

Feminism in "The Company of Wolves"

Melissa Mott

Women writing short fiction have often used different strategies to “tell the truth” about women’s lives. In “The Company of Wolves,” Angela Carter writes with the strategy of the myth and the manipulation of point of view. This allows Carter to change this well-known tale into a “coming of age” story that allows her to express the resistance of oppression and to rethink traditions. Carter also writes about aspects of women’s lives that have been unspeakable for decades.

The tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” is extremely well known. By using this tale’s plot as the basic structure of “The Company of Wolves,” Carter is able to both grab and hold onto the reader’s attention. Using a popular myth and changing around a portion of the plot, as well as the ending, allows the story to become a “coming of age” story for Little Red, and allows Carter to write about how women really are and how they should be looked at. Also, by having the point of view jump around and speak in the second person from time to time, it gives off the feel of an oral tale that is passed on through generations. When speaking about how terrifying the wolves are, the narrator says:

At night, the eyes of wolves shine like candle flames, yellowish, reddish, but that is because the pupils of their eyes fatten on darkness and catch the light from your lantern to flash it back to you (Carter 1221).

The way the narrator uses such adjectives really creates a demon-like picture for the reader, especially when the narrator says, “But those eyes are all you will be able to glimpse of the forest assassins as they cluster invisibly round your smell of meat as you go through the wood unwisely

late” (Carter 1221). Having the narrator use “you” in the middle of the story allows the reader to also feel as if he or she is right there listening to it be told, and that the reader should be extremely afraid of going into the woods late at night, just like Little Red should be.

Carter also uses the myth to resist oppression, meaning that Carter wants the reader to know that males aren’t always dominant over females. When Little Red meets a handsome hunter in the forest, they make a bet as to who will get to Granny’s house first; whoever does will receive a kiss from the other. After Little Red makes it to Granny’s house and she realizes that the handsome hunter is actually a wolf, she still “freely gave the kiss she owed him” because she knew that “since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid” (Carter 1227). However, at this particular part in the story, Carter has Little Red give off the illusion to the wolf that he is the one in control because that’s what keeps men calm and Little Red safe. Little Red asks the wolf “What shall I do with my shawl?” and “What shall I do with my blouse?” as she is already stripping of these articles of clothing and controlling the situation herself. He responds by saying to “throw it in the fire... You won’t need it again,” believing that he is being intimidating and controlling (Carter 1227).

Around the time this story was written, in the late 70s and early 80s, women were thought to always be conservative about their sexuality because they were supposed to be religious and virtuous. Carter decides to re-think these traditions by having Little Red be very open about her sex drive, especially at such a young age, and also plays on this by having Granny be extremely religious. The narrator describes Granny as “a pious old woman” who “has her Bible for company” right before the wolf actually enters her home. When he does come in, Granny is absolutely terrified and the narrator switches back to the second person again saying:

You can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, Granny; you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin...Now call on Christ and his mother and all the angels in heaven to protect you, but it won't do you any good (Carter 1225-26).

In short, the narrator is saying how being so very religious and virtuous will not save Granny when she is in danger. On the other hand, Little Red ends up living and being happy with the wolf by using her sexuality to aid her in this moment. Carter has the narrator tell how Granny's "old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering" while Little Red and the wolf are having sex because in Granny's virtuous views, this is highly unacceptable and the remnants of Granny under the bed are either quivering or angrily shaking because of Little Red being so promiscuous (Carter 1228).

The biggest difference from the traditional tale is that Granny does not survive the wolf attack and there is no man with an axe coming to save the little girl. Carter decides to have Little Red save herself because a woman is perfectly capable of depending on herself without a big, strong man coming to her rescue. Carter makes the extremely clear when Little Red points out how big the wolf's teeth are and he says, "All the better to eat you with" (Carter 1227). Instead of trembling in tremendous fear, Little Red actually begins laughing in his face because "she knew she was nobody's meat," just as women are not objects, and then willingly has sex with the wolf on her own terms (Carter 1227). This is something so promiscuous that would never have been discussed in any sort of story during this time period and would be considered strange because there was no male hero in the end.

Carter revamped this very well-known myth so that it would be known that women can finally rely on themselves and not need a male to save them. Having the narrator sometimes

talking in the second person point of view also creates a more intimate environment for the reader, allowing him or her to feel as if the narrator is telling them the story directly. Carter resists oppression by having Little Red take control of the dangerous situation, but still wisely letting the male wolf think he is in control of her. The traditional views of women to be religious and virtuous are torn when Little Red is anything but while her “pious” Granny is extremely uncomfortable about it, just as all older generations of women would be. Also, having Little Red be her own savior is very uncommon for this era, but Carter sparks a new revelation among feminism because of these aspects in “The Company of Wolves.”

Works Cited

Carter, Angela. "The Company of Wolves." *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*. Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. 1220-1228. Print.