

Bridging Work

Literature

Read 'The Werewolf'

Read the short story 'The Werewolf' by Angela Carter. Do you recognise the fairy tale on which this is based?

1

Answer the Questions

These questions are concerned with Narratology - how writers build and structure their stories.

2

Read the Article

Read and annotate the article: 'Ambiguity and Ambivalence'. What does it add to your reading of the short story?

3

Summarise your ideas

Put your final ideas into a paragraph - what is *your* response to the tale and its characters?

4

Hand it in!

Have your ideas ready to hand in during your first lesson. This will form the focus for our first piece of assessment in Literature.

5

The Werewolf

It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.

Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a crude icon of the virgin behind a guttering candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool, a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives.

To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards, those bleak and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased in the naïf style and there are no flowers to put in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small, votive offerings, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering from the margins of the forest to snatch away. At midnight, especially on Walpurgisnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.

Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch—some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death.

Winter and cold weather.

Go and visit grandmother, who has been sick. Take her the oatcakes I've baked for her on the hearthstone and a little pot of butter.

The good child does as her mother bids—five miles' trudge through the forest; do not leave the path because of the bears, the wild boar, the starving wolves. Here, take your father's hunting knife; you know how to use it.

The child had a scabby coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold, she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard.

When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on the beast.

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw.

The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it. The child wiped the blade of her knife clean on her apron, wrapped up the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor that might have been upon it were obscured.

She found her grandmother was so sick she had taken to her bed and fallen into a fretful sleep, moaning and shaking so that the child guessed she had a fever. She felt the forehead, it burned. She shook out the cloth from her basket, to use it to make the old woman a cold compress, and the wolf's paw fell to the floor.

But it was no longer a wolf's paw. It was a hand, chopped off at the wrist, a hand toughened with work and freckled with old age. There was a wedding ring on the third finger and a wart on the index finger. By the wart, she knew it for her grandmother's hand.

She pulled back the sheet but the old woman woke up, at that, and began to struggle, squawking and shrieking like a thing possessed. But the child was strong, and armed with her father's hunting knife; she managed to hold her grandmother down long enough to see the cause of her fever. There was a bloody stump where her right hand should have been, festering already.

The child crossed herself and cried out so loud the neighbours heard her and came rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead.

Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

Narratological Questions on *'The Werewolf'*

Story Types

1. From what genres or stories does this story borrow?
2. What has Carter changed?
3. Why do you think these have been changed - are they improvements or not? Give reasons for your opinion.

Beginning: Setting the Scene

1. How is the setting described?
2. What superstitions are held by 'these upland woodsmen'?
3. How are we encouraged to feel about them?
4. How does this scene prime us to feel about the tale that follows?

Narrators and Narrative Gaps

1. What kind of narrator do we have? List all the terms that might apply, with evidence for your choices.

2. Are there any narrative gaps that we'd like filled?

Characters and Characterisation

1. Describe the girl in the tale – look at her personality and her actions
2. How is the wolf described? Look at words like 'gulp' and 'sob'
3. What effect is created by these two character descriptions? How do they make the reader react to the characters concerned?
4. Are they flat or round characters? Why do you think so?
5. Who are the victims in this tale? Find evidence and evaluate possible alternatives

Ending

1. Is it a happy ending? Why do you think so?
2. Is it possible to deconstruct the subtext of the story and get a different one? For example – what evidence is there that the girl is actually a 'wolf in sheep's clothing'?

Angela Carter's 'The Werewolf' - Ambiguity and Ambivalence

Tony Cavender argues that Carter's remoulding of the classic fairy tale challenges and mocks the reader.

'Little Red Riding Hood' is a fairy-tale that has been re-told many times, sometimes straightforwardly, sometimes subversively. Its fascination can, perhaps, be put down to the fact that the story is a way of addressing some important issues to do with sex, sexuality and the balance of power between men and women. Writers have used the story in many different ways, adding and subtracting elements to convey different perspectives on it. Charles Perrault points out the meaning of his tale in a 'moral':

Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers; for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf.

Little Red Riding Hood is an innocent who fails to heed warnings. The wolf unequivocally represents male sexual power and threat. Roald Dahl's verse re-telling features a Little Red Riding Hood whose readiness to deal with the wolf surprises and delights the reader (with Dahl's use of that naughty word, 'knickers'):

*The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers.
She whips a pistol from her knickers.
She aims it at the creature's head
And bang bang bang, she shoots him dead.*

Things are not so straightforward in Carter's 'The Werewolf', one of three versions of the Little Red Riding Hood story in The Bloody Chamber collection of short stories.

Beginning, Middle and End

The structure of the story is unusual. The opening scene-setting description takes up nearly half of the 'story'. There are only two actual events: the encounter with the wolf and the discovery and killing of the witch-grandmother. The ending is very brief: 'Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.' When I've given students the whole story on a single side of A4, many have turned the page over when they've got to the end to see if there's any more. Clearly it's not an ending that satisfies and it sends the reader back into the tale to find out why.

Where's Willy?

It's difficult to find a male character in this story. There's a reference to the Devil and the description of the wolf suggests a male ('It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops') - though Carter refers to the wolf as 'it', leaving its gender ambiguous. Otherwise, the tale features witches, old women, a mother, a grandmother and a 'child' referred to as 'she'. There is a significant male absence, that of the 'child's father. What

has happened to him is not made clear; what is, is that he is not needed to perform the traditional male role as protector of the female. The child has her father's hunting knife and she 'know[s] how to use it'. The knife is, of course, a phallic symbol, a symbol of male power. However, what it represents here is not male sexual power but power pure and simple.

'Where wolf?' or a Tense Encounter

In Mel Brooks' horror film spoof *Young Frankenstein* Dr Frankenstein ('it's pronounced Fronkensteen') hears the howl of a wolf and enquires of Igor, 'Werewolf?' Igor replies, 'Where wolf?' and points, 'There wolf!' In Carter's story the 'child' points the finger at her grandmother. But on what evidence? The wolf's paw is no longer a wolf's paw but a human hand, 'a hand toughened with work and freckled with old age'. If the villagers were to visit the scene of the child's encounter with the wolf they would find no trace of the event

Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor that might have been upon it were obscured.

The implications of that choice of tense, the conditional 'might have been', are easily overlooked on a first reading. 'Might have been' suggests the possibility of 'might not have been', of no attack and no wolf at all.

'Them and us'

Initially the narrative voice seems to be external third person, working hard to create that frisson of terror associated with the Gothic: 'Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest'. But suddenly there's a first person narrator and one who makes a link between himself (herself? - again, the gender is not clear) and the reader: 'To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I'. The voice encourages an alliance, a feeling of shared knowledge and attitudes and beliefs. It encourages the reader to feel superior to the people in the story with their primitive, superstitious and brutal lives. However, is it a voice the reader can trust? Isn't there something tongue-in-cheek about the remark 'Anyone will tell you that' and the exclamatory comment, followed by the italics 'Oh, sinister! - follows her about all the time'? Who's being mocked here - the superstitious people of the story, or the reader who has been seduced by the Gothic atmospherics into believing in this world? How is the reader meant to take the comment, 'Wolves are less brave than they seem' and the description of the wolf 'lolloping off disconsolately between the tree as well as it could on three legs'? There's a mockingly humorous edge to the narrative voice here that disconcerts the reader and sits rather uneasily with the serious tone of the opening paragraphs and with the echoes of the fairy-tale with which we are so familiar.

And the Moral of the Story is...?

The most significant detail that Carter changes from the fairy-tale is that of the garment worn by the protagonist. Carter's 'child' has no red riding-hood but instead 'a scabby coat of sheepskin'. This is not merely a change made to be more in keeping with the setting Carter creates: it is a change on which the whole meaning of the story could be seen to rest. The title of the story, the echoes of the fairy-tale and the drive of the plot suggest a reading in which the 'child' is some kind of feminist heroine, facing up to the dangers of the symbolic forest and wolf and winning through with courage and resilience

(and no need for help from any male). However, the 'child's cloak evokes the idea of a 'wolf in sheep's clothing' and she is not childish or child-like in her behaviour and character. The interpretation suggested by this is that the 'child', not the grandmother, is the werewolf of the title and that she uses the beliefs and superstitions of her people to get rid of her grandmother and grab her property. The 'child' is empowered by the possession of her father's hunting-knife but to what ends does she put this power? She moves away from the domestic role performed by her mother but what does she become? The story thus has some interesting and ambiguous things to say about the relationship between women and power. Is the child's ruthlessness a male characteristic she's acquired along with her father's hunting-knife? The reader certainly feels uneasy and ambivalent about the outcome of the story.