

A Barthesian Reading of
Le Petit Chaperon Rouge (Little Red Riding-Hood)
Cameo Wood

The following readings of Charles Perrault's short story, *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* follow Barthes' method of "starring" a text: of reading each sentence carefully for the ways it plays with what Barthes identifies as the five codes of narrative (see the end of this entry for explanations of each).



[1] *The little red Riding-Hood* *SEM: The title implies a colour, and perhaps a child, being "little." **REF: Literature (18th century English tradition). ***REF: Linguistic code: A riding-hood was a type of cloak mainly used for travel on the open road. ****SEM: this story was written at least in the 18th century. *****HER. Enigma 1: An enigma is brought, where will this person be travelling to?

[2] *There was once upon a time a little country girl, born in a village, the prettiest little creature that was ever seen.* *REF. Literature (Fairy tale). **SEM. country town in 18th century, village. ***SYM. Prettiest. This implies that the little girl is prettier than the other country girls, perhaps implying selfishness or pettiness. Antithesis: A: pretty girl. B: Other village girls.

[3] *Her mother was beyond reason excessively fond of her, and her grandmother yet much more.* *HER. Enigma 1: In what way were her mother and grandmother 'excessively fond' of her? What problems would arise as a result? **SEM. Incestuous or lesbian familial sensuality. Excessive Fondness leading to excessive danger to death.

[4] *This good woman caused to be made for her a little red Riding-Hood; which made her look so very pretty, that every body call'd her, The little red Riding-Hood.* *ACT. :To name: 1: to name the girl. **SEM. The village girl and the red cloak, the name of the cloak symbolising the little girl. **ACT. :to accept: 1: the acceptance of the riding hood and name.

[5] *One day, her mother having made some custards, said to her, Go my little Biddy, for her christian name was Biddy, go and see how your grandmother does, for I hear she has been very ill, carry her a custard, and this little pot of butter.* *REF. Cultural code (Christian family). **ACT. :to accept: 2: custard and pot of butter for grandmother. ***HER. Enigma 1: Mother sends girl to grandmother, knowing grandmother is even more fond of the girl than she is.

[6] *The little red Riding-Hood sets out immediately to go to her grandmother, who lived in another village. As she was going through the wood, she met with Gossop Wolfe, who had a good mind to eat her up, but he did not dare, because of some faggot-makers that were in the forest.* * ACT. :journey: 1: to depart. **SYM. Wolf and Woodcutters. Antithesis: A: The dangerous wolf (he will kill the girl in 20) B: The Woodcutter (savior of the girl) ***HER. Enigma 2: The wolf is attracted to the girl in a sexual and bloodthirsty way. **** ACT. "Danger":1: Sign of a violent character.

[7] *He asked of her whither she was going: The poor child, who did not know how dangerous a thing it is to stay and hear a Wolfe talk, said to him, I am going to see my grandmamma, and carry her a custard pye, and a little pot of butter my mamma sends her.* *HER. Enigma 2: The wolf will eat the girl at her destination. **ACT. "Danger": 2: unaware of danger. ***REF. Wolves can talk. ****HER. Enigma 1: Continues to express love for grandmother, even if it will cause her death.

[8] *Does she live far off? said the Wolfe. Oh! ay, said the little red Riding-Hood, on the other side of the mill below yonder, at the first house in the village. Well, said the Wolfe, and I'll go and see her too; I'll go this way, and you go that, and we shall see who will be there soonest.* *HER. Enigma 2. Wolf's hunger for the grandmother as well as the girl. The wolf will eat the girl after the grandmother in the grandmother's house. ***SEM. Intent (murder and eat grandmother).

[9] *The Wolfe began to run as fast as he was able, the shortest way; and the little girl went the longest, diverting her self in gathering nuts, running after butterflies, and making nose-gays of all the little flowers she met with.* *SYM. Antithesis: A: longest way. B: shortest way.

[10] *The Wolfe was not long before he came to the grandmother's house; he knocked at the door toc toc. *ACT. "Danger": 3: Danger at door.*

[11] *Whose there? Your granddaughter, The little red Riding-Hood, said the Wolfe, counterfeiting her voice, who has brought you a custard pye, and a little pot of butter mamma sends you. *SEM. Intent to deceive.*

[12] *The good grandmother, who was in bed, because she found herself somewhat ill, cried out, Pull the bobbin, and the latch will go up. *HER. Enigma 1: Excessive love for granddaughter allows danger into her home.*

[13] *The Wolfe pull'd the bobbin, and the door open'd; upon which he fell upon the good woman, and eat her up in the tenth part of a moment; for he had eaten nothing for above three days before. *ACT. "Murder:1: active murder and cannibalization. Even through it is a wolf, because he as intents as a human, it is cannibalism. **SEM. Sexual nature, in bed, the ongoing deception to lure Red Riding-Hood into bed with the wolf. ***HER. Enigma 1: Love for granddaughter causes the grandmother's death.*

[14] *After that, he shut the door, and went into the grandmother's bed, expecting the little red Riding-Hood, who came some time afterwards, and knock'd at the door toc toc, Who's there? The little red Riding-Hood, who hearing the big voice of the Wolfe, was at first afraid; but believing her grandmother had got a cold, and was grown hoarse, said, it is your granddaughter, The little red Riding-Hood, who has brought you a custard pye, and a little pot of butter mamma sends you. The Wolfe cried out to her, softening his voice as much as he could, Pull the bobbin, and the latch will go up. The little red Riding-Hood pull'd the bobbin, and the door opened. *ACT.1: To deceive, pose as another. **ACT. "journey" 2. to arrive.*

[15] *The Wolfe seeing her come in, said to her, hiding himself under the clothes. Put the custard, and the little pot of butter upon the stool, and come into bed with me. *SEM. Sexual, Wolf wants girl in bed before he eats her. **ACT. "Murder:1: attracting victim to the place of the act. ***HER. Enigma 2: The wolf is preparing the girl to be eaten in a sexual, premeditative.*

[16] *The little red Riding-Hood undressed her self, and went into bed, *ACT. "Murder:2: fulfillment of the wolf's fantasy. ** HER. Enigma 2: The girl is fulfilling the wolf's needs. **SEM: Nakedness: overture to the sex act of death.***SEM: Evidence of history of overt sensuality between Grandmother and Granddaughter.*

[17] *where she was very much astonished to see how her grandmother looked in her night-cloaths: *ACT. 2: to deceive. The wolf is convincing in his costume.*

[18] *So she said to her, Grandmamma, what great arms you have got! It is the better to embrace thee my pretty child. Grandmamma, what great legs you have got! it is to run the better my child. Grandmamma, what great ears you have got! It is to hear the better my child. Grandmamma, what great eyes you have got! It is to see the better my child.*

*HER Enigma 3. *snare.* While suggesting that her grandmother's body is very different than her memory, he asks to be convinced that this is her grandmother.

ACT. "to deceive":3: to continue the fantasy. *HER. Enigma 2: The wolf enjoys taunting and playing with the girl, indulging his fantasy of her. ****ACT.

Danger:4: Danger in bed. Girl questions if the wolf is her grandmother and begins to understand she has been deceived.

[19] *Grandmamma, what great teeth you have got! It is to eat thee up. *ACT.*

"Murder":3: The wolf alludes to what he is about to do, enjoying her reaction to fear. **HER. Enigma 3. *disclosure.* From the wolf to the girl, of his intent to devour her.

[20] *And upon saying these words, this wicked Wolfe fell upon the little Red Riding-Hood, and eat her up. *HER. Enigma 2. The wolf eats the naked girl, eating her as he did her grandmother. **ACT. Danger:5:The Danger is realized to be valid, and the girl finds herself eaten. ***ACT. Murder:4: The Wolf kills and eats the girl.*



My source: Andrew Lang, *The Blue Fairy Book* (London, ca. 1889), pp. 51-53.

Lang's source: Charles Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Paris, 1697).

Little Red Riding Hood

by

Charles Perrault

Once upon a time there was a little village girl, the prettiest that had ever been seen. Her mother doted on her. Her grandmother was even fonder, and made her a little red hood, which became her so well that everywhere she went by the name of Little Red Riding Hood.

One day her mother, who had just made and baked some cakes, said to her: "Go and see how your grandmother is, for I have been told that she is ill. Take her a cake and this little pot of butter."

Little Red Riding Hood set off at once for the house of her grandmother, who lived in another village. On her way through a wood she met old Father Wolf. He would have very much liked to eat her, but dared not do so on account



of some wood-cutters who were in the forest. He asked her where she was going. The poor child, not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf, said: "I am going to see my grandmother, and am taking her a cake and a pot of butter which my mother has sent to her." "Does she live far away?" asked the Wolf. "Oh, yes," replied Little Red Riding Hood; "it is yonder by the mill which you can see right below there, and it is the first house in the village."

"Well now," said the Wolf, "I think I shall go and see her too. I will go by this path, and you by that path, and we will see who gets there first." The

Wolf set off running with all his might by the shorter road, and the little girl continued on her way by the longer road. As she went she amused herself by gathering nuts, running after the butterflies, and making nosegays of the wild flowers which she found.

The Wolf was not long in reaching the grandmother's house. He knocked. Toc Toc. "Who is there?" "It is your granddaughter, Red Riding Hood," said the Wolf, disguising his voice, "and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter as a present from my mother." The worthy grandmother was in bed, not being very well, and cried out to him: "Pull out the peg and the latch will fall." The Wolf drew out the peg and the door flew open. Then he sprang upon the poor old lady and ate her up in less than no time, for he had been more than three days without food.

After that he shut the door, lay down in the grandmother's bed, and waited for Little Red Riding Hood. Presently she came and knocked. Toc Toc.

"Who is there?"

Now Little Red Riding Hood on hearing the Wolf's gruff voice was at first frightened, but thinking that her grand mother had a bad cold, she replied: "It is your granddaughter, Red Riding Hood, and I bring you a cake and a little pot of butter from my mother."



Softening his voice, the Wolf called out to her: "Pull out the peg and the latch will fall." Little Red Riding Hood drew out the peg and the door flew open. When he saw her enter, the Wolf hid himself in the bed beneath the counterpane. "Put the cake and the little pot of butter on the bin," he said, "and come up on the bed with me."

Little Red Riding Hood took off her cloak, but when she climbed up on the bed she was astonished to see how her grandmother looked in her nightgown.

"Grandmother dear!" she exclaimed, "what big arms you have!"

"The better to embrace you, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!"

"The better to run with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!"

"The better to hear with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big eyes you have!"

"The better to see with, my child!"

"Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"

"The better to eat you with!"

With these words the wicked Wolf leapt upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

Moral

From this story one learns that children, especially young lasses, pretty, courteous and well-bred, do very wrong to listen to strangers, And it is not an unheard thing if the Wolf is thereby provided with his dinner. I say Wolf, for all wolves are not of the same sort; there is one kind with an amenable disposition - neither noisy, nor hateful, nor angry, but tame, obliging and gentle, following the young maids in the streets, even into their homes. Alas! Who does not know that these gentle wolves are of all such creatures the most dangerous!



Explanation of Barthes' Codes:

Barthes argues in *S/Z* that every narrative is interwoven with multiple codes. Although we impose temporal and generic structures onto the polysemy of codes (and traditional, "readerly" texts actively invite us to impose such structures), any text is, in fact, marked by the multiple meanings suggested by the five codes. The five codes are as follows:

The hermeneutic code (HER.) refers to any element in a story that is not explained and, therefore, exists as an enigma for the reader, raising questions that demand explication. Most stories hold back details in order to increase the effect of the final revelation of all diegetic truths. We tend not to be satisfied by a narrative unless all "loose ends" are tied; however, narratives often frustrate the early revelation of truths, offering the reader what Barthes terms "snares" (deliberate evasions of the truth), "equivocations" (mixtures of truth and snare), "partial answers," "suspended answers," and "jammings" (acknowledgments of insolubility). As Barthes explains, "The variety of these terms (their inventive range) attests to the considerable labor the discourse must accomplish if it hopes to arrest the enigma, to keep it open". The best example may well be the genre of the detective story. The entire narrative of such a story operates primarily by the hermeneutic code. We witness a murder and the rest of the narrative is devoted to determining the questions that are raised by the initial scene of violence. The detective spends the story reading the clues that, only at the end, reconstructs the story of the murder. See the Star Trek Lesson Plan for an example of a television episode that invokes this code.

The proairetic code (ACT.) refers to the other major structuring principle that builds interest or suspense on the part of a reader or viewer. The proairetic code applies to any action that implies a further narrative action. For example, a gunslinger draws his gun on an adversary and we wonder what the resolution of this action will be. We wait to see if he kills his opponent or is wounded himself. Suspense is thus created by action rather than by a reader's or a viewer's wish to have mysteries explained.

These first two codes tend to be aligned with temporal order and thus require, for full effect, that you read a book or view a film temporally from beginning to

end. Barthes at one point aligns these two codes with "the same tonal determination that melody and harmony have in classical music". A traditional, "readerly" text tends to be especially "dependent on [these] two sequential codes: the revelation of truth and the coordination of the actions represented: there is the same constraint in the gradual order of melody and in the equally gradual order of the narrative sequence". The next three codes tend to work "outside the constraints of time" and are, therefore, more properly reversible, which is to say that there is no necessary reason to read the instances of these codes in chronological order to make sense of them in the narrative.

The semantic code (SEM.) points to any element in a text that suggests a particular, often additional meaning by way of connotation. In the previous module, for example, in the first lexia that I quote from Barthes' *S/Z*, "Sarrasine" is associated with "femininity" because of the word's feminine form (as opposed to the masculine form, "Sarrazin"). The question of femininity later becomes an important one in Balzac's story about a man's love for a castrato that he, at first, believes to be a woman. By "connotation," Barthes does not mean a free-form association of ideas (where anything goes) but "a correlation immanent in the text, in the texts; or again, one may say that it is an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system". In other words, Barthes marks out those semantic connotations that have special meaning for the work at hand.

The symbolic code (SYM.) can be difficult to distinguish from the semantic code and Barthes is not always clear on the distinction between these two codes; the easiest way to think of the symbolic code is as a "deeper" structural principle that organizes semantic meanings, usually by way of antitheses or by way of mediations (particularly, forbiddend mediations) between antithetical terms. The concept is perhaps most analogous to Algirdas Greimas' understanding of antagonism and contradiction in narrative structure. (Note that the modules on Greimas are still under construction; however, for comparison, you can read an application of Greimas to the sentence, "There is a road"). A symbolic antithesis often marks a barrier for the text. As Barthes writes, "Every joining of two antithetical terms, every mixture, every conciliation—in short, every passage through the wall of the Antithesis—thus constitutes a transgression".

The cultural code (REF.) designates any element in a narrative that

refers "to a science or a body of knowledge" . In other words, the cultural codes tend to point to our shared knowledge about the way the world works, including properties that we can designate as "physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical, etc.". The "gnomic" code is one of the cultural codes and refers to those cultural codes that are tied to clichés, proverbs, or popular sayings of various sorts.

Together, these five codes function like a "weaving of voices," as Barthes puts it. The codes point to the "multivalence of the text" and to "its partial reversibility", allowing a reader to see a work not just as a single narrative line but as a constellation or braiding of meanings: "The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (text, fabric, braid: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices form the writing".