Real "wolves in those bushes:" readers take dangerous journeys with *Little Red Riding Hood*

Cornelia Hoogland

Résumé: *À la suite de l'examen de trois versions du* Petit Chaperon rouge, *dont celle des frères Grimm, l'auteur s'interroge sur le bien-fondé de certaines remises en question du rôle de la littérature et des contes de fées dans la formation des enfants: la critique à visée purement idéologique, qu'elle soit d'obédience féministe ou non, peut entraver la capacité de l'enfant d'amorcer un dialogue imaginaire avec les contes et leur univers symbolique.*

Assumptions about the nature, content and function of Grimms' fairy tales have changed considerably since their publication in the early nineteenth century. While they have been more or less consistently viewed as delightful literary stories, the debates surrounding their educational uses have often told more about the concerns of the society of which they are a part than about the tales themselves. The multiplicity of interpretations, the sustained interest in the tales, the vigour of debate, as well as the re-publications of the original tales—all these attest to the power and enduring art of the Grimms' fairy tales.

Traditionally, the tales have been valued within educational circles for their literary merit. Northrop Frye and Jane Yolen say that myths, legends, and fairy tales are foundational to the study of literature. Bruno Bettelheim asserts the psychological accuracy of the fairy tales' articulation of the developing psychic life of the child. He says the tales are a realistic portrayal, symbolically expressed, of such things as the basic affective tensions which constitute human experience, such as security versus fear, acceptance versus rejection, happiness versus despair. In *The educated imagination* Frye says the King James' version of the Bible, rich in myth and poetry, "should be taught early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind, where everything that comes along later can settle on it" (46). Yolen makes a similar claim saying that a grounding and understanding of the old lore and wisdoms "is a basic developmental need" (15, 19). Children's need for myth and art to generalize and interpret their experience, Yolen says, is compounded at particular times in their lives when the mythic elements of stories can be of greatest influence.

If fairy tales fill such important educational roles as encouraging literary and cultural continuity, assisting in the assimilation of experience, and giving imaginative options for children's lives, it would seem their inclusion in the curriculum would automatically follow. Some contemporary critics, however,

say that fairy tales provide an inaccurate portrayal of the female, and thus of the relationships possible between the sexes. Speaking from a predominantly feminist perspective, these critics have, through close reading and sociohistorical and linguistic approaches, sought to reveal underlying authoritarian and sexist attitudes demonstrated in the tales' emphasis on passivity, industry, and self-sacrifice for girls, but on activity, competition, and accumulation of wealth for boys. Feminists conclude that the tales impart "values and norms to children which may actually hinder their growth, rather than help them to come to terms with their existential condition and mature autonomously as Bruno Bettelheim maintains" (Zipes, "Who's afraid of the Brothers Grimm?" 15).

While each critical perspective contributes to the ongoing discussion about fairy tales, our task as educators is to discern among these competing voices: which interpretation, version, or particular use of the Grimms' tales can best satisfy our educational purposes. Our intention is to educate children to live fruitful lives in a world realistically conceptualized and understood. If, as some critics suggest, the fairy tales do distort reality by offering repressive images of gender, race, and class relations, upholding obedience, humility and subordination, then they perpetuate the controlling mechanisms of a socially stratified society. The argument follows that tales which give a false sense of reality must not be used.

Feminist critics' solutions have been either to censor, to rewrite, or to create new tales. I examine and discuss the implications for readers, and thus for students, of a traditional telling of *Little Red Riding Hood* (hereafter called *LRRH*), a realistic feminist adaptation of the tale, by the Merseyside Fairy Story Collective, and a contemporary poem by Olga Broumas which depends upon traditional imagery and motifs. Underlying this analysis is my concern about maintaining a feminist perspective towards literature without sacrificing aesthetic enjoyment and enrichment.

I make three claims. First, open texts which invite multiple responses and different interpretations provide the richest reading experience that literature has to offer. Second, the feminist adaptation by the Merseyside writers of the Grimms' tale *LRRH*[1] renders interpretation to the literal. Third, the Broumas poem encourages readers' emotional and imaginative involvement, and interpretation. I examine the traditional tale by the Grimm brothers, asking whether feminist critics are correct in assuming it offers one, closed meaning (which is counterproductive because it is ideologically incorrect and thus "false"). Are there ways in which the Grimms' tale can be read openly, and if so, how?

This is not to say that fairy tales are unsullied documents of a purer and more *natural* people, but social constructions reflecting the desires and conditions of their times and authors. Aitken says "literature is more than a thwarted investigator; it is also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality: literature *pre*scribes thought and action according to the dictates of certain ideologies just as surely as it *de*scribes them" (11). While our consciousness is shaped, to varying degrees, by the literature we read, the literature itself is shaped by current, popular thoughts and

attitudes. As educators, we should be concerned about literature's prescriptiveness. At the same time, literature must be understood and examined within the literary, historical and social contexts within which it occurs.

For example, feminists who criticize the fairy tale posture of the female—seated at the window, within the home—and who suggest that women should be adventuring out of the castle and down the road with the males, would do well to consider that within literature, postures and gestures and even social conventions such as marriage, operate not simply in direct correspondence to their social equivalents in the real world (though they can be read this way), but have literary significance.

Marriage, or more accurately, the wedding, indicates a successful resolution to the binary tensions of the tale, on many levels. It can be seen as the heroine's emergence from an unaccommodating domestic space into an acknowledged public one. It can also indicate the successful maturation of the heroine into psychic wholeness—into obtaining a balance of the female and the male principles. Marriage as a literary convention signals closure, and satisfies that psychological need.[2]

In education, traditional fairy tales are historically important. On social and literary levels they provide readers with the opportunity of examining the posture/position of the female in other cultures, at different eras, providing contrast with current conceptions and mores. Which posture—the contemplative or the physically active—the myth asks, is truly adventurous? Which posture leads to understanding—the contemplative attitude towards life (embodied in the window-seated posture) or the thrusting, adventuring posture? While literature can be examined in direct correspondence to social realities, limiting literature to this role robs it of its power, and robs education of literature's potential usefulness in teaching. Literary, historical and social contexts are helpful, however, in preventing us from being overly insensitive or naïve about the limitations and foibles of our own points of view.

Munro illustrates this in the title story of her collection, *Friend of my youth*, where she says:

> the odd thing is that my mother's ideas were in line with some progressive notions of her times, and mine echoed the notions that were favoured in my time. This in spite of the fact that we both believed ourselves independent, and lived in backwaters that did not register such changes. It's as if tendencies that seem most deeply rooted in our minds, most private and singular, have come in as spores on the prevailing wind, looking for any likely place to land, any welcome. (22-23)

The "prevailing wind" is an important consideration not only when we look at the Grimms' tales, with their obvious prejudices, but also when we examine current tellings of the tales, with their/our not-so-obvious prejudices.

Deconstructive and regenerative possibilities

How then should we value literature? Without diminishing the importance of

addressing inequities of gender, class and race, the tales continue to provide important social understanding. The fact that they neither have been forgotten nor have lost their power to unsettle and fascinate (fairy tale images and themes continue to appear in both popular and serious culture) speaks for their historical and their aesthetic value. What is needed is a balance between the ideological and the artistic, or between the deconstructive and regenerative possibilities that fairy tales provide.

In this article I show that aesthetic response to the Grimms' tales does not just mean compliance with their cultural values. Quite the opposite. Broumas' response shows critical and creative awareness of the mythic content of *LRRH*. She adds her voice to the literary conversation started by the Grimms. Using the tale in this way shows that its importance lies not in any final and absolute meaning, but along a continuum represented at one end by their problematic aspects and on the other by their literary value. Literature, as Barthes says, need not be destroyed, but neither should it be protected.

When writers respond aesthetically, critically, and creatively they revise the cultural myths, making the texts obtain in their particular cultural circumstances. Initially this occurs as their own artistic struggle with the inherited forms and contents, but can extend to a level where cultural change is possible. Such a position implies that we trust writers to "register" in their responses, stories and poems "such changes" as the best feminist political thought and action has produced. The plethora of current fairy tales, stories, and poems amply demonstrates that writers are getting on with telling "liberated" stories, but it also is the case that within schools texts are increasingly censored. The current curriculum is in danger of being as authorial and dogmatic as the previous patriarchal culture. Sexism in any form is undesirable, but I disagree with banning or censoring art on the basis of a single criterion, and without seriously considering the losses incurred in the process. The rewriting of fairy tales according to feminist politics can result in a loss of the literary value of their themes, forms and motifs, thus also losing the material and means for new and fresh responses. Ruth MacDonald characterizes three ways feminist criticism has responded to the tales:

> One may present the tales, unaltered, with their traditional endings, and the devil take the consequences of the possible damage to a young girl's career expectations; one may rewrite the tales, de-emphasizing physical beauty and marriage, but thereby violating the objectivity of the folklore collector by imposing one's own language and bias on the narrative; or one may write new tales, using folklore motifs with less conventional endings. (18)

Using MacDonald's assessment of feminist response as a starting touchstone, I will discuss Grimms' fairy tale, *LRRH*, with its potential, at the least, for damage to a "young girl's career expectations," then examine an adaptation written by the Merseyside Fairy Story Collective in Liverpool in 1972 (*Red Riding Hood*, in Zipes, *Trials and tribulations* 239-244) which, while "de-emphasizing physical beauty" and other conventional attitudes in the tale, also imposes its

"own language and bias on the narrative." In addition, I will examine the American poet Olga Broumas' use of "folklore motifs with less conventional" meanings in her poem *LRRH*.

Although both the Merseyside and Broumas adaptations can be called *feminist* in that they register dissatisfaction with the traditional tales, they are different texts intended for different audiences. The former is prose and intended for children; the latter is poetry intended for older students and adults. These distinctions, however, are not as significant to my purposes as the way in which these works demonstrate their understanding of literature, and how children learn. The Merseyside version of *LRRH* is written as an anti-sexist document, while Broumas' version can be called "revisionist," a term used by Ostricker (72).[3] It is the way that feminist concerns are perceived and addressed through literature which interests me here.

How do these two feminist adaptations respond to the traditional tale—and to what effect? Each version relies on the imagery and form of the traditional story, using its themes as the imaginative fodder to create different stories. Feminist goals can be served using traditional fairy tales which, through their use of wonder and magic, their indirect depiction of human behaviour, and their symbolic representation of emotions, allow children (including young girls) to imaginatively express their hopes, fears and desires. Surely such empowerment is our common agenda.

My intent is not to demonstrate which of the two adaptations is superior, the right model or approach. Rather, I want to show that as educators committed to both literary and feminist concerns, we need to understand and appreciate their sometimes disparate intentions, claims, and points of view. We need to be clear about the significance and the limitations of feminist politics as it applies in literary—and more broadly speaking—artistic work, distinguishing between feminist criticism as it pertains to politics and to art.

Grimms' *LRRH*

The Grimms' version in *Household stories* has not been cinematized by Disney; thus, many may remember it with greater accuracy than the stories of Cinderella or Snow White. It is the story of a little girl, identified by a red hood, "much beloved by everybody," whose mother asks her to take cakes and wine to the sick grandmother who lives in the woods. The mother warns *LRRH* to "walk properly and nicely, and don't run," which she does, only to meet up with the wolf anyway, but who, "as she did not know what a bad sort of animal he was," did not frighten her. Neither is the wolf frightening to the reader; instead, he [sic] tells *LRRH* to "look at the pretty flowers that are growing all around you." While *LRRH* lingers to pick flowers, the wolf dashes to grandmother's house, eats her up, and gets into bed. The well-known litany of "O grandmother, what large ears you have" is repeated until the climactic "The better to devour you!" The wolf

eats *LRRH* but the effect is reversed by the huntsman, and Grimms' happy ending gives *LRRH* another chance at obedience and life.

Jack Zipes (15) says it is "generally known" that the Grimms' version of the story is based on Perrault's text (published a century earlier, in 1697) since Marie Hassenpflug, one of the women from whom the Grimms collected their tales, had a French Huguenot background and would have known Perrault's version of the story. The basic change is the happy ending, made possible by borrowing a motif from the fairy story, "The wolf and the seven kids," where another hunter saves a granny, who then proceeds to fill the wolf's belly with stones and to sew it up, causing its death. Still another change is in the warnings *LRRH* receives from her mother, to which she responds by "promis[ing] her mother to be very obedient." *LRRH*'s failure to heed her mother's instructions gets her into trouble. Nodelman says about Grimms' *LRRH* that:

> unlike Perrault's mother, this mother believes her daughter is too innocent to look after herself. And she's right; the child does not heed the warnings and is eaten by the wolf. But since the problem was her disobedience rather than her lack of knowledge, she is allowed a second chance; a hunter comes along and rescues her, and she herself makes the significance of her adventure clear to young readers: 'She said to herself, "Never again will I leave the path and run off into the wood when my mother tells me not to."' (162)

Children should be protected from evil; in addition, their innate innocence, the tale suggests, is revealed in *LRRH*'s lack of instinctual fear of the wolf. The stress is on the reciprocal need of adults to give, and children to receive, protection. But the tale is more than a tale of warning to children, particularly girls, of the dangers of disobedience, says Zipes (*Trials* 57, 55). The tale is a reflection of

> men's fear of women's sexuality—and of their own as well. The curbing and regulation of sexual drives is fully portrayed in this bourgeois literary fairy tale on the basis of deprived male needs. Red Riding Hood is to blame for her own rape. The wolf is not really a male but symbolizes natural urges and social nonconformity. The real hero of the tale, the hunter-gameskeeper, is male governance. If the tale has enjoyed such a widespread friendly reception in the Perrault and Grimm forms, then this can only be attributed to a general acceptance of the cultural notions of sexuality, sex roles, and domination embedded in it.

Zipes' is a radical interpretation of the tales. He suggests that the Grimms' account demonstrates the culturally acceptable norm (seen in the Garden of Eden) that female sensuality and curiosity are to blame for socially unacceptable male conduct. The resolution that the Grimms offer and that appears to satisfy everybody, Zipes says, is in the hunter-gameskeeper ("male governance"), who saves Little Red and her grandmother. In making Little Red responsible for the wolf's attack (it never would have happened had she listened to mother) Zipes says that the Grimms exonerate males' unruly or "wolfish" sexual urges, and make females somehow responsible. Thus while the huntsman protects—indeed, rescues—the female characters, the larger implication of the story is that of assigning female complicity and guilt. In reality, Zipes says, the tale teaches young girls to curb their own sensuality and sexuality, urging them "to become eminently rational in [their] anti-climactic adventure" (*Trials* 16).

These troublesome patterns of justification and blame are perpetuated by the Grimms, and are the reason, Zipes says, that the stories are unacceptable. Zipes then makes the circular argument that the enormous staying power of the Perrault and Grimm versions of the tales is based on society's willingness to accept the notions of "sexuality, sex roles, and domination" of Zipes' own Freudian interpretation.

Whether confirmation of cultural codes and patterns defines a successful work of art is debatable. The aesthetic pleasure of the work, our fascination with particular themes, and, as Frye says, literature's ability to project our anxiety regarding the fulfilment of our desires—all these should argue for our continued reading of established as well as new literature.

Merseyside's *LRRH*

If Zipes' dictum regarding the "continual impulse of later writers to make free with the fate of *LRRH*" (*Trials* 9) is true, then the Merseyside Collective's *Red Riding Hood* will demonstrate at least a degree of liberation from the moral and cultural codes imparted upon her (*LRRH*'s) nineteenth-century progenitor. Their story, four times as long as Grimms', posits the child as an individual and not a type. *LRRH*'s real name, we are told, is Nadia. The story demonstrates how Nadia overcomes her fear of "going up to bed by herself ... dogs and thunder and ... people she did not know" and most importantly, the forest. The day when Nadia must walk to her grandmother's house alone is a troubling one. "All day at school she could think about nothing but whether she dared to walk through the forest alone. At dinnertime she did not want to eat because she felt sick." She doesn't meet the wolf on the way, but senses it "moving toward great-grandmother's cottage" and fear for the old woman strengthens the girl's resolve and impels her toward the cottage. Together the females outsmart the wolf and murder it.

In this story, female-lineage is emphasized; the child's red cloak once belonged to Nadia's great grandmother who, in her youth, had been attacked by a wolf. Her bravery, and the story itself, act as a conduit between the generations. Children's fears are presented as real and valid experiences, and altruistic concern is shown to lead to acts of bravery and victory over one's fear. So although Nadia is an active heroine, the story marks her growth from a fearful girl to one who is enabled to reach out into her community and lend her cloak so that others, like her, "will grow brave."

Part of the awareness gained through reading this adaptation includes the gender messages implicit in traditional tales, such as the gender-appropriate behaviour the tales advocate. The Merseyside version enables readers to envisage another sort of *LRRH*, one who learns to conquer her wolf, to overcome her fear, to grow from her experiences. Just as Nadia looked to her grandmother for continuity and leadership, so readers, girls especially, can adopt Nadia as

their role model and come to understand that their strength lies in their own capacities, rather than in blind obedience to an external authority. But, as MacDonald says, it is the story's "own language and bias on the narrative" which is of interest.

There is neither magic nor humour in the story; rationality saves the day; and even the wicked wolf is turned into the protective lining of Nadia's coat. The attitude implies that, given the correct role models (heroic female ancestors), time and understanding, children will rationally come to model behaviour. Relatives and friends, rather than magical acts or helpers, will assist children's growth and development. The realistic tale is biased toward a rational, adult point of view, which makes it different from other versions where there is a close correlation between fairy tale conventions and children's imagination (McGlathery 56). The Merseyside *LRRH* does not compensate for its lack of the fantasy features which make the Grimms' tale attractive. Its suspense is forced, and the rhythm of the story obstructed by the need to account realistically for the story events. Perhaps most jarring is the "climax" of the tale—grandmother is behind the kitchen door all along, with a great burning torch in her hand.

Broumas' *Little Red Riding Hood*

The intimacy of an overheard conversation is suggested in this confessional piece, written by a woman to her mother about the conflicting needs to both establish and sever the matriarchal bonds. Birth is physical separation, easily executed in comparison to the more difficult task of mental and spiritual separation from the mother. As the speaker recreates in images her difficult birth, Broumas addresses her real subject—patriarchy's subjugation of women. The mother cramps her baby with a patriarchal legacy of rules: "Stick to the road and forget the flowers, there's/wolves in those bushes, mind/where you got to go, mind/you get there." The mother's responses to life—avoid its dangers and risks, "play it safe," stick to the tried and the given—she passes on to her daughter.

The speaker, both as a baby and as a woman, resists her mother and midwife. Dressed in her "mantle of blood," and later in her "red hood, howling," the baby avoids the constraining, shaping forceps, as well as the "doctor," who, as possessor of scientific and technological knowledge, constitutes seeing and hearing in patriarchal terms. Although as a daughter she responds dutifully (Broumas repeats "mind" three times), the speaker as adult subverts the image of the "red hood," so while it is still something by which the female is identified, it is not identifiable by villagers or wolf. Instead, Broumas' "hood" refers to women's common experience of their bodies, and to how their sexuality and creativity is focused in the same place. Broumas is lesbian but her insight is not limited to that community. The poem's themes pivot around the demands upon private conscience and women's attempts to survive the processes of civilization.

For Broumas the horrible contradiction of the male is his threatening presence (for females, males rather than wolves are truly dangerous) while being the necessary connection for even maternal lineage. Broumas voices the acute and chronic pain of her childless/daughterless existence. The speaker unsuccessfully tries to reach the grandmother "alone in (her) house and waiting, across this improbable forest/peopled with wolves," realizing that, because the female lineage is severed, she is not able to deliver her "basket of love." The fallout of the damaged relationship between the sexes, alienation, is felt within this female community, and is developed dramatically at the end of the poem when Broumas concedes that there are "wolves in those bushes" that "feed on" the "lost, flower-gathering sisters." Sisters who haven't learned, Broumas suggests, to keep their "hoods" and selves secret, and thus safe, from men. The poem ends in sad acknowledgment of the powerful, destructive forces of an abusive patriarchy.

Broumas uses traditional fairy tale imagery to talk about alienation, fear and subjugation in a female context. The red hood that identifies *LRRH* as a nice polite young girl signifies sexuality and sexual identity, which in the traditional story is consumed by the wolf, or is at least threatened in this way. In the poem sexuality is equated not with consumption but with sharing. Broumas subverts the howling wolf as a howling daughter, capable of equal noise. In her image of a forest "peopled with wolves" Broumas also makes a literary connection to Perrault's warning:

> Little girls, this seems to say,
> Never stop upon your way.
> Never trust a stranger-friend:
> No one knows how it will end.
> As you're pretty, so be wise;
> Wolves may lurk in every guise. (29)

While Perrault's *moralité* is a reference to men's *wolfishness*, Broumas' complex image depends upon associating the *bad* wolf of fairy tale with the processes and people who devalue, abuse or eventually destroy women. The titillation of the animal lover ("wolves may lurk in every guise"), that is, sex with a hint of the animal in it, is no longer a possibility. Men are a deadly threat to these women; there can be no compromise. In subverting patriarchy's dictum to "stick to the road" and by establishing her own path, even while calculating the risks, Broumas creates a world where innocence is as deadly as it was for Perrault's *LRRH*. She deconstructs the myth of female identification with the protective male, Grimms' hunter, and constructs a female community that defies the constructs of a repressive society and the impositions of convention, even while she is painfully aware of the cost of such action.

How readers read and children learn

In her article, "Some day my prince will come," Walkerdine discusses current approaches to sexism in literature. Recent feminist literature, she says, suggests

that offering a wide array of views and conceptions of female roles will counter the stereotypical images of traditional, sexist literature. If females are shown only working in the home, children will not be aware of the potential roles and vocations available to females outside the home. The feminist solution has been to create literature that presents females in more broadly conceived ways of being and acting. The response of the Merseyside group (feminist writers Audrey Ackroyd, Marge Ben-Tovim, Catherine Meredith and Anne Neville) to the distorted, offensive, stereotypical images in *LRRH* has been to provide a *better* story and role model for girls.

This approach, however, assumes that children will recognize these non-sexist images as the true ones. The desired response is for children to adopt these role models and engage in similar acts suitable to their ages. And certainly, it would appear that Nadia's story is written in the hope that children will recognize its message. But Broumas wants her images *to affect* the reader. What then is the difference? The key is the text's openness to interpretation. Although both stories are variously interpretable, the Merseyside version presents an ideal, realistically conceived. The story's realism allows little interpretation about that ideal, and (falsely) assumes a direct correspondence between story conventions and the conventions of life. Broumas, on the other hand, uses poetry's conventions, presenting images and metaphors which convey her emotional conviction and which are expansive enough for individual contemplation and interpretation. Her poem does not make strict realistic sense—understanding it requires the reader's participation. The poem makes sense, but not just one sense, or a once-and-for-all sense. This poem, like all good literature, is an opportunity to talk about issues and concerns close to the human heart. Issues such as families and relationships, for instance, which are so difficult to speak about directly, benefit from poetic exploration. Through metaphoric language these issues are interpretable in highly individual ways. It might be useful to think of the Merseyside group advocating a denotative reading of *LRRH*, that is, the words of the story existing in direct relationship to things and events in the world (and presenting one view that we accept or reject), while the Broumas version suggests that the story holds up signs and symbols interpretable in a variety of ways. Broumas shows that she is aware of traditional interpretations, but rather than replacing them she *plays* with them. The huntsman saves the little girl? she asks. Think again! She suggests that literary language is connotative, and that it is readers' responsibility not just to understand the old stories within their particular contexts, but to *retell* the old stories, and to make their mythic content meaningful for our viewpoint and time. It is not so much Broumas' radical interpretation of the tale, in line with her personal vision, that I embrace, either personally or as a teacher, but the idea that literature provides *good things to think about*, and the tools with which to think about them. And this brings us to an important point for education, because both readings make implications about *how* children learn. The Merseyside group

assumes that children are passive learners, or, rather, rationalist ones, "who will change as a result of receiving the correct information about how things really are." Walkerdine makes two points in response to this position. The first deals

> with the central importance of cultural practices in producing forms of thought and positions for women, the second deals with the inscription in those positions, of desire—that is, how we come to want what we want. Recent work in the field of cultural practices has stressed the importance of the way in which texts, such as books, films, advertisements and so forth, operate in terms of systems of signification. Thus the text has to be actively read in order to engage with the way in which images and other signs, verbal and non-verbal, are constructed ... In this sense then, we can say that texts do not simply distort or bias a reality that exists only outside the pages of books—in the 'real world'—but rather that those practices are real, and in their construction of meanings create places for identification, construct subject-positions in the text itself. So we need not point to some untainted reality outside the text, but to examine instead how those practices within the text itself have relational effects that define who and what we are. (164-165)

Walkerdine says that texts, and the characters within them, are embodiments of forces that vie for power and position. This may emulate such activity as it occurs in the *real* world (and certainly, feminist critics are interested in literature because it delineates those struggles more clearly than life, with its complexity and untidiness, can); but literature's role is not limited to revealing the social and cultural forces that shape us. The text itself struggles to make its position felt and known. This is usually a very complex process because inherent in most literary encoding is the desire to explore experience from many points of view and, through metaphoric construction, to leave *space* for the readers' imaginative contemplation and contribution. Stories need readers, to say the obvious, but some literature offers more imaginative space for readers.

Literature as imaginative engagement

Fairy tales are well suited for imaginative activity because they allow effortless movement between the realistic and other-worldly planes of existence, and their simplicity of style and language invites multiple readings. They are also suitable because the characters' binary-positions leave little doubt *whose side* the readers will want to be on. This, as well as the assured positive resolutions, acts as a safety net for children, leaving them imaginatively free to explore the tales' often troublesome themes. Bettelheim, claiming that "the manner in which the child can bring some order into his world view is by dividing everything into opposites" (74), confirms the tales' ability to provide organizing frames for children's chaotic emotional experience of the world. Development occurs, he says, when children project their affective conflicts onto the settings of stories. Built as they are upon oppositions, the stories enable children to understand reality in a way which is appropriate to their experience. Egan (118-20) speaks of this, too, emphasizing the pedagogical importance of stories in that it resolves binary opposites or incongruities offered by the text in the same mediating way that children do.

Ted Hughes speaks of the story as a "unit of imagination" which creates the

space needed to reconcile disparate contents (32). Take, for instance, he says, a story that engages both the earth and the underworld: "It contains not merely the space and in some form or other the contents of those two places; it reconciles their contradictions in a workable fashion and holds open the way between them. The child can re-enter the story at will, look around him, find all those things and consider them at his leisure" (32). Hughes says that the importance of stories is that, through living and growing in our heads, they help shape our consciousness.

In *LRRH*, the characters who embody the main binary opposition, *LRRH* and the wolf, create the tale's theme of an innocent girl's exposure to danger. Innocence and its dark opposite is a theme that has intrigued many writers. In the Grimms' tale, the wolf alerts an oblivious *LRRH* to bird song and beautiful flowers, which gives her the idea of picking a bouquet. Thus, at the same time that the wolf extends *LRRH*'s life, he *takes her into life* as it were. A reader's feelings about the wolf, then, are pulled in the contradictory direction of curiosity (as the wolf "points seductively to the freedom of the colorful and musical woods" [Zipes, *Trials* 17]) as well as apprehension (this is, after all, a wolf). Through this indirect depiction of the human need for safety and for risking extending oneself, and its symbolic representation of fear and pleasure, it would seem that the Grimms' tale is an imaginative means by which children can be helped to explore, and perhaps acknowledge or express, their fears and desires. Zipes, while acknowledging the above dichotomy, interprets this as Grimms' "justification of law and order and against individual autonomy and imagination" from which "*LRRH* might some day break out, become a Bohemian, and live in the woods with the wolf" (18, 20).

For Zipes the story is an ideological assertion, one that must be countered or broken by another, better story. The tensions it embodies cannot be seen, as the above models suggest, as a discussion among forces vying for power, nor as the imaginative means by which children can make sense of their experience. However, disagreeing with Zipes, Ostricker says that it is the seemingly problematic aspects of the story, that is, the mythic contents, which are vital in the creation of new stories:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (72)

Literary continuity, conversation, and change

Myth is not just the codified tales of the religious, literary, and educational authorities, but "the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation—everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable" (Ostricker 72). *Because* the tales are ideologically vibrant, as many of the classical myths no longer are, and as the Bible or other religious texts

are not permitted to be in an educational context, we should continue using them. What other sources do we have?

Mythic elements provide emotional and imaginative response, says Ostricker, in "satisfying the thirst" of the poet, or reader engaged with the text. "Thirst" is a strong noun/verb to describe such a relationship, but not, I think, overly strong, and it is certainly helpful in making some final distinctions between the two versions of *LRRH*. Although the Merseyside story uses familiar *LRRH* images, the struggle is lost; indeed, it hasn't even been engaged. The wolf as the embodiment of fear, for instance, has been eliminated by Nadia's conquest of it. It is, after all, irrational (her parents, for instance, laugh at her fear of the forest and the sound of the wolves), and it is this *irrational* fear, which, at the end of the tale, has been transformed into altruistic acts. Nadia is admonished by the grandmother to remember, "whenever you meet another child who is shy and timid, lend that child the cloak to wear ... and then, like you, they [sic] will grow brave." In order to be moved to appropriate action, all Nadia needs to do is remember her grandmother's words. However the route to "truth" is conceived, it is already in place: it only needs rational recollection at the right moment. Interestingly, this is similar to Grimms' 1857 story warning children to obey the authority of their parents and community who *know better* than they do. Surely this calls into question the liberating potential of this anti-sexist tale. Is it possible that in misguided attempts to protect children—the desire to protect children is, of course, not itself misguided—we are as ideologically prescriptive as the Grimms?

Broumas also conceives of *fear* differently from the Grimms' conception, but by imaginatively exploring, through images, the psychic conflicts the traditional tale embodies, she does more than replace a faulty conception. Fear, Broumas asserts, is not once-and-for-all conquerable, and while some fear is irrational, what is of greatest urgency is the ability to *recognize* that which is truly dangerous. The very institutions and figures which society perpetuates as *safe*, are, for woman, perhaps the most dangerous. The underlying message is about *awareness* and reliance on one's instincts, something Broumas' "flower-gathering" sisters do not possess. Broumas engages the original struggle, and the poem's images of danger and fear are infused with the power of the same myth, differently envisioned. Who, Broumas asks, controls "all the better to see with, to hear, and to eat;" that is, from whose/which authority does our societal vision emanate? To whom should we listen, she asks, and why, and how? She not only questions the organizing binaries of the original tale, but also our collective assumptions about *innocence* and protection; further, she shows through her images and form, *how* she questions. Reconsider, she says: can women *afford* to be innocent, to engage with their "natural urges" for beauty (as Zipes puts it), to further their "non-conformist" characteristics, or to risk extending themselves? Or, she asks, does any association with the supposedly protective patriarchy spell death? Although such a question in itself does not necessitate

cultural change, there is greater possibility, I think, not just for readers' emotional involvement (there are, after all, *real* wolves in her bushes), but also for their intellectual participation as well. Readers can make the connections between past and present, and gain awareness of their own feelings, fears and understanding. When such questions as Broumas poses are taken seriously, the literary conversation is furthered rather than halted. By satisfying her "thirst," Broumas makes "cultural change possible."

The Merseyside writers, on the other hand, through their rational prescriptions and attitude toward fear, and their lack of new, expansive images for readers to consider, halt the conversation. These writers have taken fear out of its existence and expression in myth, and put it in the rational world where fears can be named and dismissed. By doing this, they suggest children *absorb* truth rather than use symbolic means to *negotiate* it. They also show little confidence in writers, to whom we must leave the creation of literature, for good or for ill, trusting that the best of feminist thought will "come in as spores on the prevailing wind, looking for any likely place to land, any welcome" (Munro 22-23). Munro implies that writers are themselves aware of the positive societal gains, and incorporate those insights into their stories and poems.

Developing a feminist consciousness cannot be the single goal for literature studies. Substituting the biased images of the tales with anti-sexist literature does not satisfactorily answer the questions of what we can do with these motifs, how we can make them, individually or communally, *ours*. This is not to say that many versions of a story are not desirable, or that we should not use the Merseyside version, or that one imaginatively-told story will suffice; rather, it is to suggest that children are creative, thinking individuals who can benefit from engagement with the themes, images and motifs inherent in the tales. The educational task is to teach fairy tales not only or even primarily in terms of critical terminology or social issues, but also to enhance children's ability to carry on an imaginative dialogue with the tale. Grappling with images for their meanings (emotional, imaginative and intellectual) provides both a continuity with prior texts, and contributes to the ongoing, human conversation which literature embodies. Imagination is the appropriate place for *real* wolves to come out of the bushes.

NOTES

1 *Little Red Cap*, which for simplicity's sake I call *Little Red Riding Hood*, abbreviated as *LRRH*.

2 However, it can be argued that marriage as a convention acts as a potentially socializing function. Marriage may thus sanction similar conclusions for young women. Even if the tale does not parallel real life, it can be argued that marriage as a literary convention still contains a potentially damaging prescription of conformity and social acceptance.

3 Naturally, all literature is "revisionist" in that it "re-visions" both the conventions and themes of the established genres. Ostricker's particular use of the term focuses on stories that are female constructions of experience (rather than male fantasies of female experience) and which represent what women find divine and demonic in themselves (Ostricker 73).

WORKS CITED

Aitken, Johan. *Masques of morality*. Toronto: The Woman's Press, 1987.

Atwood, Margaret. *Cat's eye*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988.

Bettleheim, Bruno. *The uses of enchantment*. 1975. Toronto: Random House, 1989.

Broumas, Olga. *Beginning with O*. New York: Yale University Press, 1977.

Egan, Kieran. *Primary understanding: Education in early childhood*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Frye, Northrop. *The educated imagination*. 1963. Toronto: CBC, 1989.

—. *Words with power*. Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1990.

Grimm, J., and W. Grimm. *Household stories*. Trans. Lucy Crane. 1886. New York: Dover, 1963.

Hughes, Ted. "Myth and education." *Imagination and education*. Ed. K. Egan and D. Nadaner. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988.

MacDonald, Ruth. "The tale re-told: feminist fairy tales." *Children's literature association quarterly* 7.2 (1982): 18-20.

McGlathery, James M. *Fairy tale romance: The Grimms, Basile and Perrault*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Munro, Alice. *Friend of my youth*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990.

Nodelman, Perry. *The pleasures of children's literature*. New York: Longman, 1992.

Ostricker, Alicia. "The thieves of language: Women poets and revisionist mythmaking." *Signs* 8 (1982): 68-90.

Perrault, Gustave. *Perrault's fairy tales*. 1697. New York: Dover, 1969.

Walkerdine, V. "Some day my prince will come: young girls and the preparation for adolescent sexuality." *Gender and generation*. Ed. A. McRobbie and M. Nava. London: MacMillan, 1984.

Yolen, Jane. *Touch magic: fantasy, faerie and folklore in the literature of childhood*. New York: Philomel, 1981.

Zipes, Jack. "Who's afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and politicization through fairy tales." *The lion and the unicorn* 3 (1979/80): 4-56.

—. *Trials and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the tale in socio-cultural context*. South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey, 1983.

Cornelia Hoogland *is a poet and an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario, where she teaches literature and English. She studies and writes fairy tales.*