

Little Red

By Gilmore Tamny

I sit, I sit, lonely, perturbed as a button cake on this Thursday in between jobs. My belly is swollen with too much ravioli. I am trying to tell an old story in an interesting new way:

The little girl's eyes were as black as prune pits. Her heart was damsel-in-distress blue. Often--

I stop because "Little Red Riding Hood" is of little interest to anyone over six , even in a revamped form. I look to the wall for inspiration and am reminded--

I was eating a green pepper, sliced green pepper, on Tuesday. I was walking and eating my green pepper (sliced) and all of a sudden I thought--God!! What do I do with this knowledge? Green peppers? Why on Tuesday? Like when someone points out a house to you and says, "I almost lived in that house." Whatever am I expected to do with that knowledge? How did that information possibly go in my head? It rings and rings and I go over and over it but it cannot settle to a conclusion. Green peppers are a door slamming, an irreducible bit of truth, of naming, a green pepper-

The ravioli is rolling over in my stomach like a tired old dog. "Little Red Riding Hood" is much simpler than grappling with a description of that ridiculousness. Sometimes I feel sumptuous when I'm this bloated, like a sultan, but other times I wish I had my child's body back.

The girl's eyes were as black as burnt prune pits. Her heart was damsel-in-distress blue. She wore a red, of the purest pigment, red coat with a hood that brought out the delicate ruddiness of her smooth child's cheeks. She was visiting her sick grandmother that day, and tucked a bunch of preserves and johnny-cakes and other outmoded snacks in a napkin lined basket. She placed her bag of heroin and works next to that.

This, of course, is evil (not to mention obviously and childishly invidious), suggesting child drug addiction. But I've always resented the sort of antiseptic presentation of fairy tales. Because of no direct reference to the glories of adolescence or sex--organs, bras, drugs, periods, orgasm and the like--fairy tales are considered much more salubrious reading than, for example, a Judy Blume. HA! Cannibalism, sexual repression, rape, bestiality, all team underneath the acceptable surface. But Little Red on the nod would mean death to the plot so:

She placed a bag of gumdrops for herself beside the bag to eat on the way there. So she set out into the woods, woods that had the faintest touch of autumn splotching the tall trees. The trail she set out on was thickly pebbled. Red Riding Hood stopped for a second and looked up at the considerable distance between herself and the tips of the tall trees. "Ah," she said, "the

inscrutable verdant hieroglyphics of the forest . . ." She left the sentence unfinished and made a mental note to herself to write this down as soon as she got to her grandmother's.

She continued on her way, skipping a little, humming to herself. Then she heard a rustling in the grass. She crept closer and noted several pairs of rabbits copulating vigorously in a scratchy yellow patch of weeds. She popped a gum drop in her mouth. Wondering if they would ever stop their twitching and shuddering, she stood transfixed for several minutes. But what Little Red Riding Hood didn't know was that in a patch behind a thick wavy-leaved bush, lay a wolf, his avaricious eyes taking her in--

It seems so difficult to draw out the character of the wolf without touching on some pedophilic tendencies.

"Hello, little girl," said the Wolf, leaning against a tree, startling Little Red Riding Hood.

"Well, hello there," she said a little non-plussed by the large beast's glinting fangs.

"So," the Wolf continued, "what are you doing out on this lovely day?" She looked at him and thought it best to be civil. What hot putrid breath he had!!!

"Sir," she said with an awkward formality, "I'm going to my grandmother's house because she is feeling ill. I'll be on my way then. Good day." She gave a dismissive nod and walked off down the path. The wolf smiled, and gave a slight bow at her departure, taking off his fedora. As soon as she was out of sight he dropped to all fours and slunk out of sight.

I'm beginning to feel worried for Little Red, because she is so oblivious and innocent and polite. The more I think. . .now I am feeling really anxious, my heart is a clenched fist, my mind dumb-struck with dull fear. . . I feel as if I'm setting up a person to be raped, I don't know, I feel like I'm abandoning her. . . best continue. . .

Little Red Riding Hood continued along, feeling vaguely anxious. She wished she hadn't talked to that wolf--he gave her the willies. But, she noticed the bright sunshine and the sweetness of the fall air, and began to cheer up again. A few leaves skittered across the path. "Ah leaves," she said, "leaves."

By midafternoon she had made considerable progress toward her grandmother's house, so she felt entitled to a rest. Her burden was becoming quite heavy. She sat on a large rock and shared some johnny-cake with some squirrels. She heard a groaning from off in the distance. Some deer were rutting in between the trees. She picked up another johnny-cake in her hand.

She stared at it.

And stared at it. And stared at it.

What on earth is this? she thought. Why this, she wondered, why now? "Johnnycake," she said aloud, feeling a slight rush of power, "yes this is a johnny cake. A johnnycake. Pardon me, ma'am, but this is a johnny cake," she chuckled to herself and rummaged through the basket.

"Aha!" she said, "here's a PEACH. A peach. If you'll excuse me, this is a peach." She bit into the peach. A delightful sense of possessiveness washed over her--her word, her fruit, her sweetness, she was reducing her world to this peach, its flavor, its supple flesh yielding to her teeth, ah, everything was all right!! Everything!!!

She stood up on top of the rock, crying, "Peaches! hey Peaches!!" the weather was beginning to change. A storm began to gather in the distance as charcoal clouds twined into circles in the sky. The wind picked up, whisking leaves about in circles. The animals moved about, unsettled. Little Red Riding Hood was waving her arms in the powerful motions of a preacher sermonizing in the pulpit.

"Peaches! You see, Peaches!!" She picked up the basket, "--and a wicker basket! Johnnycakes!! And, yes, yes," she fished between the red napkins, "Gumdrops! Gumdrops!" she cried out to the storm that was now flashing lightning and trees that shivered against the bottle green and gray sky. She threw the basket out into a clump of bushes. "HA! Wicker baskets!! Peaches!!!!" she suddenly jumped up and down, her voice soaring from a shout to a shriek.

"But wait-- there's more!!!! Like, uh, yeah, STAPLERS!! As well as Peaches!! Shelled peanuts!! Groceries!!! Potato peelers, yes POTATO PEELERS!!! And BUNIONS!!! EXCUSE ME!!!" she pointed to a buck that was looking warily at her, "BUT THERE ARE BUNIONS!!! and Groceries! Peritonitis!! Silver cow cream dispensers!!" --she gasped for breath as her shouting competed with the storm for audibility. She opened her arms up.

"Linseed oil!!! Groceries!! Trikedepsiphobia!!! Rock lichen!!! And Yes, HAIR NETS. HAIR NETS. HAIR NETS!!!" She was panting loudly, her body shaking as the storm rattled the trees in a final mighty gust, "Arable land!!!! AND YOU SIR," she shouted, pointing to a squirrel bouncing nervously by, "ARE A SQUIRREL!!!!" Her red cloak billowed around her like a wizard's, and in a final splintering scream, "GROCERIES, GROCERIES, GROCERIES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" She sank to her knees.

The storm broke up quickly as it had gathered. The sun came out again. Birds fussed over their wind-ruffled feathers. Red Riding Hood sat for several minutes. Her chest rose and fell with exertion.

Feeling pleased, she lifted her fine dark eyes to the afternoon sun, unaware that the wolf was not so far away.

Apparently I've been shouting rather loudly--was interrupted by a loud pounding at the door. Mrs. Jefferson, who lives downstairs, wanted to know if everything was all right. Mrs. Jefferson is an agoraphobic in her late fifties, who I've never seen out of her bathrobe, which I think is a bunch of fuzzy toilet seat covers sewn together--with all that time inside she does come up with some pretty weird craft projects. She once showed me some plant holder made out of

macramed coffee tops. Anyway, she wasn't convinced by my excuses so I invited her in for a cup of tea. She very reluctantly agreed.

She came in and noted my writings and hedged over for a better look. I took them from the table and placed a cup of cranberry tea in front of her.

"Are you sure you're all right, dear???" she asks, concern all over her white face.

"Yeah," I say, "Sorry if I scared you." She doesn't look convinced so I squeeze her hand. "Really, everything is fine."

"Well," she says, gulping her tea, which is much too hot to drink yet, "you never know, with all the different types of people who live here, you know," --she rolls her eyes upwards and mouths some words at me, presumably some derogatory name to refer to our upstairs neighbors, an inter-racial couple, "--you never can be too sure."

I can tell she is dying to get back to her own home; she has that agitated look I remember from a fire alarm we had last month-- I am flattered by the concern that it must have taken to get her out of her apartment.

Well, lunchtime is long past, it is those pendulous sunny hours between noon and late afternoon, that seem as if they could go on forever. I wish I could put a pear between my breasts to catch the afternoon sun slanting through the windows. No pears, not enough breasts.

Feeling pleased, Little Red Riding Hood lifted her fine eyes to the afternoon sun, the sun of those pendulous sunny hours between noon and late afternoon. She leaned back and took a nap.

When she woke, it was getting on toward late afternoon. She gathered up what she could of the basket's contents from the grass. The cakes were a little nibbled at, but the preserves were just fine. She rearranged them as neatly as she could, brushing off some large black ants that still clung to the cakes.

After straightening her red cloak around her shoulders, fussing over the basket one more time, and clearing her throat she began singing, "We're off to see the Wiz--"

Oh, just ha-ha.

Straightening her red cloak around her shoulders and fussing over the basket one more time, Little Red Riding Hood went off to finish her journey in ebullient spirits.

"I'll visit Grandma, and we'll have tea and cookies and she'll have that delightful lace tablecloth on the kitchen table, and we'll talk and talk. . . now if I could just remember what I was saying earlier, herumph, let's see. . . the verdant semiotics of the forest, no, er, the indestructible semiotics of the forest's fair green tresses, no, now what was that. . .?"

So Little Red Riding Hood prattled on, having a running narration at everything she passed that interested her. And, before she knew it, she had arrived at her grandmother's house.

So here she finally is--in front of grandmother's house. Ugly sense of apprehension, I can almost hear the rumble of horror movie music in the background.

Little Red Riding Hood marched up the path to her grandmother's cottage, and knocked three times. "Oh Grandmother!!!" she called out in a sing-song voice, hopping from one foot to another. She really did have to pee and was getting hungry after her meager snack that afternoon. She knocked one more time, loudly. Sighing, she was about to make her way to the back entrance when she decided to try the front door. It was open.

Previous to her arrival, the wolf had surprised Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother as she was crocheting leftover tea bags into an afghan. He ate her, crocheting needles and all. The wolf then snuck into her room and put on one of her flowered bathrobes and got into the bed. He dozed a bit, and was awakened by Little Red's knocking at the door. He awoke and, in the highest pitched voice he could muster, said, "Come in, if that's you, dearest Little Red Riding Hood." Little Red entered, saying, "Grandmother? Are you doing your Mel Tormé impression again? You sound awfully funny." Little Red went into the bedroom, where she saw the wolf.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Why, er, I'm your grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood," said the wolf.

"Bullshit."

no no no, a little rough

"Why, er, I'm your grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood," said the wolf.

"No you're not. My grandmother doesn't have a pelt, or glistening fangs. I'm not stupid."

The wolf began to get out of bed and move toward Little Red. He threw off the robe, smiling. A flash of understanding and dawning déjà vu hit Little Red as she looked at the wolf.

"You intend to eat me?" she asked.

He looked at her. "Yes, Little Red Riding Hood."

"For heaven's sake, look at me, wolf," she said, shaking him, "in the eye. Do you actually want to do me physical harm?????"

"Yes."

"Why, you don't look hungry, look how big your belly is."

"I'm not hungry."

"Then why," Little Red Riding Hood said plaintively, "Why?"

"No one can answer that."

"Listen, I like peach melba and want to write brilliant lyric verses when I get older. I learned to spell hippopotamus in nursery school."

"This means nothing."

"And you still want to do me actual physical harm that will cause me untold anxiety and torment for the rest of my life?"

(I guess the answer is yes, but it can't be. Does this exist? Is this how it is?)

So he began to move toward her to force her down his throat. Little Red Riding Hood, at first still astonished, began to fight as he attempted to gulp her down--

Oh I can't stand this. How can I stand by and let this happen to another person??????? If I was on the street, right now, and saw this happening I'd intervene, I'd try to stop--

Little Red continued to struggle, squirming, wriggling like a greased pig, and felt a heavy weight put in her hand. She looked over. It was a gun.

"For heaven's sake!!" she said. The wolf looked over and abruptly backed away, holding his paws up. He laughed a little, a nervous dribble of a laugh, "Easy with that thing, Little Red Riding Hood, I was just rough-housing before--"

"Where did this come from?" Little Red asked no one in particular. She pointed the gun in the general direction of the wolf. The wolf tried to grab the gun and was frozen like ice.

From me.

Little Red Riding Hood said--"You mean you just invented this .38 Magnum, and placed it in my hand? And the wolf, did you freeze him?"

Yes, Yes--I can't stand to see you struggle so--how can I do this to another human, fictional or otherwise? I know you're scared, Little Red, I'm scared. I want to see you back with your picnic basket, invoking thunderstorms, and shouting, strong as air, not this horror of being assaulted by something that scares you, will scare you for the rest of your life--

"But is that realistic? I mean would this happen in real life??"

No, of course not, but listen, you're in a different world than reality. You know you're a fictional character, that someone has made you up and you've become a sort of archetype??

"Well, I don't know what an archetype is, I mean I'm only supposed to be a kid, but I had already kinda guessed at the fictional part. There are spaces in my head--you wouldn't believe how the negative space in between letters and words can add up to vast gaps of consciousness. I am made up of words. My knee is the word `knee'--your knee is flesh, yes? I'm two-dimensional, so, listen, about this gun--"

Watch the wolf--the ice is melting. He is trying to grab you again.

Little Red stepped back a few steps from the wolf, saying out loud, "I'm sorry. If this was happening in the world, no .38 would drop into a pre-pubescent girl's hand to protect her. Many a person has been eaten with no champions, no protectors, no magical guns. It's silly to pretend otherwise. In respect, I must be no different." Little Red dropped the gun on the ground and waited for it to disappear. It wouldn't.

In the real world no one would refuse the gun.

Little Red shook her head. "Let go," she said.

(Long pause)

The gun disappeared.

(Long pause)

Fight. FIGHT.

Little Red struggled with the wolf for several minutes, but to no avail. She was eaten, his cruel teeth grazing her face, gashing her cheek. She bled and bled and bled and she went down his rippling gullet, squeezed, bloody

_____ (yes, this was stolen from Tristram Shandy.)

Little Red was wadded up in the belly of the wolf, hemorrhaging, with the withered limbs of her partially eaten grandmother twining around her like bloody snakes. The wolf could barely move with the weight of the two in his belly. He staggered out of the bedroom to the back yard and toppled to the ground.

It was around suppertime when a Mary Kay consultant named Linda, who had graduated with honors from college but was unable to find anything else honorable to do with her hard-earned English degree, had had an appointment to see the old lady and made her way toward the little cottage. Linda knocked on the door and heard no response. She stood on the doorstep thoughtfully chewing her Bruised Sunset Pink varnished nails. Linda knew how the old lady never went out of her house, not even to buy groceries. Concerned, Linda went around to the back door, carefully side-stepping a pair of praying mantises who were beginning to copulate.

Linda gasped as she turned the corner of the house. There lay the biggest mangiest animal she'd ever seen. Some sort of horrible dog, she imagined. She tip-toed closer. It began to snore with deep guttural snorts, disturbing the mating of the mantises. Linda began to feel nervous, and was making her way back down to her car when the wolf started to choke. It would later be revealed that Little Red Riding Hood had wedged the old lady's reading glasses toward the wolf's esophagus for just this effect, causing the wolf to choke violently. Linda had just taken a first aid course at the Y, and although a little nervous, had full faith that she could complete the task before her. She grabbed the wolf from behind, noticing how its fur was littered with ticks, and with a few good hefts, began to administer the Heimlich Maneuver.

It worked. The wolf began to retch, loudly, until the grandmother came up covered in greenish stomach bile, then Little Red, who was barely alive and bleeding badly. Linda gasped, horrified at the results of her effort, and ran inside to telephone for help.

The wolf sputtered and coughed like a drowning person. As the blood and bile began to trickle down his muzzle, the spasm began to quell. He turned over and saw the black venom in Little Red's eye, just before she went into shock.

With this as a cue, The Righteous Squad descended with cattle prods and hot irons and red ants and moved toward the wolf. . .

hmmm. . . vengeance vs. reform vs veracity vs vengeful reform vs. reformed vengeance vs realism. . . .

With this as a cue, a team of doctors, sociologists, psychologists, psychotherapists, descended on the wolf, all dressed in lab coats, rubber-gloved fingers twitching in experimental anticipation.

come on. . .

The wolf looked away and began to weakly push himself toward the forest, leaving a trail of gruesomely vomit behind. No one would ever know what happened to him.

The paramedics finally arrived and just saved Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother from the jaws of death. They both spent several months in physical recovery.

Little Red's grandmother's fears of leaving the house became so bad after she came back from the hospital that she could no longer leave the room they put her in after she left the hospital. Little Red Riding Hood agreed to move in with her, to take care of her and be taken care of by her. Little Red understood all too well the trauma her grandmother showed. Sometimes they would sit in their rooms all night, sleepless, unable to move with grief and fear.

They tried to help each other, but in taking care of her grandmother, Little Red had slowly taken on many of her fears as well. She found herself unable to go outside anymore. The two had groceries delivered by friends. Little Red Riding Hood would sit by the window, in her grandmother's rocking chair made of old hairspray cans, and stare out the window all day. Little Red had come back from the hospital with scars the size and shape of caterpillars, which she felt often, idly, while staring at the birds outside.

Winter passed. Spring swept in, trailing the moist hot air of summer behind.

One late day in July, Little Red Riding Hood was in her usual position by the window when she noticed an exceptionally large pair of rabbits in her front yard. "Oh," she said aloud, enraptured. She had been staring out the window for a good ten months but she had not been seeing. They continued to eat. Maybe, Little Red thought, if I go outside real quiet I can watch them a little closer. Outside!!! Little Red got up from her chair. Her grandmother looked up, startled, "Where are you going, dearie?"

"Outside, Grandmother, to look at those rabbits," Little Red replied, trying to be nonchalant.

Her grandmother gasped, "But No!!!! You could get hurt or trip or fall or--"

Little Red Riding Hood began to breathe harder and her eyes glowed green.

"Goddammit," she said, "we sit in this house, like two cornered animals! Well, today I'm going outside, and I'm going--"

"Little Red!!! Think of what happened--" her grandmother said, fear bringing a tremor to her voice.

Little Red Riding Hood let out a scream that could have cut cheese.

"That son of a bitch!!!" she shouted, "look what he's done!!! We're acting as if we can't go outside!!!" She threw a houseplant against the wall, "Well listen, I'm not staying in here another minute," --she tromped outside-- "I'll take my chances!!!"

Little Red Riding Hood's face had become as red as her coat. She stormed onto the porch. She raised her fist, as the trees began to sway back and forth with a blustering wind, and clouds began to twine together in dark swirls. "YOU MOTHERFUCKER!!!!!" Little Red Riding Hood screamed, "YOU GODDAMNED COCK-SUCKING SON OF A BITCH!!!!!! YOU ASS-FUCKING FUCKHEAD!!!!!! I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU IF YOU EVER COME NEAR ME OR MY GRANDMOTHER AGAIN, YOU PIECE OF SHIT, DICKHEAD, ASS-WIPE--" The scars on Little Red Riding Hood quivered and turned purple as the clouds overhead and looked as if they were about to pop off. "YEAH, FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU, YOU STUPID BASTARD, I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU EVER COME ROUND HERE AGAIN, I'LL FUCKING RIP YOUR HEART OUT, YOU PISSANT STUPID-ASS ASSHOLE SON OF A BITCH FUCKER!!!!!!" Lightning struck a nearby tree with a mighty crack and the thunder shuddered the windows of the little cottage. Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother grabbed her from behind and tugged her in the house, Little Red struggling and kicking all the way, and the torrent of expletives not slowing for several minutes.

Little Red Riding Hood sobbed till she was so tired she could barely move.

"OK, Grandmother, OK," she said, as her grandmother still held her closely, "It's OK, let go, let go." Her grandmother let her go reluctantly, her face pale and very frightened.

"Little Red Riding--" her grandmother began.

"Just call me `Red' from now on, OK?" She gave a deep sigh. "You can go back to your jigsaw puzzle now. I'm all right, really." She squeezed her grandmother's hand. Red moved over to the desk and pulled out a piece of paper. After an hour or so she began to write,

Who knows what horror lurks within the inscrutable verdant hieroglyphics of the forest. .

"Little Red"--Analysis from Narrative Design by Madison Smartt Bell

Plot

Backstory-- there is none, in either narrative vector. Both vectors begin at the beginning and proceed to the end with no deviations from chronological straightforwardness. Right?

On the other hand, it can be argued that the conventional Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, presumably known to the reader, serves as a sort of backstory to vector two. Certainly the vector two story plays off our knowledge of the original. As for the vector one narrative, the narrator

doesn't ever tell us anything about her past, but at the end, it may be possible to make some general inferences.

Present Action-- In vector two, we have the traditional Little Red Riding story in its most familiar edition (though in the primal version of this tale, the little girl and her grandmother stay eaten). Most of the variations added here don't directly affect the plot proper, which retains the original pattern of journey, conversation with the wolf, being eaten, deliverance at last from the belly of the wolf. The vector-one narrator/author has added only two significant plot points (which in a way reflect each other): Little Red's ecstatic outburst, early in her journey, on the "itness" of everything, and the long denouement where Little Red and her grandmother strive to cope with their post-traumatic stress disorder after being regurgitated, a problem which is finally resolved by Little Red's second, more violently cathartic outburst. Sure, the original fairy tale has been messed around with in lots of other obvious ways, but most of the other additions are peripheral to the essential story line-- insertion of copulating animals and Mary Kay consultants, changes in the content of Little Red's discussions with the wolf, and various direct authorial intrusions and manipulations which come from vector one.

In vector one, perhaps less is happening, for the vector one protagonist is merely sitting alone in her room, as writers are wont to do. She has eaten too much ravioli and at the outset she must struggle with writer's block-- or at least some difficulty in getting started. But presently she gets so involved in her story that she screams and shouts along with her character, so much so that her upstairs neighbor comes down to make sure she's all right. After this interruption the vector-one narrator has some difficulty getting started again, but soon is well underway, so engaged with the story that she can have direct arguments with the character she has invented. By the last scene the vector-one narrator has effaced herself entirely from the story, which ends with a curious suggestion that Little Red herself, the vector two protagonist, may somehow have written the whole thing herself.

It's worth noticing that the vector one plot is essentially the story of a successful writing experience (can one also call it a happy one?) Beginning the story is not all that easy-- the writer is awkwardly self-conscious, unpleasantly aware of details like her bloated stomach. But she surmounts these difficulties and begins the story. Next she must deal with the intrusion of craftsman's self-consciousness, for her thoughts about how it's "so difficult to draw out the character of the wolf," &c, also interrupt the flow of the story she's trying to tell. But after she has worked a little longer, the story takes her over altogether and she identifies with her character so completely that she shouts and hollers along with Little Red without even knowing she's doing it. (You put yourself apart from yourself and enter the imaginary world.) That's what all writers want and need to do-- to get into the story entirely, as if it were reality.

But then comes the intrusion from the outside world-- something else all writers have suffered (the unwelcome phone call, cries of your child falling down the stairs, the knock at the door just as Coleridge is about to express the essence of "Kubla Khan"). After Mrs. Jefferson has left, the writer has some problems getting back into the story, is again distracted by self-consciousness (although her reverie about the pear is more dreamy and fantastic than her earlier self-consciousness about the ravioli, &c.). But since the story has already been well begun, it's

easier for her to get back into it on the second attempt (and she's even able to convert some of her quaint observations of Mrs. Jefferson into the characterization of Little Red's grandmother).

Thereafter the writer experiences the story less as a person who's making it up and more as a dreamer who's dreaming it-- which is to say that it's controlling her as much as she's controlling it. The story has "come to life." The main character, Little Red, has come to life in a comically frustrating way-- asserting her autonomy against the wishes of the vector one narrator/author. Once the story has come to life in this way, its course appears to be irrevocable; there are many kinds of tampering on the part of the writer that the story just won't allow. From this point on the story appears more or less to "write itself," and the vector-one narrator/author seems to experience it and learn from it in almost the same way that we, the readers, do.

Character

The personality of the vector one narrator is given an indirect exposition. We are told next to nothing of her history, and her present moment is almost entirely occupied by the composition of the vector two narrative. First and foremost she is a voice talking to us and so is primarily characterized by her tone. We learn, perhaps, that she is a classic daydreamer (which for a writer is a virtuous characteristic). Yet absorbed as she may be in the world of her imagination, she can still emerge to deal pleasantly with Mrs. Jefferson's unwelcome intrusion, making her a cup of tea and listening tolerantly to her conversation.

The vector-two heroine, Little Red, is much more directly portrayed. She is, as she points out herself, "supposed to be a little kid," but she is a very determined and stubborn little kid. She shares with the vector-one narrator a fascination with "irreducible bits of truth," with the essences of objects in the world around her. Perhaps this quality helps her to confront the wolf so directly and to ask him such probing questions. A bit later on she confronts the vector-one narrator in much the same way. All along she is entirely determined, so to speak, to call a spade a spade. By the end of the story this determination has evolved into a kind of moral courage which gives her the power to recover from terrible suffering.

As for the wolf, he is one of those essential facts of life that so fascinate both Little Red and the vector-one narrator, but his is the essence of evil, of indifferent malice-- his appetite for wanton destruction and cruelty has nothing to do with necessity. Like the vector-one narrator, we recoil from the wolf, asking "is this how it is?" and reluctantly forced to admit that "the answer is yes." The wolves are out there in the world and cannot be explained away.

A couple of cameo characterizations are worth noticing also. Mrs. Jefferson, who appears for barely one page, is very vividly presented: her frowzy appearance (bathrobe made of "fuzzy toilet seat covers sewn together"), her eccentric craft objects (the "plant holder made out of macramed coffee tops"), her provincial disapproval of the inter-racial couple in the building, and her perpetual jitteriness about anything at all unusual. Vector one represents the "real world," so Mrs. Jefferson's is a basically realistic characterization with a few fanciful elements. Vector two represents the world of the imagination, and there Linda, the Mary Kay consultant, is given a more fantastic characterization, but with a few realistic elements thrown in: she "had graduated with honors from college but was unable to find anything else honorable to do with her hard-

Much of the vector two dialogue is fast-paced and witty, its humor often depending on the insertion of a line that breaks the context of the conventional fairy tale:

He awoke and, in the highest pitched voice he could muster, said, "Come in, if that's you, dearest Little Red Riding Hood." Little Red entered, saying, "Grandmother? Are you doing your Mel Tormé impression again? You sound awfully funny."

For Little Red Riding Hood to start talking about Mel Tormé is so ludicrously unexpected that it surprises a laugh from the reader.

But some of the dialogue is more serious and significant, for instance Little Red's interrogation of the wolf:

"You intend to eat me?" she asked.

He looked at her. "Yes, Little Red Riding Hood."

"For heaven's sake, look at me, wolf," she said, shaking him, "in the eye. Do you actually want to do me physical harm?????"

"Yes."

"Why, you don't look hungry, look how big your belly is."

"I'm not hungry."

"Then why," Little Red Riding Hood said plaintively, "Why?"

"No one can answer that."

"Listen, I like peach melba and want to write brilliant lyric verses when I get older. I learned to spell hippopotamus in nursery school."

"This means nothing."

"And you still want to do me actual physical harm that will cause me untold anxiety and torment for the rest of my life?"

The situation here is comical in one sense-- the whole idea of Little Red Riding Hood cross-examining the wolf in this way is funny, and the humorous aspects of the passage are stressed by fanciful references to peach melba, hippotami, and so on. But the content and significance of this interview are quite serious, and as the reader becomes aware of that seriousness, the mood of the passage changes, becomes grimmer and more portentous.

Probably the most important passage of dialogue is the argument between Little Red and the vector one narrator-- not least because it breaks the barrier between vector one and vector two:

Little Red stepped back a few steps from the wolf, saying out loud, "I'm sorry. If this was happening in the world, no .38 would drop into a pre-pubescent girl's hand to protect her. Many a person has been eaten with no champions, no protectors, no magical guns. It's silly to pretend otherwise. In respect, I must be no different." Little Red dropped the gun on the ground and waited for it to disappear. It wouldn't.

In the real world no one would refuse the gun.

Little Red shook her head. "Let go," she said.

(Long pause)

The gun disappeared.

(Long pause)

Fight. FIGHT.

As in the case of Little Red's discussion with the wolf, the whole idea of the character arguing with the author this way has its comic side, but the tone has shifted; the sympathy and concern of the vector-one narrator for Little Red has become serious and poignant. But it seems that the narrator/author has no choice but to let the character win her case (which in this situation feels very much like a choice of martyrdom). It's a curious paradox, for in theory the author has all the choices all the time-- yet Little Red is more convincing when she argues that once the course of the story has been set, there are limits beyond which it cannot be further manipulated or tampered with.

Almost all of the dialogue in the story has more than one dimension. The conversations are comic, more often than not, but most of them also present serious questions or odd intellectual challenges-- as above.

Imagery and Description

Descriptions in this story, often very vivid, sometimes work by drawing in unexpected comparisons: eyes "black as burnt prune pits;" "a nervous dribble of a laugh:" "the ravioli is rolling over in my stomach like a tired old dog." Because the surface tone of the story is often light and comic, the reach for these similes can be somewhat exaggerated-- but the same principle, more conservatively applied, works to enliven descriptions in narratives that are more uniformly serious in tone. Indeed, some of the descriptions here are thoroughly serious, like this one, which is viscerally convincing if not entirely "realistic": "Little Red was wadded up in the belly of the wolf, hemorrhaging with the withered limbs of her partially eaten grandmother twining around her like bloody snakes."

The descriptions of the wolf are often full of realistic details: his fur is "littered with ticks;" when he regurgitates his victims "he stuttered and coughed like a drowning person." Sometimes he is described as a natural, animal wolf, but at other times he is rendered as the fairy tale archetype of the wolf as avatar of bad human qualities and evil in general. Part of the story's wit involves moving the wolf very fluidly between these two conditions: "The wolf smiled, and gave a slight bow at her departure, taking off his fedora. As soon as she was out of sight he dropped to all fours and slunk out of sight."

The chief archetypal figure in the story is Little Red Riding Hood herself, of course, as the narrator argues during their debate. Along with being an archetype, she is also a visual icon. The story rides on the assumption that the reader will be familiar enough with the conventional image of Little Red Riding Hood to picture her clearly the moment her name is mentioned. Thus the description can slightly twist the details of the reader's assumed preconception of Little Red, sometimes in matters of visual detail: "She wore a red, of the purest pigment, red coat with a hood that brought out the delicate ruddiness of her smooth child's cheeks"-- but a bit later, this coat has turned into a wizard's cloak. Little Red departs from the conventional image of herself in other ways, such as her speech:

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Why, er, I'm your grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood," said the wolf.

"Bullshit."

no no no, a little rough.

Indeed. But that roughness serves to remind us that Little Red can be separated from the conventional fairy tale context, to become fuller, more realistic, perhaps more adult ("Just call me `Red' from now on," as she requests toward the end). Like the image of the wolf, though more subtly, the image of Little Red is flexible, undergoing a process of change. Her most radical transformation is her identification with the vector-one narrator/author, hinted at throughout the story and confirmed in the conclusion.

Design

Like "The Child Downstairs," "Little Red" begins by declaring that the narrator of one narrative vector is also telling the story in the other. In "The Child Downstairs" however, as soon as the two vectors have split, they remain strictly separate-- the reader can and should infer that the two vectors are different aspects of the same story, but will not be told so outright. By contrast, we are constantly reminded that the vector-one narrator of "Little Red" is always composing, revising, and trying to manipulate the vector-two narrative. The two vectors are constantly interpenetrated, continually break through the barriers that would hold them apart.

Consider first the more standard structure of "Little Red" vector two, which is based on, though it does not strictly follow, the structural design of the fairy tale's most familiar versions:

Exposition: Little Red Riding Hood sets out on her journey.

Rising Action: She meets the wolf and carelessly reveals her destination.

Climax: When she arrives she is eaten by the wolf, disguised as her grandmother (previously consumed).

Falling Action: Digestive processes are underway.

Denouement: A kindly hunter (or whoever) appears to deliver Little Red Riding Hood and her granny from the belly of the wolf.

Tammy's revision of the tale uses this pattern but introduces some new structural elements to it:

Exposition: Little Red sets out on her journey.

Rising Action: She meets the wolf and carelessly reveals her destination. After the encounter she feels a vague anxiety.

Subclimax: Little Red purges her anxiety in a gestalt epiphany, an ecstatic explosion of insight into the irreducible essence of everything.

Falling Action: The subclimax tapers off into exhaustion and sleep.

Rising Action: Little Red reaches her grandmother's house, argues with the wolf about his intentions, and rejects the vector-one narrator's efforts to reach in with magical devices which might save her.

Main Climax: Little Red is eaten by the wolf.

Falling Action: Digestive processes. Linda, Mary Kay consultant, turns up to deliver Little Red and her granny from the belly of the wolf.

Rising Action: Little Red and her grandmother are cooped in the house, greatly inhibited by the trauma of their ordeal. Little Red suffers increasing tension and resentment in this situation.

Subclimax: Little Red declares her autonomy in another wild outburst which reflects the one in the first subclimax, but this second one is more violently cathartic. Like the first, it involves naming the things of the world in their essence, but this time Little Red concentrates on naming the wolf as evil (with graphic, though somewhat incoherent, obscenity). This act of naming seems to give her power to withstand her enemy, the wolf.

Denouement: Following the second subclimax, Little Red weeps herself into exhaustion. When she recovers, she gives herself a new name too. Then she picks up pen and paper and, through an

odd extradimensional twist, reveals herself to be the writer of the story we've been reading all along.

The new structural elements added by Tamny are the two subclimaxes-- Little Red's parallel essentialist outbursts. And these are very appropriate additions to a version of the tale which is so conscious of itself as a construction of language, for both involve powerful acts of naming. The first is an innocent, positive affirmation; the second (after Little Red's innocence has been ravished by the wolf) is darker, more terrible. But both exhilarate the character with a new sense of power. It logically follows that acts of naming should be very powerful in a world made out of language, where Little Red's knee is the word 'knee,' and so on. But it's also implied that naming, truth-telling, confrontation of the irreducibility of truth for better or worse, can be a powerful act in the "real world" too.

In most respects, the structure of vector one follows the structure of vector two. In the expository phase, the vector one narrator must overcome some difficulties in order to "get into" writing the story, but once she's well underway, she experiences the story much as the reader does. She is wholly absorbed into the world of her own imagining in vector two (as all writers need to be during the process of inventing and imagining their stories) and so she shares the peaks and valleys of the vector-two structure with the character she's inventing, Little Red. There are some interruptions when the vector one narrator draws back to consider the vector two narrative from technical points of view, or when intrusions come from outside (Mrs. Jefferson's visit). But for the most part she is wholly within the world of vector two and in this world she really does have magical powers because it is a world of her own creation. When Little Red names all those commonplace items in her first ecstatic outburst, her act of naming is powerful enough to affect the weather. Meanwhile, the vector one narrator can create the weather outright (along with most other circumstances of the story) with strokes of her pen... with her choice of words. This shared power, a power of language, contributes to the identification of Little Red with the vector-one narrator that develops throughout the course of the story.

The main climax of vector one, however, should be located in a slightly different place than the main climax of vector two. For the vector-one narrator, the main climax comes when Little Red turns to face her author and finally asserts her own autonomy against the author's wishful intention to change the circumstances of the story to help her out. As Little Red successfully argues at this point, there are some kinds of interference the writer will not be permitted-- interference the story just won't tolerate. The vector-one narrator/author can make the wolf wear a fedora or inspire Little Red with the will to fight back, but she can't make weapons fall into the story out of thin air. Once the story has been sufficiently realized it (and its author) must abide by its own laws of reality-- some things can happen but others cannot.

Once this point has been settled, the devouring itself is falling action-- from the vector-one narrator's point of view. Like the reader, she already knows what is going to happen-- she shares Little Red's sense of dawning *déjà vu*. But the subclimax of the story's third, concluding phase still holds some surprises for the reader and the writer too.

Where is the conflict for the vector-one narrator? what is at stake in the story for her? Most evident is her sympathy for the character (analogous to the reader's sympathy) which

evolves into her fervent and futile desire to protect Little Red from the wolf. But the progressive identification of Little Red and the vector-one narrator (a twist at the end makes them appear almost as reflections of each other) suggests a further answer. There are hints (that "déjà vu") that Little Red and the vector-one narrator may share similar traumatic experiences. There are very strong indications (those praying mantises) that the wolf's attack on Little Red is a symbolized sexual assault. From these clues it may be inferred that the vector-one narrator shares with Little Red, if not the experience of an actual assault, at least an apprehension of the likelihood of such assaults (as many women do in the real world). If so, then the whole story, vector one and vector two combined, constitutes an effort to find a way to cope with the presence of malevolence in the world, and to manage the radical loss of innocence that the confrontation with evil entails.

The third phase of the story differs sharply from the conclusion of the original fairy tale. In Tamny's revision, rescue does not erase the awful effects of what Little Red and her grandmother have undergone. There are no magical solutions (after all the character herself has already rejected them), no flicks of the wand to make everything all right again as if it had never happened. Little Red has to find her own way to deal with the lingering trauma of the wolf's assault-- which makes for a very realistic conclusion to what has otherwise been a fairly fantastic tale.

But the story's last line adds a different twist. Vector one and vector two are designed to be interpenetrated all the way through, and this interpenetration works in both directions. It's declared at the beginning that the vector-one narrator is composing the vector-two narrative, and we're reminded of this often enough by her frequent intrusions into vector two. But Little Red is a writerly personality herself. As she moves through the story she composes sentences about it in her head ("Ah," she said, "the inscrutable verdant hieroglyphics of the forest . . ." She left the sentence unfinished and made a mental note to herself to write this down as soon as she got to her grandmother's.) In her climactic conversation with the vector one narrator she's arguing about how to write the story. Then, at the very end, we see her picking up the pen to begin writing a version of the story we've been reading. This maneuver allows the end of the story to flow almost seamlessly into its beginning, creating a continuous, endless surface reminiscent of a mobius strip. Seen as a whole, the design of this story recalls the famous Escher print of the two interlocked hands, each drawing the other one.

The reciprocity of this image evokes the similarly reciprocal relationship between author and invented character. It evokes a reciprocal relationship between the real world inhabited by writers in general and the world of the imagination which writers must enter in order to do their work. Most of the vector one narrative in "Little Red" is devoted to a portrayal of creative process as such, of the devices and stratagems which the writer deploys to put herself in the right state of mind for imagining, then rendering, the story. When these devices and stratagems are successful, the story does indeed take on a life of its own, asserting its own verities in a fashion which is (however paradoxical it may seem) separate from, though generated by, the intentions of the writer. In that sense, "Little Red" is a striking demonstration of what writers are talking about when they make the claim that one of their stories has "written itself."

"Little Red" -- Instructors' Manual Annotation