International Ecolinguistics Association

Article

Representations of nature and gender roles in Little Red Riding Hood: An ecolinguistic and ecofeminist discourse analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the representations of nature and gender in *Little Red Riding Hood* (Charles Perrault, 1697), *Little Red Cap* from *Household Stories from the Brothers Grimm* (1886), *Little Red Riding Hood* from *Ladybird Favourite Fairy Tales* (2011), *Little Red* (Bethan Woollvin, 2016), and *Little Red Hat* (Bridget Irving, 2021). Research is carried out using an ecolinguistic analysis to uncover stories about nature and human relationships with the natural world. Ecofeminist analysis examines stories about gender relations and nature, and multimodal analysis is used to analyse how images and text work together to create these narratives. Findings are judged against my own ecosophy in order to evaluate whether the stories present in each version of Little Red Riding Hood are positive, negative or ambivalent. The key findings are that the traditional narrative of Little Red Riding Hood perpetuates negative stories about gender relations and human relations with the natural world. Like the oral folk tales that fairy tales originated from, alternative versions have the power to offer different, more positive discourses which reflect the changing concerns of society without losing the essence of the fairy tale. However, they do not always represent gender and nature equally.

Keywords: discourse analysis; multimodal analysis; ecolinguistics; ecofeminism; nature; gender; Little Red Riding Hood

1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to examine the gender and ecological stories present within the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood. The research questions will consider the potential impact of these stories upon children, who are exposed to them at a highly formative stage of life

and will potentially carry these stories into adulthood. I will examine these stories through ecolinguistic and ecofeminist lenses in order to uncover the stories concerning representations of nature and gender within the narratives of three popular mainstream versions of Little Red Riding Hood from different periods of time: *Little Red Riding Hood* (Charles Perrault, 1697)[1], *Little Red Cap* from *Household Stories from the Brothers Grimm* (1886), and *Little Red Riding Hood* from *Ladybird Favourite Fairy Tales* (2011). I am using this range of texts in order to evaluate if and how the story has changed as the needs and values of society have changed. I will also look at two modern alternative versions: the feminist retelling *Little Red* (Bethan Woollvin, 2016), and the econarrative version *Little Red Hat* (Bridget Irving, 2021). I will evaluate these two alternative versions as I expect to find that little has changed in the representations of nature and gender in the traditional texts across the last three centuries, and so I will examine whether these modern alternative versions offer more positive representations of nature and gender. Of particular concern is the representation of the wolf. The wolf has appeared in narratives repeatedly throughout history and in cultural representations from around the world and has influenced how wolves are perceived. Negative perception does real damage to wolves as it promotes irrational fears and can spark unnecessary retaliation against them or misguided policy, which is neither in the best interests of the wolves nor of the people (Living with Wolves, 2023). In the wild, wolves are a keystone species. Their position at the top of the food chain causes a trophic cascade, contributing to the natural control and balance of ecosystems. Wolves alter the behaviour of their prey species, reducing overgrazing, which boosts biodiversity and transforms landscapes for the better. Carcasses of wolf kills also provide food for many other creatures, adding to the abundance of wildlife (Rewilding Britain, 2023). I will also consider a range of different versions to reflect the large range of literature based upon the story of Little Red Riding Hood that is available today. I will conclude whether these stories are positive, negative or ambivalent and what impact they may have on how readers and listeners of Little Red Riding Hood view gender relations and nature. In using both older and modern texts, I hope to show the enduring nature of narrative and how deeply embedded the stories of Little Red Riding Hood are in our minds. I am analysing alternative versions to explore their potential to reshape those narratives and the stories they create within our minds.

2. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse the representations of gender and nature in Little Red Riding Hood. I am looking at mainstream versions, which I expect to convey negative stories, and alternative versions, which I expect to convey more positive stories. However,

[1] When referring to Charles Perrault's version of Little Red Riding Hood, I am referencing an illustrated English version published in 1810 and available on the British Library website. When referring to the moral verse I am referencing Maria Tatar's 1999 English translation of Charles Perrault "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" in *Histories ou Contes du temps passé. Avec des Moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697).

I do not expect these stories to always represent both gender and nature equally.

My research questions are: What are the stories that Little Red Riding Hood tells children about gender relations and human relationships with the natural world, and are these stories harmful? Have the underlying stories changed over time as society has changed? What stories do alternative versions of Little Red Riding Hood tell, and do they offer stories that promote greater gender equality and positive, more equal relationships with the natural world? To answer these questions, I will use ecolinguistic analysis to look for ecological stories, such as the representation of the wolf and the forest. By focusing on linguistic strategies such as erasure, salience, identity, framing and metaphor, I will uncover the stories within Little Red Riding Hood and evaluate whether they are positive, negative or ambivalent, and what impact these stories may have upon the intended audience. I will also use ecofeminist analysis and discourse analysis to examine stories about gender relations and nature. As much of the narrative is told through illustration in children's books, I will also use multimodal analysis.

3. Ecosophy

In order to answer these questions, I must first state my own ecosophy. The purpose of revealing or shedding light on any story is to assess whether that story is positive, negative or ambivalent. Does it work in the current climate? Is it perpetuating negative stories or offering something more positive or more ethical? I can only assess whether a story is working if I analyse it within my own ethical framework. Every ecolinguist shares in common a consideration of the interrelationships of humans with other organisms and the physical environment we share. However, we all have our own values and priorities, which we will judge any story against (Stibbe, 2015).

My own ecosophy can be summed up in one word: *equality*. I do not think there are many who would disagree that the world is a very unequal place. However, inequality goes beyond the differences between just humans. Equality is something which must exist, not only between all humans but also between humans and the natural world. In a capitalist patriarchal society, huge inequality exists. A more equal world shifts the focus from individual gain to everyone having their needs met so that connections with each other and the natural world are valued and nurtured. An equal world allows everything that inhabits it to use what it needs without exploiting or disrupting the natural balance.

This level of equality benefits not only environmental well-being but also human well-being, as nature keeps us emotionally, psychologically, and physically healthy, and feeling a strong connection with nature creates a close relationship and emotional attachment to our natural surroundings (Lombardo et al., 2021). In a capitalist society, there is a focus on "having more". This needs to shift to "being more" so that people can live in a way that increases their own connections with nature, which in turn leads to greater respect for the natural world, allowing everything that inhabits it to use what it needs without exploiting it or disrupting the natural balance, ensuring a continued and equal existence for all life, now

and for future generations.

The human race continues to exploit the natural world for its own gain, and as long as nature is being exploited, then people will be as well, as humans are not separate from the natural world but a part of it. A large wealth divide means many are living in poverty, and when it is a daily struggle to meet one's own basic needs for survival, then connections with the natural world are less of a priority. Women are more likely to live in poverty than men. This is true across industrialised countries (Casper et al., 1994) as well as developing countries. In early research on poverty, it was assumed that household incomes were distributed equally among its members, and so all members of a household were equally poor. However, empirical evidence showed income deficits affected some members of the household more than others, most often along lines of gender and age, showing that women experience more poverty than men and that while gender inequalities are not confined to the poor, they tend to be exacerbated by poverty (Kabeer, 2015). It is with this in mind that my ecosophy draws on ecofeminism, as it recognises the need for a new, more equal society, away from the current capitalist, patriarchal systems (Mies & Shiva, 2014). My ecosophy also draws on social ecology. As ecology deals with the balance of nature and the interdependence of living and non-living things, ecology must include the role of humans in the natural world. Social ecology recognises that humanity has split itself from the natural world, and as long as humans assume mastery over the natural world, then we will continue to harm it (Bookchin, 1982). This ecosophy also draws on deep ecology in that it recognises all organisms as knots in the field of intrinsic relations. Without equality, intrinsic relationships between all living things cannot be maintained, and so a deep-seated respect for all ways and forms of life is necessary. To limit that level of respect to just a human level is detrimental to humans themselves (Naess, 1995). If humans continue to exploit the natural world, then the most vulnerable in society will continue to suffer from the effects of this exploitation, such as climate change, deforestation and polluted water. As shown in studies mentioned above, women and children suffer disproportionately. Therefore, humans need a close partnership with all forms of life in order to be able to acknowledge our dependence upon the natural world (Naess, 1995). My ecosophy also draws on sustainable development in that it calls for a continued and equal existence for future generations.

4. Contextualisation

Fairy tales are part of children's lives. The national curriculum in England states that children must become "very familiar with key stories, fairy stories and traditional tales, retelling them and considering their particular characteristics" (Department for Education, 2014). So, as every child is legally obliged to participate in formal education, every child in England should become familiar with fairy tales. But whether they know them through school activities, books, movies, television, advertising, computer games or any other of the numerous outlets that fairy tales influence, there is no doubt that fairy tale narratives

are a familiar part of life. A visit to the children's section of any bookshop or library will show that these fairy stories come in many different versions, by different authors, with different illustrations. They are available for children as simple board books for babies, colourful picture books, first reading books, stories for newly confident readers and even as young adult fiction. Since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937, Disney has produced numerous movie adaptations of traditional fairy tales and movies with fairy tale plots. The Grimm brothers' final standard edition of their collection of fairy tales (1857) is the most widely translated work in the world after the Bible and the Qur'an, rendered into more than 160 languages and still counting (Warner, 2014).

Fairy tales have been in existence as oral folk tales for thousands of years, so long that it is impossible to trace the historical origins and evolution of fairy tales to a particular time and place (Zipes, 2012). Fairy tales emanated from a wide variety of tales, fables, myths and legends from across the world. Also known as the wonder tale or magic tale, the fairy tale was first a simple, imaginative oral tale which contained magical and miraculous elements related to the belief systems and values of pagan people. However, the fairy tale underwent numerous transformations before the invention of printing led to the production of fixed texts, and it was during the seventeenth century that the fairy tales we know today began to be written down (Zipes, 2002). Scholars distinguish between folk and fairy tales, as the former are unsigned and undated, originating from tales told and passed on through generations of ordinary people. The latter "literary" fairy tales are signed and dated (Warner, 2014). It is these literary fairy tales which are the focus of this essay. Throughout the nineteenth century, fairy tales were not considered "proper" reading material for children by well-intentioned parents, clergymen, and educators because of their lack of Christian teaching and mixed messages. However, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, fairy tale writers began to incorporate Christian and patriarchal messages into the narrative in order to satisfy the wants of middle- and upper-class adults (Zipes, 1997). And so, fairy tales became stories "suitable" for the child audience.

It is worth noting that, as an oral form, folk tales were not children's stories; they belonged to the whole community. This communal ownership allowed the stories to change and evolve to the needs of the community who shared them. They were a vent to the frustrations of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes. But with the expansion of publishing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the folk tale was appropriated by the aristocratic and bourgeois writers and so inevitably began to reflect their needs and wishes (Zipes, 2002). They excluded the common people, but used their material, tone and style to address the concerns of the upper classes (Zipes, 2007). In what we now know as the fairy tale, folk tales were appropriated in order to create new tales which reflected upon the rituals, customs, habits and ethics of the upper classes, and to simultaneously serve as a civilising agent, reinforcing a hierarchically arranged society (Zipes, 1997).

The fairy tale expanded upon the stock motifs, figures and plots of the folk tale, and reflected a change in the values and ideology in the transitional period between feudalism

and early capitalism. Stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel* and *Cinderella,* some of the most popular and well-known fairy tales today, are extremely biased against women, who must either have their identity defined by males or be put in their place (Zipes, 2002). The fairy tales that we know today very much have their roots in patriarchal capitalist ideology. However, this "fixing" in print of earlier oral narratives has not stopped the fairy tales' evolution. It continues to be told and retold through ever-evolving technological innovations, such as film, photography, television, gaming and radio and continues to grow through the human disposition to re-create relevant narratives (Zipes, 2012). Through technology, we are retaining stories in our modern society, where oral storytelling is no longer a primary way of transmitting stories. As a result, we still have access to older versions of fairy tales, such as the Grimm brothers. However, discussions about childhood and the framing of childhood are influenced by time and culture (Immel, 2009), so as popular as these classic texts are, there is always a need for stories to be rewritten in a way that reflects the changing needs of society.

This essay focuses on the story of Little Red Riding Hood. I chose this particular fairy tale because it contains very clear messages about gender roles and sexuality. Namely that women are passive beings with very little agency who can be either ruined or saved by men. The only power they have to influence the outcome is to be obedient, to not "stray from the path", as Little Red Riding Hood does, for which she pays a heavy price. There are, however, other interpretations of the story, where Little Red Riding Hood is a temptress, or a young girl making the passage into womanhood, or the personification of good, triumphing over evil (Orenstein, 2002). All of these interpretations carry messages about gender relations and human relationships with nature. If the wolf represents evil, and the forest a place of hidden dangers, then what are the implications of this representation for wolves and the natural world?

The tale has evolved from a morality tale for adults and, over the centuries, has undergone changes to become what we know today as a children's tale. However, it is still rife with symbolism and metaphor, leftover from its past lives, which most of us overlook (Orenstein, 2002). It is far from a simple story, but it is one that children become familiar with at a highly formative stage of their lives and continue to be exposed to throughout childhood and adulthood. I have chosen Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* as the starting point for my analysis, as it is his moral rendering of the story, written for an upper-class French audience at the end of the seventeenth century, that gave rise to further versions within the civilising process of the Western world (Zipes, 1993). Jack Zipes believes that Perrault transformed hopeful oral tales about the initiation of a young girl into a tragic tale of violence in which the young girl is blamed for her own violation (Zipes, 1993). It is this negative story about gender roles and relations which underpins the popular version which exists in people's minds and therefore becomes a story to live by. The moral of the story can be understood on different levels by both adults and children. The fact that gender equality does not exist satisfactorily in Western society has allowed this issue to be continually readdressed in different versions of *Little Red Riding Hood.* Zipes maintains

that "literature and art cannot be fully understood without considering the socio-political-cultural context in which they are produced" (Zipes, 2002). This is evidenced in the civilising elements of the versions I will be examining. Older versions were preoccupied with civilising by keeping women in their place and reiterating the importance of girls maintaining their innocence and purity, whereas I expect to find alternative modern versions reflecting shifts in social and political attitudes towards gender identity and rape (Zipes, 1993). It is in these versions that I expect to see fairy tales doing what fairy tales are supposed to do: provide hope that social and political conditions can be changed (Zipes, 2007). Likewise, in econarrative versions, I expect to find a reflection of the increasing awareness of environmental issues such as the destruction of habitat and species, and climate change due to human actions. I will consider attitudes towards gender relations and human relations with the natural world that were dominant at the time of writing, how these messages translate into today's world and how alternative versions reflect the changing values of society. Do they perpetuate the values of stories whose messages are embedded in a patriarchal capitalist society, or do they offer an alternative story?

The aim of this essay is to uncover the stories that these fairy tales, which are embedded in us from a highly formative age, and continue to influence our lives into adulthood, tell us about our relationships with each other and with the natural world. I will focus my analysis on the representation of the wolf, as he represents both the natural world and the human world within the story.

5. Narrative and narrative environments

In their 2020 collection of essays, James and Morel state that stories about the environment significantly influence experiences of that environment and vice versa (James & Morel, 2020). In econarratives, experiences of the natural world influence how people express themselves when writing about the natural world, and reading about the natural world influences how people experience it. Little Red Riding Hood is a story which takes place outside, in the forest, and details a little girl's interactions with the natural world and its inhabitants, and it is in this space, and with these interactions, that danger lies. Language is a powerful force which shapes the opinions of people and society and, ultimately, their behaviour (Schultz, 2001). If stories about the environment significantly influence our experience of the environment, and language influences our opinions and behaviour, then it is entirely plausible that Little Red Riding Hood will influence how readers, namely children, will view and interact with the natural world.

The study of narratives is important in the emerging world of environmental humanities. They show that environmental challenges are deeply rooted in culture (James & Morel, 2020). Narratologists have likened literary narratives to "instruction manuals", containing a set of instructions for mental composition, and they invite readers to follow those instructions. This metaphor stresses the active role of the reader; they perform narratives in their mind and use their own experience to bridge gaps in texts and invest

their own emotions into the characters' psychological lives. They reconstruct in their minds not just what is happening but also the environment in which they are happening; they inhabit a storyworld in which things matter, and they experience emotional responses to (Weik von Mossner, 2020). Children have limited real-world experience, so as well as using their own experience to bridge the gaps in a text, they will use a text to bridge the gaps in their own experience. As Stibbe states, the familiar everyday world we inhabit is also a storyworld, influenced by the countless narratives we have already been exposed to within our culture (Stibbe, in press). How we treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and worldviews, which are, in turn, shaped by language (Stibbe, 2021). Fairy tales are one of the narratives that children are exposed to from a very early age, when they are beginning to make sense of the world around them. The idea that early childhood is a formative phase of people's lives, influencing children's long-term prospects, is an ancient and enduring one which can be traced at least as far back as Plato (428–348 BCE) (Woodhead, 2006). We use the countless narratives we are exposed to in our everyday lives to build an idea of how the world is or should be, and the storyworlds which we begin to build as children, if we do not question them, will influence our understanding of the world into adulthood.

To understand how narratives work in building storyworlds in our minds, we can turn to embodied simulation theory, which is built upon the scientific field of mirror neuron research. At a basic level, this means that the brain-body system models objects, agents, and events. For example, when we see another person act, we map those actions onto our premotor cortex, the part of the brain which is active when we engage in activity ourselves. A very similar thing happens when we engage with literary texts. When we read, different parts of the premotor cortex are activated according to the action we are reading about, so the mirror neuron system is active when imagining actions in the same way it is active when seeing actions. The mirror neuron system also activates imagined emotions in the same areas of the cerebral cortex as experiencing these emotions ourselves. This is what we call empathy. It has been argued that it is possible to empathise more strongly with a fictional character than a real person because we get a greater degree of access to a fictional character than is possible with another person in real life (Weik von Mossner, 2020). As readers or listeners of Little Red Riding Hood, we can inhabit the little girl's mind and body to an extent where we can imagine her journey through the woods and her innocence of hidden dangers. At the same time, we will gain an insight into the wolf's mind and wicked intentions. This could potentially invoke sympathy towards Little Red Riding Hood while simultaneously distrusting and disliking the wolf even more. This empathic engagement is important not only to how we engage with characters but also for our experience of the narrative environments, which stand in complex relations to them. Feeling along with a character is crucial to how we experience and relate to a narrative environment (Weik von Mossner, 2020). When engaging with Little Red Riding Hood, readers may feel both her pleasure in the woods — it enticed her off the path with its beauty and opportunity for having a good time —, and her betrayal by the wood — it conceals danger in the form of

the wolf. This means readers may experience the forest as a place which cannot be trusted. Projecting human thoughts and emotions onto the personified wolf gives readers the opportunity to understand him in a way that they would not otherwise. For example, watching a pack of wolves hunt an animal in a nature documentary is unlikely to arouse the same negative feelings towards the wolf as humans do not have the same level of empathy for natural wolf behaviours.

Narrative environments are crucial for understanding characters, but also, characters are crucial for understanding narrative environments (Weik von Mossner, 2020). With this in mind, I argue that the wolf and the forest cannot be separated. In Little Red Riding Hood, the forest will always be a place of danger because danger (the wolf) lurks within it. Little Red Riding Hood cannot enjoy the forest because when she does, she falls victim to the wolf.

6. Multimodal ecolinguistic analysis

6.1. The wolf and the woods: Depictions of nature in Little Red Riding Hood

The Big Bad Wolf is a key character in Little Red Riding Hood's story. He is the cunning, malevolent trickster who lures the poor unsuspecting little girl into his trap and into his stomach. The wolf lives in the forest, a place that is inviting yet full of hidden, unnamed dangers for a young girl like Little Red Riding Hood. Without him, and without the forest, there would be no story. However, this section will examine the representation of the wolf and the forest, and the impact that negative representation has upon not only the wolf and the natural world, but also upon humans and their relationship with nature.

Little Red Riding Hood promotes certain ideologies which are destructive to both the wolf and the natural world as a whole. Ideologies allow relations of power to be established, maintained, enacted, and performed (Fairclough, 2013). The ideologies that stand out in Little Red Riding Hood are those around gender roles, which I will discuss later. However, Little Red Riding Hood also establishes ideologies around human relationships with, and dominance of, the natural world. Discussing the ideologies of stories is important in relation to my ecosophy, which is summed up by the word *equality*, because ideologies are cognitive, existing in the minds of groups of people (Stibbe, 2021). If ideologies, like those of human power over nature or male power over female, exist in the minds of a society unquestioned, then equality cannot exist because unequal power relations are allowed to remain. What is important in discourse analysis is not just the messages in specific texts but patterns of linguistic, and in the case of fairy tales, visual features which run across multiple texts and convey the same ideology over and over again (Stibbe, 2021). Fairy stories often repeat the same ideologies. For example, the negative ideology that the natural world is a dangerous place runs across many fairy tales. Hansel and Gretel encounter a cannibalistic witch when they are cast out into the forest, the gingerbread man is eaten by a sly fox when he runs off into the outside world, Sleeping Beauty is cut off from the

outside world for one hundred years by impenetrable thorns, and like Little Red Riding Hood, the three little pigs are terrorised by a wolf who wants to destroy the comfort and security of their homes.

According to Todorov's narrative theory of equilibrium, narratives contain five elements: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, resolution, and a return to equilibrium (Todorov, 1971). The narrative structure of each version of Little Red Riding Hood in this analysis begins with harmony, moves through this process, and ends with a new equilibrium. However, the way this plays out in the narrative differs across the texts. For each version, except Irving's, harmony is a scene of domesticity. Little Red Riding Hood is depicted in the home and is described in the Grimm brothers' version as "a sweet little maid, much beloved by everybody" (Grimm Brothers, 1886). In Perrault's version, she is "diverting and good" (Little Red Riding Hood, 1810). In the Ladybird version, her mother has "a special errand for her" (Archer, 2011) which she is only too happy to carry out. The language used is positive, and the association of the little girl and the home creates an image of beauty and happiness in the domestic setting. The appraisal pattern here is that inside the home is a good and safe place.

In contrast to the home, descriptions of the forest vary more across the texts. In the Ladybird version, it is described with the adjectives "dark" and "lonely"; however, in the Grimm brothers' version, the wolf encourages Little Red Cap to "look at the pretty flowers [and listen] to the song of the birds" (Grimm Brothers, 1886). Despite the beauty of the forest being voiced here, the evaluation is that the forest is dangerous, a disruption to the equilibrium, because the wolf is using the beauty of the forest to trick Little Red Cap. Perrault's version is similar in that, rather than describe the forest itself, he refers to the "fierce wolf of the wood" (Little Red Riding Hood, 1810). The fact that the woods house the wolf makes the forest a place of danger. Woollvin does not describe the wood at all, so in this respect, she is erasing it. This erasure is enhanced by the highly simplistic, unrealistic black and grey illustrations of the forest throughout the book, where the only colour is red, mainly reserved for Little Red Riding Hood herself, suggesting that only she is worthy of our attention (Figure 1)[2]. The appraising items across the texts that describe the forest as lonely, dangerous, or just unimportant, come together to build an appraisal pattern which evaluates nature as negative in its relationship with humans. This is in stark contrast to the evaluation of the domestic setting as one of beauty, safety and importance. The implication is that the natural world is of less importance than the man-made world. This ideology runs counter to my ecosophy, as an imbalance between the importance of the home and the natural world does not create equality between the two. This is detrimental to environmental well-being, as it encourages a lack of consideration of nature when making our own homes and communities. Furthermore, a lack of emotional and physical connections with the natural world is also detrimental to human well-being.

[2] Copyright of all images is with the original producers. Images are used here under fair dealing exception to copyright on the basis of academic criticism, see https://www.gov.uk/guidance/exceptions-to-copyright#fair-dealing

Figure 1. Image source: Illustration from Bethan Woollvin, *Little Red* (London: Two Hoots, 2016)

Harmony, however, is depicted in Irving's version very differently. The cover image is of Little Red Hat reading a book in the woods (Figure 2). This shows the wood as somewhere that a child can enjoy spending time in. She is not using the wood simply as a means of getting from A to B, as Little Red Riding Hood traditionally does, but as a place to spend time for no other reason than to simply enjoy being there. Within the home, Irving uses images of the wind blowing through open windows, using the weather to connect the inside and outside worlds, showing them both to be of equal importance (Figure 3). This is a much more positive evaluation, which is beneficial to both environmental and human well-being.

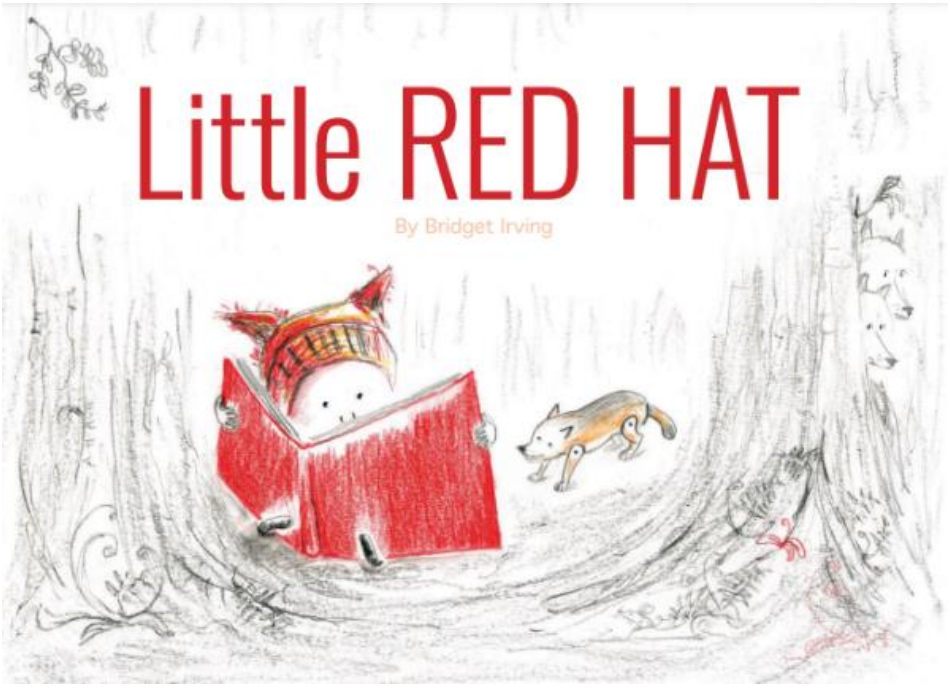

Figure 2. Image source: Illustration from Bridget Irving, "Little Red Hat", *Language and Ecology* (2021)

Figure 3. Image source: Illustration from Bridget Irving, "Little Red Hat", *Language and Ecology* (2021)

6.2. The wolf and the women: Gender representations in Little Red Riding Hood

The Big Bad Wolf is a well-known archetype, not only present in Little Red Riding Hood but also in other popular tales and fables such as The Three Little Pigs and The Boy Who Cried Wolf. Wolves have long had a negative image which can be seen through common idioms. These conventional metaphors, not only about wolves but other animals too, are overwhelmingly negative towards animals and have a strong influence over our everyday thinking (Stibbe, 2012). Idioms such as "keep the wolf from the door", "hold a wolf by the ears" or "throw someone to the wolves" all have connotations of the wolf as a symbol of a devouring and destructive force (Siefring, 2004). They largely date back to the sixteenth century; however, similar references can also be found in the Bible. This shows that the negative image of the wolf is deeply rooted in our culture, and stories such as Little Red Riding Hood continue to perpetuate these stereotypes and misconceptions.

The Big Bad Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood is obviously gendered. The use of he/him pronouns across all the texts in relation to the wolf personalises him as a social actor and represents him as a human being (van Leeuwen, 2008). He is a metaphor for the human predatory male. This section will examine how the wolf came to represent this type of human behaviour and the effect that this representation has on our perceptions of real wolves. I will also discuss the stories within Little Red Riding Hood concerning gender roles and relations and how those stories ultimately undermine both equality between humans and equality between humans and the natural world.

Little Red Riding Hood most likely emerged from a storytelling culture concerned with the theme of predatory animals roaming the countryside in search of food. Such stories served as a means of fear management and to ready the group for future encounters. Early

versions of Little Red Riding Hood featured wolves on the prowl looking for a meal. However, when Charles Perrault wrote down his version, it was with a very different intention: to teach behavioural directives to children in aristocratic nurseries (Tatar, 2017). His tale even included a moral verse, warning that if nice, well-bred young girls talk to strangers, they should not be surprised if they get "eaten" by "wolves". It is a story of rape which employs victim blaming as a behavioural teaching tool for young girls.

This framing of the wolf as a villain is a story which has been handed down through generations, passing on the archetype of "the big bad wolf", turning the wolf's intelligence and hunting talents into undesirable human characteristics of deception, trickery and an entirely human version of predatory behaviour. An image which is highly damaging to wolves, shaping people's understanding of them on an image based on fiction rather than fact. As the wolf has appeared countless times in cultural representations throughout history, for many people, their understanding of wolves is a mixture of fact, fiction and half-truths (Living with Wolves, 2023).

In ecolinguistic terms, framing is using a package of knowledge about one area of life to structure how another area of life is conceptualised (Stibbe, 2021). The wolf in Little Red Riding Hood is framed as a lone predatory man, not only anthropomorphising the wolf in an extremely negative way but framing him in a way that is contrary to natural wolf pack behaviour. Wolves are social animals, and a lone wolf in the wild is one who is looking for a mate and a new pack, not a social outcast (Maestas, n.d.). The effect of this framing is that the wolf becomes a metaphor for evil, erasing the real wolf.

In Charles Perrault's version of Little Red Riding Hood, he describes the wolf with adjectives that could be used for humans or wolves: "fierce", "ravenous" and "strong", alongside adjectives more commonly attributed only to humans: "cruel" and "artful". The effect of using these adjectives together frames the wolf as a man and attributes extremely negative human traits to the wolf. In contrast to this, the Grimm brothers do not describe the wolf's character with a range of adjectives as Perrault does. They merely remark that Little Red Cap "did not know what a bad sort of animal he was" (Grimm Brothers, 1886). This implies prior knowledge of the reader as to the bad character of wolves. The reader already knows that the wolf means danger. This is possible because of the storyworld that has long been established about the nature of wolves through negative discourses. In this version, it is the language that describes the wolf's thoughts and behaviours that frame him as something more human than wolf. An insight into his thought process: "That tender young thing would be a delicious morsel, and would taste better than the old one, I must manage somehow to get both of them" (Grimm Brothers, 1886) anthropomorphises him and frames him as a man with evil intentions towards the women, preying on them because they are weaker than he is, resulting in the wolf becoming a metaphor for the male human sexual predator. It is possible to do this with the wolf character because of the stories we think we know about wolves. It is difficult to think of another animal that could play the role as effectively in our minds as the wolf.

In order to understand why the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood has become this sexual

predator and metaphor for evil, it is important to understand the ideologies of gender roles and relations in Little Red Riding Hood. Literary fairy tales have always had a didactic function. They have played and continue to play a significant role in the socialisation process (Zipes, 2002). However, feminists have argued that fairy tales are the first formative scenarios of the patriarchy, filling little girls' dreams with fantasies of becoming glamorous victims (Orenstein, 2002). There are two types of men in the story of Little Red Riding Hood: the fatherly protector, represented by the woodcutter or huntsman, and the dangerous predator, represented by the wolf. Little Red Riding Hood is the helpless victim to one and the passive damsel in distress to the other.

In Perrault's version, however, Little Red Riding Hood is not rescued. His tale is one that warns girls not about the dangers of predators, but about the dangers of their own desires and sexuality. Nature is a metaphor for Little Red Riding Hood's own natural desires, and when she fails to control her natural desires by climbing into bed with the wolf, she is raped (Zipes, 1983). This message is very explicit as the moral at the end of the story spells it out; "[…] young girls, / Pretty, well-bred, and genteel, / Are wrong to listen to just anyone, / And it is not at all strange, / If a wolf ends up eating them" (Tatar, 2017). This message puts the blame for Little Red Riding Hood's rape firmly on her own shoulders. The association between the little girl and nature is also a negative one, according to my ecosophy, as the side of her that is represented by nature is the part of her that Perrault believes needs to be controlled and tamed, reinforcing what Karen J. Warren famously referred to as the "logic of domination" underlying the "dual dominations of women and nature" (Höing, 2023).

Bruno Bettelheim wrote extensively on the role of fairy tales in helping children to understand their inner selves and the mysteries of the outside world. He was highly critical of Perrault's version of Little Red Riding Hood. He believed that it lost much of its appeal because it is so obvious that the wolf is a metaphor, leaving little to the imagination of the reader (Bettelheim, 1976). His view of Little Red Riding Hood's character was equally critical. He believed that in making everything as explicit as possible, nothing is left to the imagination, and as she makes no move to fight back or escape the wolf, then she is either stupid, or nothing but a fallen woman. This summary of Little Red Riding Hood denies women of all sexual agency. If she gives herself willingly, then she deserves her fate. If she is too stupid to know what the wolf wants from her, then she deserves her fate. The wolf, or the man he represents, on the other hand, is allowed to seduce or to take by force without fear of repercussion. In some ways, Perrault's wolf character is less harmful to the real wolf as it is easier to separate the fictional wolf-man from the actual wolf. However, it is an extremely harmful discourse according to my ecosophy as it portrays an ideology where inequality is assumed as normal and natural. Using a human female and a non-human male removes the blame for immoral behaviour from men and places it upon the natural world, in the image of the wolf, and on women, in the image of Little Red Riding Hood.

By the time the Grimm brothers wrote *Little Red Cap*, times had changed, and Little Red Riding Hood's punishment by death for her wayward behaviour was no longer deemed

necessary. Order is restored by an authority figure, the woodcutter, and it is the wolf, the outsider, who receives the punishment (Zipes, 1993). However, the portrayal of gender roles is no more positive. In the opening lines, Little Red Cap is issued with a list of behavioural instructions by her mother: "walk properly and nicely […] don't run […] don't forget to say 'Good morning' instead of staring about you" (Grimm Brothers, 1886). The obedience required of her immediately indicates that this is a story about how little girls should behave.

Beyond the requirement for female obedience, the role of the women in the story fades into the background. Little Red Cap serves as little more than an instruction on how to behave and what could befall you if you fail, and the mother and grandmother are completely powerless to protect her. The male figure, on the other hand, is split into two forms, both of equal power and importance. The wolf represents the destroyer, the dangerous seducer and potential downfall of the innocent little girl. The huntsman, on the other hand, is the rescuer, protector and father figure. According to Bettelheim's analysis, in Freudian terms, Little Red Cap is trying to understand the contradictory nature of man by experiencing all aspects of his personality: the selfish, violent and potentially destructive tendencies of the id, and the unselfish, protective properties of the ego (Bettelheim, 1976). This is problematic because it excuses predatory behaviour in men by making it the woman's responsibility to be able to identify and avoid it. It is also problematic from an ecological perspective as the traits of the wolf are tied in with the representation of nature as something untrustworthy and full of hidden dangers that the honourable human male can, and should, control.

Since the publication of Perrault's and Grimm's versions of Little Red Riding Hood, many writers have interpreted the basic plot in unique ways and either consciously or subconsciously entered into a discourse about the civilising process, which involves the rape or attempted rape of a young girl (Zipes, 2015). Examples include Roald Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf* (1982), Tony Ross's *Little Red Hood: A Classic Story Bent Out of Shape* (1981), and Fransman and Plackett's *Gender Swapped Fairy Tales* (2020), which all attempt to address gender inequality, but whether intentionally or not, still involve the attempted rape of a young girl (or young boy in the case of *Gender Swapped Fairy Tales*).

Bethan Woollvin seeks to address gender inequality in her modern retelling, *Little Red*; however, she still follows the traditional plot in which a wolf attempts to violate a young girl. The heroine of her story is not fooled by the wolf's tricks and defeats him without any need for male intervention. She is smart and, unlike her predecessors, she spots the "badly disguised wolf waiting in Grandma's bed" (Woollvin, 2016). She swiftly dispatches the wolf herself without fear or aid from anyone. In one respect, this is a positive discourse as she shows equal power to resolve the situation as the hunter/woodcutter figure in traditional versions. However, Grandma is eaten by the wolf and never mentioned again. This represents a lack of equality between the women in the story as it is very individualistic and favours youth over age. While I agree with the message that women should have the agency to look after themselves, I disagree with the framing of the wolf as a sexual predator, as it

creates false stories about wolves and the natural world.

6.3. The wolf and the woodcutter: Power and violence in Little Red Riding Hood

With the exception of Irving's and Perrault's versions, harmony is restored at the end of the narrative with the despatching of the wolf, albeit in slightly different ways in each version. The Grimm brothers have the huntsman and Little Red Riding Hood fill the wolf's body with stones so that when he tries to run away, he falls down dead. Woollvin's Little Red Riding Hood kills, then skins the wolf and wears his skin as a wolf costume. Both are excessively violent actions against the wolf. The wolf in the Ladybird version is scared off by Little Red Riding Hood's father waving an axe at him. All of these endings contain the ideology that humans have power over nature, and that violence towards nature is justified and acceptable — a harmful discourse against equality with the natural world. Conversely, the wolf in Perrault's version escapes punishment because it is unimportant. It is Little Red Riding Hood's actions we are meant to be judging. However, the anthropomorphisation of the wolf into a dangerous and predatory man heightens irrational fears about wolves. It is true that wolves can be dangerous to humans; however, they are generally afraid of people and avoid them. To put this into context, in America, there have only been two reported incidents of a wild wolf killing a human in the last 100 years, whereas domestic dogs kill approximately 30 people every year (Living with Wolves, 2023), yet we do not have the same fear-provoking stories around domestic dogs as we do for wolves.

The power balance represented in Little Red Riding Hood is not only unequal between man and nature as represented by the wolf, but also between man and nature as represented by the female figure. Perrault's wolf is depicted looming over Little Red Riding Hood with his teeth bared, showing his power over her (Figure 4). However, as the wolf is obviously a metaphor for a predatory man, it is an image of male power over female, and also, as Little Red Riding Hood is connected with nature in her inability to control her natural desires, it is also an image of man's power over nature.

Figure 4. Image source: Illustration from Artist unnamed, *Little Red Riding Hood* (1810) from the British Library, https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/1810-edition-of-little-red-riding-hood

The Grimm brothers and Perrault both actively promote stories of inequality in the didactic function of their writing. However, in Woollvin's version, she addresses the power imbalance between men and women when Little Red Riding Hood defeats the wolf herself through her own intelligence and bravery. This is a positive story, according to my ecosophy, as it empowers women. However, the violence against the wolf is extreme. She is not content with merely killing the wolf. She skins him and makes a suit out of his skin. The image of her wearing the wolf's skin is the first image of her smiling in the book, suggesting that this violence towards, and power over, nature brings happiness (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Image source: Illustration from Bethan Woollvin, *Little Red* (London: Two Hoots, 2016)

Furthermore, the wolf's intelligence is undermined in Woollvin's version, creating a further imbalance of power. The wolf's plan is communicated not through text but by a double-page picture which illustrates the wolf's thoughts; he clearly intends to make a meal out of Little Red and Grandma (Figure 6). The lack of text to convey the wolf's thought processes and the image of the women on the dinner plate inside the wolf's head show the wolf as being single-minded and only focused on food. In contrast to the cunning wolf of more traditional versions, he is portrayed as less intelligent. However, this does not help the wolf. He is moved from intelligent and cunning but evil to less smart, still wicked and driven only by a desire to eat. This erases wolves multi-dimensional lives of family and pack bonds, individual roles within the pack, caring for their young, pack hunting and coordination, and social interactions (Wolf Haven International, n.d.).

When writing her econarrative version of Little Red Riding Hood, *Little Red Hat,* Bridget Irving was motivated by the discovery of this award-winning feminist version of Little Red Riding Hood by Bethan Woollvin. She believes that no one in the making or publishing of the book was really able to see the wolf, the mocking of real violence towards

animals, or the destruction of nature, which are all erased. Her intention was to show that humans are the risk to wolves and not the other way around (Irving, 2021).

Figure 6. Image source: Illustration from Bethan Woollvin, *Little Red* (London: Two Hoots, 2016)

Irving questions this ideology of power in *Little Red Hat* by showing the power that humans have over nature as a destructive force. In contrast to other versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the book begins with the forest portrayed as a place of safety. The wolves and many other animals are portrayed as social actors who go about their everyday lives in the wood. The forest does, however, become a place of danger when the bulldozers arrive. It is humans who are a threat to the forest and its inhabitants, not the other way around. Here there is an intertextual reference to the traditional story of Little Red Riding Hood, with the words, "what big teeth they have" and "what big eyes they have" accompanied by illustrations where the bulldozers resemble the fierce image of the big bad wolf much more that the wolves in the story do (Figure 7).

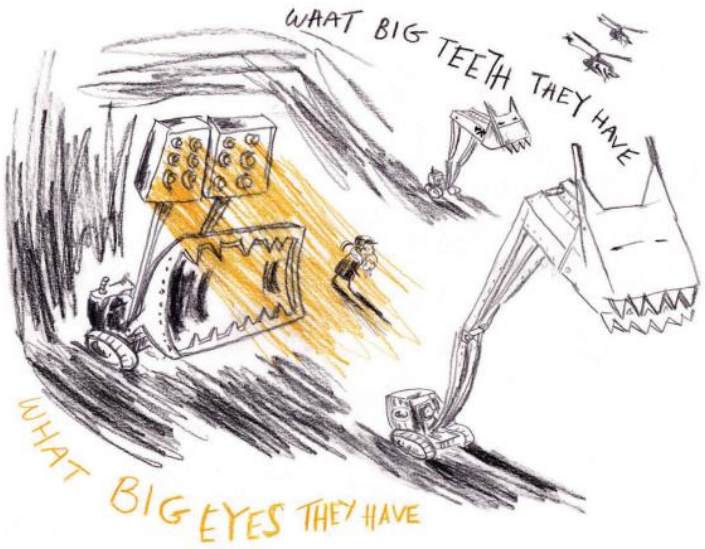

Figure 7. Image source: Illustration from Bridget Irving, "Little Red Hat", *Language and Ecology* (2021)

This reframes the human-made bulldozers as the villain rather than the wolf. Irving consciously sets out to combat erasure by giving the wolf a family and perspective, devoting pages entirely to the wolves. She has been mindful of showing a closeness between the wolves and a similarity to humans (Irving, 2021). This differs from all of the other versions I have analysed because Irving picks traits that wolves and humans genuinely share: family bonds, playfulness, curiosity and fear, rather than attributing the wolf with distorted versions of perceived wolf characteristics to liken him to the worst of humanity.

The final words of the story are a call to action, "don't let this be the end", followed by links to education and conservation-based websites about wolves. Fairclough stated that ideologies are primarily located in the unsaid (Fairclough, 2013). Irving draws these ideologies out into the open, questions them and offers a more positive alternative; an ideology where humans have a respectful relationship with the natural world.

6.4. Visual analysis

Any text whose meanings are realised through more than one semiotic code is multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). As all of the versions of Little Red Riding Hood I am analysing use illustration alongside the text to create narrative, particularly in more modern versions, I will also analyse the images and how they work alongside the text. As there are many illustrations across the five texts I am analysing, I will focus this discussion on the Ladybird version of Little Red Riding Hood, and I will use a selection from Bridgit Irving's *Little Red Hat* to show how the embedded negative discourses of Little Red Riding Hood can be addressed while telling a story which is still recognisably based on the narrative of the traditional tale.

Within visual analysis, Kress and van Leeuwen describe the term salience as the degree to which an element draws attention to itself due to its size, place in the foreground, colour and other features. Patterns of visual features come together in pictures to give prominence to particular entities. In the same way, patterns of linguistic features come together to form salience patterns which represent particular participants prominently in the text (Stibbe, 2021). Here I will discuss how the illustrations and the text work together to give salience to an anthropomorphised fictional version of the wolf, and in the process, erase the real wolf.

Figure 8, from the Ladybird version, is the first time the wolf is introduced into the narrative. The image of the wolf fills the whole page. He is given salience because he is large and features in the centre of the page, drawing the viewer's gaze. He has a bright yellow eye, sharp teeth, and his facial expression is a wicked-looking smile. He is the perfect image of the Big Bad Wolf the reader has come to expect from a Little Red Riding Hood story. The contrast between the bright yellow eye and the grey of his fur draws your attention directly to his face. The wolf's stance is poised, ready for something. His facial expression is mean and unnatural. The natural yellow of a wolf's eye is exaggerated to make the wolf appear more sinister. The effect of his facial expression, and the fact that the wolf

dominates the page, is that he looks malevolent and cunning, reinforcing the wolf as a metaphor for evil. However, it is this distorted, personified image of the evil wolf and not the actual wolf that is given salience here, and so, the actual real-life wolf is erased.

Figure 8. Image source: Illustration from Diana Mayo, "Little Red Riding Hood", in *Ladybird Favourite Fairy Tales* (Ladybird, 2011)

Furthermore, the image of the wolf is on the page preceding the text, on the left-hand side of the double-page spread. This is significant as, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, elements placed on the left are presented as given. The reader already knows that the wolf is cunning and malevolent and does not need to be told. The elements placed on the right are new (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), in this case, the specifics of how this version of the story will be told. The picture also makes use of framing devices. The presence of framing devices, realised by elements which create dividing lines, in this case, the trees, connect elements of the image, signifying that, in some sense, they belong together (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The wolf is framed by the trees overlapping his body, not only in this picture but in every picture where the wolf appears in the woods. This shows that the wolf and the woods belong together, reinforcing the idea that the woods conceal danger and is, therefore, a place that cannot be trusted. Conversely, the only time that a human character is framed by a tree is Little Red Riding Hood's father, when he runs out of the woods to save her (Figure 9). He has an axe in his hands and has only been connected with the woods in the sense that he has been using it to exploit its resources.

Moreover, with the exception of Irving, each version erases the real forest by depicting it in oversimplified, low-realism images and failing to depict any lifeforms of note in the forest apart from humans and the lone wolf, suggesting that it is unimportant and not worthy of consideration beyond the part it plays in concealing the wolf and luring Little Red Riding Hood off the path. Irving addresses this erasure of the forest in her econarrative by depicting a range of both animal and plant life (Figure 10). Like in a real forest, you have to take your time and look carefully to see everything in the picture. The more time you

take to look, the more you can see and appreciate. The fine lines of the pencil drawings have enabled her to include a lot of detail; the forest is not depicted as a backdrop to the action but contains the action. There is a very small deer in the centre of the page, who looks directly at the viewer. It is a demand image, demanding that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relationship with the deer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). However, it takes some time to spot the deer, and what is being asked of the viewer by the deer here is to be seen. It also suggests that, in order to have a relationship with the natural world, you need to take your time to exist within it, not merely observe from a distance.

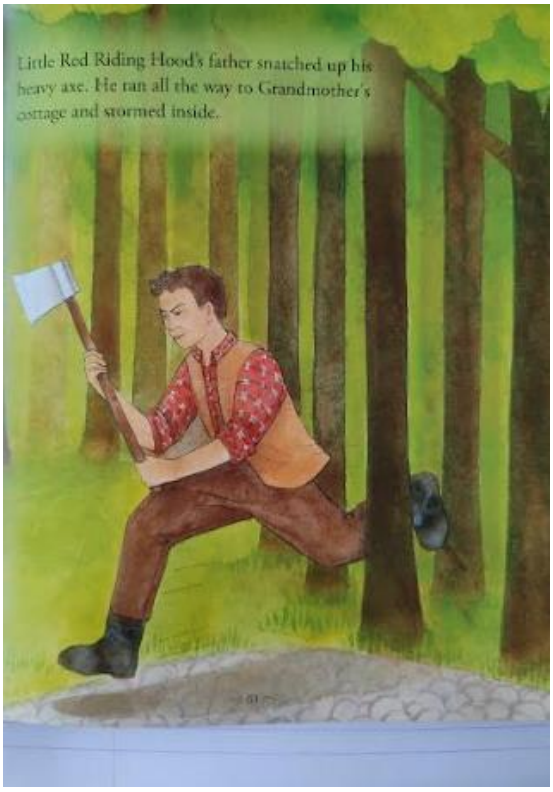

Figure 9. Image source: Illustration from Diana Mayo, "Little Red Riding Hood", in *Ladybird Favourite Fairy Tales* (Ladybird, 2011)

Figure 10. Image source: Illustration from Bridget Irving, "Little Red Hat", *Language and Ecology* (2021)

The framing of the wolf is also very different in Irving's *Little Red Hat*. There are very few words, and the story is mainly told through illustration. This avoids anthropomorphising the wolves by giving them human thought processes. It is also notable that it is not a single wolf in the story but a number of wolves, recognising wolves as social animals with close family units. The story mainly depicts a mother and a cub, which is a visual parallel to the image of Little Red Hat and her mother. Little Red Hat's mother looks after her and comforts her after she has been upset by the book she is reading, and the wolf mother looks after and protects her cub when they are threatened by human activity. The wolves are given visual salience by repeatedly featuring throughout the book, being the main characters depicted and often being at the centre of pictures or the only characters in the picture. The actions of the wolves also give them salience by showing them to be actors of material processes; for example, the wolf cub plays with a butterfly and with their parent. They are also shown as beings with mental lives (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In one image, the adult wolf watches the cub watching a frog (Figure 11). She seems to be taking pleasure in observing her cub's interest in their surroundings. Giving salience to a version of the wolf which is much closer to real wolves makes this a positive discourse, according to my ecosophy, because it shows a connection between humans and the natural world which should be valued and nurtured.

Figure 11. Image source: Illustration from Bridget Irving, "Little Red Hat", *Language and Ecology* (2021)

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to answer questions about what the representations of gender and nature are in traditional and non-traditional versions of Little Red Riding Hood and whether those stories, taught to children at a highly formative stage of life, convey positive, negative or ambivalent stories to live by.

To answer my research questions, I primarily focussed on the representations of the wolf, as if we fail to see the real wolf underneath the "big bad wolf" trope, then we are

violating the wolf's nature and the nature of the natural world that wolves inhabit, which inevitably leads to suffering and ecological damage (Stibbe, 2012).

It was also important to address questions of gender representations and power, as, in an unequal society, women suffer disproportionately. The fairy tales we know today have come from a tradition where children's fiction was supposed to prepare children to enter a society where strict codes governed male and female conduct and was meant to influence their outlooks in ways which would be conducive to that society.[3] Modern society has moved on; however, the narrative of fairy tales are embedded in society, and they often perpetuate ideologies of male dominance over both women and nature.

The traditional versions of Little Red Riding Hood by Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers, on which our modern understanding of the tale has been built, establish strict behavioural directives for women and establish male power over women and nature as a given. The modern Ladybird version of the traditional tale does little to address these ideologies. The violence is toned down, the wolf no longer has to die, and neither do Grandma or the little girl, but the messages of who has power over whom remain unchanged.

Bethan Woollvin has attempted to address this power imbalance in her feminist retelling, *Little Red.* By removing the male saviour from the story, she empowers Little Red Riding Hood, who is smart and resourceful and is able to look after herself. However, she is the only female character who is empowered. Grandma is powerless against the wolf and, furthermore, appears to be entirely forgotten after she is eaten. The forest is largely erased, and the wolf suffers extreme violence at the hands of the little girl. Power over nature is merely passed from one human character to another, perpetuating ideologies of human power over nature and human welfare taking priority over animal welfare.

Conversely, Bridgit Irving, in *Little Red Hat*, actively sought to address the erasure of the natural world and to bring the real wolf back into the narrative of Little Red Riding Hood. The real wolf is given salience, and human power over nature is shown as a negative, destructive force, questioning and addressing where the real threat is coming from and who it is that is under threat.

According to the education framework used in schools, children should read widely to "develop their knowledge of themselves and the world they live in" (Department for Education, 2014). According to my ecosophy, the underlying stories in traditional versions of Little Red Riding Hood form negative discourses, which potentially influence children's knowledge of themselves and the world they live in. However, Fairy tales grew from oral folk tales, which have always changed to reflect the needs of society, and it is this adaptability which has made them enduring. Both Woolvin and Irving have shown that these stories can adapt to reflect the needs of society without losing the essence of the traditional narrative. In a society which is becoming more and more aware of the

[3] Judy Simons, "Gender Roles in Children's Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 146).

environmental destruction caused by human activity and the ecological disaster we are facing, I am hopeful that the changing nature of fairy tales will continue to offer alternative, more positive stories to live by.

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