies, gestures, lighting, sound, costume, editing, and visual juxtaposition. Consequently Jordan's film does not merely reproduce Carter's feminist reinterpretation; it gives that reinterpretation a visual and sensory form.

The film also reestablishes the traditional division between rational human beings and irrational animals. The wolf is certainly dangerous, but human beings are not represented as completely rational either. The animal becomes a figure through which the supposedly civilized human subject encounters impulses that civilization attempts to regulate.

The question consequently changes from "How can the girl escape the wolf?" to "What does the wolf reveal about the girl and about the society that teaches her to fear him?"

Carter's "Magic Feminism" and the Transformation of the Heroine

Carter's rewriting deliberately challenges conventional representations of women as passive victims waiting for rescue. Her fairy-tale revisions repeatedly transform women from objects of narrative action into subjects who possess knowledge and agency.

In the traditional *Little Red Riding Hood*, the heroine's survival is frequently dependent upon external intervention. In Carter's versions, however, the relationship between heroine and wolf becomes more complicated. The woman does not necessarily defeat the animal by destroying him. Instead, she recognizes what he represents and learns how to negotiate with him.

This is the central principle of what may be called Carter's **magic feminism**. The heroine does not become free by pretending that sexuality, aggression, fear, and instinct do not exist. She becomes free by acquiring knowledge about them.

Jordan's film extends this principle. Hutcheon (2006) notes that Jordan and Carter combined material from several Carter texts, including "The Company of Wolves," "The Werewolf," and "Wolf-Alice," while also incorporating a contemporary prologue derived from Carter's earlier radio adaptation. The resulting film is therefore deliberately composite rather than a literal adaptation of a single narrative.

The significance of this strategy is considerable. Jordan creates a dream structure in which several versions of the wolf story coexist. The narrative becomes a network of stories, memories, dreams, warnings, and repetitions. The heroine therefore does not enter a single stable fairy tale. She enters a cultural archive of stories about women, men, sexuality, danger, and violence.

This strategy is consistent with Carter's broader interest in dismantling what might be called mythic versions of femininity. The passive girl waiting for rescue is replaced by a heroine capable of interpreting the situation in which she finds herself.

The transformation is therefore not merely from weak woman to strong woman. More fundamentally, it is a transformation from ignorance to knowledge.

The European Cultural Context

The history of *Little Red Riding Hood* cannot be reduced to a single national origin. Although Italian versions such as *La finta nonna* (The False Grandmother) are important to the genealogy of the tale, scholarship increasingly understands the narrative as part of a trans-European and

broader Eurasian tradition. Graça da Silva and Tehrani's (2016) phylogenetic study, for example, traces relationships among versions circulating across Europe and Asia and identifies connections between later *Little Red Riding Hood* traditions and older forms, such as *The Story of Grandmother*.

The best-known literary versions are associated particularly with Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Perrault's *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* appeared in 1697, while the Grimms published *Rotkäppchen* in 1812. These literary versions participate in a much longer process of oral and written transformation rather than representing a single original text.

This history is important because the moral meaning of the story changes with its cultural context. Perrault's version is strongly didactic, while later versions can modify the relationship between warning, punishment, sexuality, and rescue. The active heroine in Carter and Jordan is consequently, not necessarily, an entirely unprecedented invention. Some earlier variants already provide the girl with greater intelligence and activity, including the Middle Ages versions in which Little red Riding Hood outwits the wolf.

The cultural history of the tale can therefore be understood as a succession of redactions in which ideas concerning female sexuality, education, obedience, rationality, and social danger are repeatedly reconsidered.

The Mediterranean and northern European traditions should likewise not be treated as absolute opposites. Nevertheless, differences in modes of moral communication can be useful as a comparative framework. Some traditions tend toward explicit moral instruction, while others rely more heavily on implication, taboo, symbolism, or indirect communication. The fairy tale is especially suited to such indirect communication because its apparently simple narrative can contain meanings that are not directly articulated.

Psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches become particularly useful at this point. The fairy tale can say one thing on the surface while communicating another through its symbols. The wolf, the forest, the grandmother's house, the path, the hood, and the night can all function simultaneously as narrative objects and cultural signs.

The Three Historical Moments: Medieval, Renaissance, and Modern

The history of *Little Red Riding Hood* can be approached through three broad cultural moments: medieval, early-modern/Renaissance, and modern.

The medieval model can be understood primarily through its emphasis on social discipline, religious morality, proper conduct, and the regulation of interpersonal relationships. The heroine is expected to behave correctly because social order depends upon obedience to established rules.

The Renaissance and early-modern literary transformations introduce different emphases. The fairy tale increasingly participates in literary culture, courtly ideals, social aspiration, and the representation of class. Perrault's literary version, for example, turns the tale into a polished moral narrative appropriate for the literary culture of the period.

The modern transformation is radically different. Carter does not simply repeat the moral lesson; she exposes the ideological assumptions behind it. The heroine's sexuality is no longer merely something to be protected from the wolf. It becomes a dimension of identity that must be understood.

The resulting contrast can be summarized as follows:

Historical-cultural model	Dominant representation of the heroine	Relationship to the wolf	Primary lesson
Medieval/didactic	Obedient girl	External danger	Obey the prescribed path
Early modern	Girl associated with social and marital aspiration	Moral and sexual danger	Proper conduct preserves social order
Carter/Jordan	Self-aware young woman	Encounter with desire, danger, and instinct	Knowledge produces agency

This historical movement should not be understood as a simple linear progression from primitive to modern. Rather, different versions coexist, overlap, and contradict one another. The modern feminist version becomes powerful precisely because it reactivates elements already latent within the older narrative.

Carter, Jordan, and Adaptation



Jordan's film is not especially interested in reproducing the literal storyline of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Its relationship to Carter is instead characterized by transformation, accumulation, and reinterpretation.

Cheu (2007) provides a useful warning against interpreting film exclusively through an intellectualized critical framework. Discussing feminist film theory and the spectator, Cheu cites Walkerdine's realization that "the

reader is not simply in the text," just as the spectator cannot be understood merely as a passive voyeur (p. 24). The broader point is that spectators bring their own histories, desires, fantasies, and social positions to the film.

This observation is especially relevant to *The Company of Wolves*. Jordan's film constantly asks the spectator to reconsider what is being seen. The wolf may appear as a literal animal, a man, a sexual metaphor, a dream figure, or a representation of fear. The spectator is therefore required to participate in the process of interpretation.

The film's dream structure intensifies this effect. Stories are embedded within stories; characters recount other versions of the wolf narrative; visual motifs recur in altered forms; and the heroine moves through a world in which dream and waking reality are difficult to distinguish.

The film thus becomes a cinematic equivalent of Carter's literary method. Both writers reject the idea that the fairy tale has only one stable meaning.

The 1980s and Gender

The cultural environment of the 1980s provides an important context for Jordan's film. Fashion, music videos, popular music, and cinema were increasingly experimenting with gender presentation. MTV, launched in 1981, contributed to a visual culture characterized by rapid editing, elaborate costumes, stylized performance, and the transformation of the body

into central visual sign.

Films such as *Victor/Victoria* (1982), *Tootsie* (1982), *Yentl* (1983), *Just One of the Guys* (1985), and TV-film *Second Serve* (1986), participated in broader cultural discussions about gender performance and identity. At the same time, action cinema associated with stars such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who frequently exaggerated conventional masculine physicality.

The cultural contradiction is important. The decade did not simply represent liberation. It simultaneously challenged gender stereotypes and reproduced them. Women could be represented as independent, sexually assertive, and professionally active while still being subjected to conventional visual objectification.

The Company of Wolves belongs to this contradiction. Its heroine is neither simply a traditional fairy-tale victim, nor a straightforward modern feminist heroine. She is a figure through whom the film explores the unstable relationship between innocence, sexuality, fear, curiosity, and power.

Jordan's Cinematic Innovations

Three formal characteristics are especially important in Jordan's adaptation: illustration, open development of action, and nonlinear editing.

1) Illustration and Visual Irony

In conventional film criticism, illustration can sometimes be used negatively, suggesting that a director merely depicts what could have been communicated more subtly, through narrative or dialogue. Jordan, however, deliberately uses visual excess.

The oversized red hood, grotesquely emphasized wolf imagery, elaborate settings, exaggerated performances, and highly artificial landscapes create a visual world that resembles an illustrated fairy-tale book. Yet the content is so sexual, violent, and psychologically complicated to belong comfortably to a children's fairy tale. This contradiction is deliberate.

Béla Balázs's film theory is relevant here because he argues that filmic nature should not simply reproduce neutral physical reality. Rather, visual style can transform setting into an expressive component of the narrative. As Balázs (2011) argues, the stylization of nature allows the cinematic environment to convey mood and meaning, rather than functioning merely as geographical background (pp. 52–53).

Jordan's forests therefore do not function simply as realistic forests. They are psychological landscapes. The artificiality of the sets makes visible the artificiality of the cultural rules surrounding the heroine.

2) Open Development of the Action

The film also resists a straightforward linear narrative. Episodes refer to one another without immediately forming a complete causal structure. The viewer frequently receives explanations only after encountering their consequences.

This technique produces uncertainty about the heroine's psychological state. Is she naïve? Is she dreaming? Does she understand that she is speaking with a wolf? Is the wolf external to her, or does he represent something she recognizes within herself?

The ambiguity is central to the film's feminist transformation. If the heroine was simply ignorant, the narrative would reproduce the traditional pedagogical structure. But if she possesses partial knowledge, the meaning of her actions changes. She is no longer merely being deceived; she is experimenting with knowledge.

3) Nonlinear Editing

Nonlinear editing further disrupts the traditional fairy-tale structure of once-upon-a-time, followed by a clear moral conclusion. Jordan's film does not provide the reassuring narrative progression of a conventional children's tale. Instead, meaning emerges through repetition, juxtaposition, visual motifs, and associations. The spectator is encouraged to connect images

rather than merely follow events. The moon, the forest, the wolf, the red hood, and the recurring stories of transformation become signs within a larger symbolic structure. The film therefore privileges meaning over chronological clarity.

The absence of strict linearity also weakens the traditional moral lesson. Instead of ending with a simple warning—do not speak to strangers—the film asks the spectator to consider why the stranger is dangerous, why the heroine is attracted to him, and what social mechanisms have constructed that danger.

The Wolf as Sexual and Psychological Figure

The wolf is the central symbolic figure of the narrative. Murphy (2015), in his discussion of the “Little Red Riding Hood genotype,” demonstrates the persistence of the wolf figure across later narratives. In his analysis of *Psycho*, for example, Norman Bates can occupy the structural position of the wolf: he is a predator whose identity the heroine must recognize before it is too late (pp. 151–171).

This structural interpretation helps explain why the wolf remains culturally powerful even when the literal animal disappears. The wolf is not simply a character; he is a narrative function. In *The Company of Wolves*, however, Carter and Jordan complicate that function. The wolf remains dangerous, but the heroine is not reduced to an object of predation. She enters into a relationship with danger and consequently acquires knowledge about herself.

This transformation is central to the feminist meaning of the story. The objective is not to claim that women should embrace danger indiscriminately. Rather, the narrative challenges a system in which women can only be protected by remaining ignorant of sexuality and by depending on male authority. The heroine becomes active precisely because she is willing to understand what the wolf represents.

Blood, the Body, and Cultural Anxiety

The relationship between the female body and cultural taboo is also important. Sellers (2001, 119-121) places fairy-tale representations of femininity within broader historical discourses concerning sexuality, Christianity, bodily boundaries, and taboo. Discussing Julia Kristeva’s analysis of menstrual blood, Sellers emphasizes the cultural significance of substances associated with bodily transgression and the disruption of constructed identities.

This framework helps illuminate the symbolic importance of blood and bodily transformation in *The Company of Wolves*. The female body is repeatedly represented as a site where cultural boundaries become unstable: childhood and adulthood, innocence and sexuality, humanity and animality, and purity and danger intersect.

The wolf consequently becomes part of a larger symbolic system surrounding the body. He is dangerous because he represents the boundary that civilization attempts to maintain. Carter’s intervention is to make that boundary visible rather than pretending that it does not exist.

The Grandmother and Female Knowledge

The grandmother occupies a particularly important position in the transformation of the narrative. In the conventional tale, she is often a victim who must be rescued. In Carter and Jordan, older female knowledge becomes more significant.

The grandmother can be interpreted as a mediator between generations. She possesses knowledge that the younger woman has not yet acquired. Rather than functioning simply as a helpless victim, she becomes part of a female chain of knowledge.

This is important because Carter’s feminism is not based exclusively on individual rebellion. Female characters can transmit knowledge to one another. The younger heroine therefore does not become independent by rejecting older women; she becomes more capable through contact with them.

Any claim that the grandmother's historical role specifically encoded a hidden medieval message about the desired aristocratic status, or about the desired company for the girl from the high society, not from the wolf-company, however, should be treated as speculative rather, than established historical fact. According to this the grandmother cannot say things directly, but when she is retailing her story, will say- the girl was wearing red riding hood. Then the listener (the granddaughter) is expected to understand that the girl in the story was dressed like a prince (because red was the color of the aristocracy). The medieval "code of speaking" can be retained as an interpretive hypothesis, but there is insufficient evidence to present it as a demonstrable historical origin of the red hood. By this code the grandmother cannot be caught by the inquisition and sentenced to death for being witch.

The Red Hood and Historical Symbolism

The red hood itself is an important symbolic object. Red has long carried associations with blood, sexuality, danger, power, and status in European visual culture. However, the argument that the red hood specifically indicated medieval aristocratic status should not be presented as historical fact without documentary evidence.

Its significance is more securely understood within the later literary tradition as a marker of the heroine's identity. The hood separates her visually from the surrounding environment, while simultaneously making her vulnerable to recognition.

Jordan intensifies this visual function. The red hood becomes an almost theatrical object: too visible to be ignored, too artificial to be entirely realistic. Its exaggeration contributes to the film's larger strategy of making fairy-tale conventions visible.

The hood therefore becomes a sign of both femininity and narrative identity. The heroine cannot simply escape the story because she is visually marked as its central character.

The Fairy Tale, Cinderella, and Redaction



The broader history of fairy-tale redaction also demonstrates how stories change through transmission. The *Cinderella* tradition provides a useful example. Perrault's *Cendrillon* (1697) explicitly contains the famous glass slipper, while the Brothers Grimm's version uses a golden slipper. The popular explanation that the glass slipper resulted simply from a mistranslation of *vair*

(fur) should not be treated as established fact; Perrault's text itself explicitly describes the slippers as glass.

The example is relevant because it demonstrates that fairy tales are not stable objects. Their details change according to literary, cultural, linguistic, and ideological circumstances. The same principle applies to *Little Red Riding Hood*. Carter and Jordan are not corrupting an original, fixed story. They participate in the same historical process of transformation that produced the versions we now regard as traditional.

The Film as a Modern Redaction

Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* can consequently be understood as a modern redaction rather

than a conventional adaptation. It combines elements of Carter's stories with older versions of the fairy tale and with the visual language of contemporary cinema. Its formal contradictions are therefore meaningful. The film can look simultaneously old-fashioned and modern, theatrical and cinematic, literary and commercial, intellectual and spectacular.

Jordan's lavish production style creates a tension between artistic experimentation and mainstream cinema. The film's elaborate sets, stylized photography, and musical score place it within the visual culture of the 1980s, while its fragmented narrative and intellectual ambition resist the straightforward conventions of commercial fantasy.

Balázs's (2011, 52) theory of cinematic stylization helps explain this contradiction. The film does not attempt to reproduce reality neutrally. It constructs an artificial world in which the environment itself participates in the meaning of the story. The forest is therefore not merely a forest. It is a psychological and cultural space.

Conclusion

The Company of Wolves should be understood not simply as a feminist version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, but as a complex transformation of the fairy tale's underlying system of meanings. Angela Carter's literary rewriting and Neil Jordan's cinematic adaptation challenge the traditional division between human and animal, innocence and sexuality, danger and desire, and victimhood and agency.

The wolf is no longer merely an external enemy. He becomes a figure through which the heroine encounters the dangerous and irrational dimensions of existence. The girl, correspondingly, is no longer simply an object requiring protection. She becomes a subject capable of interpretation and action.

This transformation is achieved differently in literature and cinema. Carter's prose exposes the ideological structures hidden inside the fairy tale, while Jordan translates those structures into visual form. Hutcheon's (2006, 152) distinction between telling and showing is therefore particularly useful: the film does not merely repeat the literary narrative, but changes the way the audience encounters it.

Jordan's use of illustration, visual irony, dream logic, open narrative development, parody, and nonlinear editing makes the ideological transformation visible. The viewer is forced to reconsider whether the wolf is an external monster or a representation of something already present within the human subject.

The historical development of *Little Red Riding Hood* likewise demonstrates that the story has never possessed a single, immutable meaning. Its versions have emerged from overlapping European traditions, and its moral and sexual meanings have changed according to cultural circumstances. Carter and Jordan continue this process of redaction, rather than breaking with it.

The most important transformation is therefore not simply from passive femininity to active feminism. It is from obedience to knowledge.

Traditional versions instruct the girl to avoid the wolf. Carter and Jordan ask her to understand him. That difference changes the entire structure of the narrative. The heroine's strength does not consist in eliminating the animalistic dimension of existence, nor in waiting for a male rescuer to eliminate it for her. Instead, she acquires the ability to recognize danger, interpret desire, negotiate with uncertainty, and determine her own response.

In this sense, the human and animal dimensions of the tale are not ultimately opposites. They are mutually decisive. The wolf teaches the heroine something about herself, while the heroine's encounter with the wolf transforms the meaning of the wolf himself.

The modern Little Red Riding Hood therefore does not simply leave the path. She learns why the path exists, who constructed it, what lies beyond it, and how she might choose her own direction.

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