

On Damsels and Heroines: A Comparative Study of the Hero's Journey in Little Red Riding Hood and Freeway

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Abstract

Little Red Riding Hood is a world famous story. Throughout the time the story of Little Red Riding Hood has been subjected to many film, animation and musical adaptations. Most modern day retellings are based on the written version popularized by the Grimm Brothers in 19th century Germany. One such adaptation is the movie Freeway (1996) directed by Matthew Bright and starring Reese Witherspoon as Vanessa Lutz. Vanessa and Little Riding Hood both venture on a journey; one through the woods and the other through a freeway. Their goal is to reach their grandmothers' house. We can say both of them embark on a "Hero's Journey". In 1949, American mythologist Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. From this work, Campbell developed the concept of "Hero's Journey". Thus, the purpose of this paper is to study and compare the concept of Hero's Journey in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the movie Freeway. The paper attempts to discover if they are successful in their journey or not, and if not what are the reasons for their failure.

Keywords: Hero's Journey, Little Red Riding Hood, Joseph Campbell, Grimm Brothers

1. Introduction

Little Red Riding Hood is a world famous story. The tale "identified in the Aarne-Thompson tale-type index as AT 333" (Tatar, 1999, p. 9), centers on a young girl wearing a red cape who is told by her mother to walk through the woods and take a basket of food to her grandmother. On the way, she meets a wolf and they have a conversation during which she tells the wolf where her grandmother lives. They take different paths from there, and the wolf reaches granny's cottage first. What happens next depends on which version you hear: if Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother are devoured, you are probably hearing Charles Perrault's literary version in 17th century France. If a passing huntsman cuts her from the wolf's belly, it is Grimm Brothers' tale in 19th century Germany. If she tricks the wolf into letting her go outside, and she escapes, you are hearing the oral tale that existed long before the first known written version in 17th century.

As for the origins of the tale it "may have roots in Nordic tales that are over 900 years old" (Joy, 2003, p. 3). Terri Windling (2004) states that "[t]he oral version, called *The Grandmother's Story*, has its tap roots in ancient Asian tales, but was largely shaped by the rural traditions of France from the Middle Ages onward" (para 1). Zipes (1983) also confirms that "the oral tale...was probably disseminated in the French countryside during the late Middle Ages" (p. 78). Verdier (1997) states that the oral tales were "[c]ollected from the storytellers' own lips at the end of the nineteenth century in the Loire basin, the Nivernais, the Forez, the Velay, or more recently in the northern Alps" (p. 102). In these stories she escapes with no help from any male or older female figure, but by using her own cunning (Zipes, 1983, pp. 79-80).

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The first literary version of the story was Charles Perrault's *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* in 1697 (Beckett, 2008, p. 1). Zipes (2000) believes that Perrault "probably knew an oral tale that emanated from sewing societies in the south of France and north of Italy" (p. 301). Alister and Hauke (1998) also believe that the tale "is almost certainly based on a mediaeval peasant story common in south-west France in the seventeenth century, which would have been familiar to Perrault" (p. 218). In the 18th century Perrault's version of the tale was translated into many different European languages, and by conflation of different literary and oral versions, "what had formerly been an oral tale of initiation became a type of warning fairy tale" (p. 302). His tale concluded with a moral in verse making it clear that young girls should not listen to strangers and if they do, they might be eaten by a wolf. He made this story an ultimate cautionary tale. The moral of Perrault's tale is that "well-mannered, two-legged wolves are the most dangerous of all" (Beckett, 2008, p. 21).

Although Perrault has the distinction of popularizing the first written version of the story, most people are now more familiar with the adaptation created by the Grimms. In fact "[m]any of Perrault's stories were rewritten by the Brothers Grimm" (Zipes, 2000, p. 302). Beckett (2008) states that, "[w]hen Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published *Rotkappchen* (Little Red Cap) in 1812, they eliminated Perrault's sexual innuendo and added a happy ending" (p. 2). The famous warning of Red's mother about not straying from the path is first seen in the Grimm version, and most importantly, the Grimms added the rescue of both grandmother and girl from the belly of the wolf by a passing huntsman.

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien (1983) suggests that fairy tales are less about fairies than about the adventures of humans in the land of Faërie, or as he also names it, the Perilous Realm, which is by nature indescribable (p.113). The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* is not just a cautionary or warning tale. Rather, it is a tale of initiation. As Verdier (1997) explains "[t]he trip to the grandmother's little house ... presents all the characteristics of an initiatory visit" (p. 117). The story chronicles a young girl's adventure and her trip into adulthood, the woods functioning as the hazy middle ground between being an innocent child and a knowing adult. It is the story of a little girl who is travelling the road of autonomy and who leaves to discover the adult world. In the beginning she is still a child. She represents the perfect innocent childhood. It is only after her walk through the forest that she leaves childhood and is ready to become an adult.

Throughout the time the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* has been subjected to many film, animation and musical adaptations. Most modern day retellings are based on the written version popularized by the Grimm Brothers in 19th century Germany. One such adaptation is the movie *Freeway* (1996) directed by Matthew Bright and starring Reese Witherspoon as Vanessa Lutz. Like other modern-day retellings *Freeway* relishes in subverting fairy tale tropes and calling out their inherent sexism and didacticism. This film radically revises the figure of Little Red Riding Hood. Vanessa and Little Red Riding Hood both venture on a journey; One through the woods and the other through a freeway. Their goal is to reach their grandmother's house. We can say both of them embark on a "Hero's Journey". The Hero's Journey is the tale of the individual path each of us takes in life sometimes with our choice, sometimes not.

In 1949, American mythologist Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. From this work, Campbell developed the concept of "Hero's Journey". The Journey is constructed of eighteen stages, although not every story has every stage. Christopher Volger (2007) in his book *The Writer's Journey* which was inspired by Campbell's work, writes that "all storytelling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the Hero's Journey: the 'monomyth' whose principles he [Campbell] lays out in the book". He continues to observe that "Campbell's thinking runs parallel to that of the Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung, who wrote about the **archetypes**: constantly repeating characters or energies which occur in the dreams of all people and the myths of all cultures" (p. 4). As Campbell (2004) demonstrated, the hero myths of many cultures follow the same basic pattern of *separation, initiation* and *return* (p. 28). These three steps represent the process of self-discovery which is at the center of the Hero's Journey. In essence the Hero's Journey is a story of transformation, which typically includes the symbolic death and rebirth of the hero. The story begins with normal people leading their normal lives, but something happens that disrupts the status quo. They set off to find a solution, and they face many tests and challenges along their path. At the end of the tale, they return home with some newfound wisdom or power. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to study and compare and contrast the concept of Hero's Journey in the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* and the movie *Freeway*.

The paper attempts to discover if they are successful in their journey or not, and if not what are the reasons for their failure. There are some stages that do not occur in every Hero's Journey. As the purpose of this paper is to explore the heroine's quest, not their return, the paper only focuses on Departure (Separation), and Initiation phases. In the Departure phase, the stages, the Call to Adventure, Crossing the First Threshold, and Belly of the Whale, and in the Initiation phase, the Road of Trials, and the Ultimate Boon are going to be studied for both the tale and the movie.

2. Departure

2.1. The Call to Adventure

According to Campbell (2004) this is the stage in which the heroes begin their journey. They are in a familiar setting when suddenly a crisis intervenes, which Campbell named the *call to adventure* (p. 45). It is when destiny calls the hero to leave "the ordinary, mundane world" to enter "a Special World, new and alien" (Volger, 2007, p. 10). He/she is "drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell, 2004, p. 46). In all cases, the heroes are presented with the unknown and often they are faced with "a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state", the area to which they must travel in order to face the challenge (Campbell, 2004, p. 53). The call to adventure sets the story moving by disrupting the comfort of the hero's ordinary world. In this stage "[t]he hero is presented with a problem, challenge, or adventure to undertake. Once presented with a **Call to Adventure**, she can no longer remain indefinitely in the comfort of the Ordinary World" (Volger, 2007, p. 10). In other words, the call to adventure is the point in a hero's life when he/she is first given notice that everything is going to change, whether he/she knows it or not.

Little Red Riding Hood's call to adventure happens when her mother asks her to take a piece of cake and a bottle of wine to her sick grandmother (we assume for the first time). Before that she was living happily in her comfortable rural surrounding, being a child and protected by her mother. When her mother asks her to deliver the food, for the first time she is trusting her daughter to do a task meant for adults. The beginning of Red's adventure marks her ending of childhood and entering the adulthood. The mother also plays the role of the mentor, warning her not to stray from the path and to watch her manners in front of her grandmother. In other words, she advises her to act like an adult.

On the other hand, Vanessa is an illiterate high school student with a meth-head stepfather and a similarly addict mother who does sex work to support her own meth habit. Her call to adventure is made when both her parents are arrested. Vanessa wants to go live with a grandmother she has never met, who lives north of Vanessa in Stockton. Grandma, who does not know that Vanessa is coming to see her, represents an ideal for the troubled girl, who has a long juvenile arrest record and faces a bleak present, never mind her bleak future. Vanessa's social worker does not see any other option but foster care, so, Vanessa chains the woman to a bed, gathers a few items in a basket and escapes to begin her journey towards her grandmother's house.

2.2. Crossing the First Threshold

According to Campbell (2004) a threshold must be crossed in order for the hero to enter onto the path that destiny has determined: "With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the "threshold..." at the entrance of the zone of magnified power". Beyond the threshold what awaits is "darkness, the unknown, and danger" (p. 71). The Crossing of the First Threshold indicates that the hero has stepped into or surrendered to the call of adventure and has begun his journey. This suggests that the hero is on the threshold of many choices and experiences. In this stage "the hero finally commits to the adventure and fully enters the Special World of the story for the first time He agrees to face the consequences of dealing with the problem or challenge posed in the Call to Adventure. This is the moment when the story takes off and the adventure really gets going" (Volger, 2007, p. 12).

Red's grandmother lives in the wood, half a league from the village, so to reach her house Little Red has to go through the wood. Her first step into the wood marks her crossing the threshold. The edge of the wood is the threshold which separates Red's mundane world from the special world which she enters. By crossing the first threshold and stepping into the forest her adventure truly begins.

Similarly, to reach her grandmother's house Vanessa must make her way along the freeway. Entering the freeway marks her crossing the threshold, where she must face danger and challenges. The freeway for Vanessa in her journey has the same significance as the wood for Little Red Riding Hood.

2.3. Belly of the Whale

The belly of the whale is an allegory for the unfamiliar dimension the hero enters after crossing the first threshold. The belly of the whale represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. It is another threshold the hero must encounter on her or his quest for greatness: "The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died" (Campbell, 2004, p. 83). There he awaits rebirth or release from this purgatorial state. His release here symbolizes a relinquishing of attachment to the world left behind. In the unknown, dark and mysterious world that he has entered, he must call upon his will and courage to continue. Campbell (2004) states that "the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation" (p. 84). By making the decision to follow the path, the hero shows his willingness to undergo a metaphoric death of an old way of thinking or behaving.

After meeting the wolf for the first time on the path, Little Red Riding Hood decides to pick some flowers for her grandmother. So she runs from the path into the wood to look for flowers. While searching for flowers, she goes deeper and deeper into the wood, thus entering the heart of the forest. The forest represents the belly of the whale. Forests represent unknown, although very serious, danger. Windling (2005) states that, "[a] journey through the dark of the woods is a motif common to fairy tales: young heroes set off through the perilous forest in order to reach their destiny, or they find themselves abandoned there, cast off and left for dead. The road is long and treacherous, prowled by wolves, ghosts, and wizards" (para 1). Many popular fairy tale heroes and heroines (Red Cap, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Goldilocks) must get lost in the woods just to come back as more responsible persons. The transformation role of the forest is obvious. The forest functions as the symbolic site of transformation where the characters and their conflicting opposites meet. The forest is where the journey's path is; the path that must be taken to fulfill the quest. There is only one way to grandmother's house: through the forest. There are many distractions along the way and sometimes this allows our shadow (the wolf) to get the better of us. According to Windling (2005) "[t]he safe return from the jungle, the forest, the spirit world, or the land of death often marks, in traditional tales, a time of new beginnings—new marriage, new life, and a new season of plenty and prosperity enriched not only by earthly treasures but those carried back from the Netherworld" (para 8).

Vanessa's forest is the freeway. The freeway (belly of the whale) is the dark and dangerous world where the freeway killer roams, in which she must survive. As Haase (2008) explains, in the movie the "[f]airy tales' threatening forests become a metaphor for the unpleasant underside of low-class American culture, in particular the justice system as experienced by the damaged and underprivileged children who are forced to navigate it" (p. 376). The freeway is Vanessa's way to transformation. Nothing would be the same for her from the moment she drives her car through it to begin her journey.

3. Initiation

3.1. Road of Trials

After entering the belly of the whale "the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials". Campbell (2004) tells us that it is his "favorite phase of the myth-adventure" (p. 89). He states that:

The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiator conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land (p. 100).

At this stage the hero has "a direct confrontation with his greatest fear. He faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a hostile force" (Vogler, 2007, p. 14). The hero must undergo these tasks or ordeals to begin the transformation. Often the person fails one or more of these tests. Each task prepares the hero to pursue the ultimate mythological goal. These trials show the hero as moving from childish behaviors to self-reliance. This is his personal evolution from personal limitations to unrealized potential.

Little Red Riding Hood meets two challenges on the way to her grandmother's house. The first one is when she meets the wolf for the first time. The wolf asks her a few questions and she naively answers all of them thus leading the wolf to her grandmother's house while she strays from the path and forgets all about her grandmother and the task left to her. The second challenge happens when she meets the wolf at her grandmother's house. She fails to recognize the wolf in disguise and gets eaten by the wolf.

Vanessa's first challenge happens when her car breaks down. Bob Wolverton (the wolf) who is driving stops to help. When he cannot fix the car, he offers her a ride, which she accepts. Bob works as a therapist. He gets Vanessa to speak at length with him about her troubled background, including her stepfather's sexual abuse. But when he asks Vanessa to detail her feelings using explicit language and humiliating details she figures out that he is a creep. Bob holds a razor to her throat and tells her to take off her pants. A struggle ensues in which she finally gets the upper hand and holds a loaded gun to his head and instructs him to pull over into a middle-of-nowhere exit. There, she shoots him in the neck and leaves him for dead, thus finishing her first challenge successfully. Her second trial happens when she is making her way to a truck stop diner, covered in blood. She's arrested as she leaves. We see her entering the juvenile detention facility. In her preliminary hearing Vanessa sees that Bob is not dead, but is left with permanent disfiguring injuries. He poses as an innocent victim of a robbery and the authorities believe his word, not hers. Thus, Vanessa is sent to jail but manages to escape. By escaping the prison she completes this part of her quest successfully as well. After escaping the jail she heads for the trailer park where her grandmother lives. What she does not know is that Bob has gotten there ahead of her, killed her grandmother and disguised himself as her. This is her third and last trial, when she must face the monster and defeat her to finish her quest. She drives to her grandmother's house. Vanessa finds Bob in bed wearing her grandmother's nightgown and nightcap with the covers pulled up to his nose. Vanessa recognizes Bob in disguise and sees her grandmother's body on the floor. A struggle ensues, culminating in Vanessa strangling Bob. Help, in the form of police protection, does not arrive until after Bob is dead and Vanessa is covered in his blood.

3.2. The Ultimate Boon

The Ultimate Boon is what the hero set out to find. It is the achievement of the search or the quest's goal, and "the adventure is here accomplished [which] signifies that the hero is a superior man" (Campbell, 2004, p.159). All the previous steps serve to prepare and purify the person for this step. It is the goal reached, the treasure taken, the princess married, or whatever the boon is. Campbell (2004) tells us the boon is acquiring knowledge of immortality and appreciation for the thing called life that is inherent in everyone from infancy (pp. 160-161). In practice, it is achieving wholeness through reaching the goal the hero has been trying to achieve. The ultimate boon is the reason why the hero faced all the obstacles along the path. These obstacles prepared and purified him for the culmination of the journey. The achievement of the boon is the realization of the hero; it is when he acquires a deeper and more accurate view of life and himself.

Little Red meets two challenges which she fails to overcome. Little Red Riding Hood would have achieved the ultimate boon if she had defeated the wolf by her own cunning. But it is the huntsman who kills the wolf and rescues the grandmother and Red. She has no voice or power in the tale, and she fails her quest and does not achieve the ultimate boon.

Vanessa in her quest meets three challenges and overcomes them all with flying colors. Vanessa does not receive the kind help of a huntsman nor does she simply flee her grandmother's house. Vanessa clearly dominates within this story as she initially shoots Bob, manages to escape prison, and in their final encounter strangles him until he is undeniably dead. Basically, she destroys Bob because she knows that if she does not, he will gobble her up and then go on to murder and rape other female victims. Therefore, she completes her journey successfully and achieves the ultimate boon.

4. Conclusion

In Grimm's fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood is inexperienced, naive and suggestible. The wolf easily convinces her to linger and give him time to reach grandmother's house. She is unaware of the animal's devious nature and "plays right into the wolf's hands and is too stupid to trick him" (Zipes, 1983, p. 80).

This is a story in which Red Riding Hood does not play an active role in relation to the events she is submitted to. Grimms' Little Red Riding Hood is a woefully ignorant and immature little girl whose victimization is her just reward.

According to many critics, Grimm Brothers' version of *Little Red Riding Hood* was rewritten based on the values of patriarchal system and its decree. It stands up for the feminine obedience and sets off an idea as regards to the assumed characteristics of women. Little Red's mother who warns her not to stray from the path "represents the patriarchal law of the straight and narrow" (Beckett, 2008, p. 15). In this version of the story, the girl needs a man, namely a fatherly hunter, to rescue her from the big bad wolf. The Hunter is chosen specially to represent the man's power and also he can be seen as a man who covers the woman with his dominance. Zipes (1983) observes that in the tale "the signs center around the male power and rationalize male domination as a norm" (p. 83). Brown Miller (1975) in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* tells us that "[t]here are frightening male figures abroad in the woods—we call them wolves, among other names—and females are helpless before them. Better stick to the path, better not be adventurous. If you are lucky, a good friendly male may be able to save you from certain disaster" (p. 310). In the Grimms' tale, Little Red is diminished and clutches at a man's label as if begging to be protected in an embrace from a father figure. As a father has been missing through the entire story the implication is that the Red Riding Hood has been seeking a father figure and that is why the Wolf is almost successful in his attack. Little Red Riding Hood ends the tale with no voice, diminished in size by the looming force of the hunter, and divested of her will. Zipes (1983) calls the literary version "the product of gifted male European writers, who projected their needs and values onto the actions of fictitious characters within a socially conventionalized genre" (pp. 81-82). He continues to observe that the character of Little Red is "projected by the authors Perrault and Grimm and generally by male illustrators as an object without a will of her own" (p. 107).

On the other hand, in the oral tale Little Red Riding Hood is the complete master of her destiny. She manages to escape from the animal's clutches. She is a cunning and mature little girl capable of turning the tables on the wolf. Tatar (1999) states that "[o]nce a folktale full of earthy humor and high melodrama, it was transformed into a heavy-handed narrative with a pedagogical agenda designed by adults" (p. 6). Joy (2003) also asserts that the oral tales, which were circulated among French peasants long before Perrault or the Grimms published their literary version "did not have the wolf eating the little girl. Instead, she is smart enough to devise a way to escape" (p. 6). In fact "it is the little girl's own resourcefulness and shrewd use of her body that resolves the story". What Perrault and Grimm Brothers did was to change "[t]he forthright and shrewd peasant girl who can look after herself", into a "gullible young girl who must be admonished to conform to a strict and protective code of conduct" (Alister & Hauke, 1998, p. 218). Verdier (1997) also suggests that once a story of feminine initiation the story that we are familiar today has been "masculinized since the seventeenth century" and "the great powers and mysteries of the female body, celebrated in the old peasant societies, now come to be denied in the society that has taken their place" (p. 118). We can conclude that it is patriarchy which causes Little Red Riding Hood's failure in her journey. While her previous avatars who existed in the oral tales did not fail their quests, the character portrayed by Grimm Brothers fails miserably and is only rescued by help of a male hunter.

However, since the beginning of the 20th century different subversive strategies, which echo these postmodernist characteristics, have been used to distort traditional, strongly patriarchal fairy tales. Many "modern adaptations of the tale usually have Red Riding Hood fighting back against the image of helplessness and sexual naiveté, thus coming closer to the original heroine" (Alister & Hauke, 1998, p. 219). Zipes (2006) also agrees that "the post-1945 tales of "Little Red Riding Hood" transfigure and criticize the traditional transgression perpetuated against the girl as a helpless, naive, and sweet thing" (p. 188). These new versions "generally aim to turn Little Red Riding Hood into a clever, resourceful heroine" (Tatar, 1999, p. 7).

In this regard, Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1996) can be seen as a critique of *Little Red Riding Hood* "in which the nature of sexuality and gender stereotypes have been questioned and debated in most innovative ways" (Zipes, 2000, p. 302). In this *Little Red Riding Hood*, the wolf makes one huge mistake: he picks a girl who certainly does not need a woodcutter to do her butt-kicking for her. Haase (2008) observes that:

The child's gun-wielding confrontation of the monster inverts the tale's outcome, asserting both her own necessarily self-reliant power and her pragmatic familiarity with violence, and successfully marking him with the outward and visible signs of his own inner grotesqueness. She defeats him completely in the film's somewhat melodramatic denouement, where the devouring monster in Grandma's bed is dispatched without recourse to the forces of the law poised to intervene. (p. 376)

Vanessa manages to accomplish her hero's journey, something which Little Red Riding Hood fails to do thanks to how she was divested of her will by the Grimm Brothers. Unlike Vanessa, Little Red Riding Hood is not a changed person at the end of the tale. Vanessa is similar to the original oral tale heroines. She is resourceful and has a strong will. What Grimms snatched from Little Red Riding Hood, Vanessa brings it forth with all her power and by killing the wolf achieves the ultimate boon and completes her journey successfully, a journey which she was destined from start to win.

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