

## BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BIG BAD WOLF? REFASHIONIG RED AND THE WOLF IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to revisit three adaptations of Red Riding Hood fairy tales and explore some of the wolf's reincarnations in order to see how realities change in time. It has generally been observed in the literature that in pop culture Red has undergone quite dramatic changes from the little ingénue to the mature seductress. But what has happened to the bad wolf? How is he imagined by the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop culture? How do his agency and power change? What (new) message does he convey? To answer these questions, I shall look at three fairly recent advertisements that adapt the classic Little Red story for the screen: "Red Bull" energizer (February 2010), "Chanel no. 5" (featuring actress Estella Warren, late 1990s, 2007) and "B.U. Heartbeat" (featuring Tyson Kuteyi, 2008) perfumes. I will explore not only how such commercials reframe the dominant Western cultural pattern, but if they also undo the lessons both men and women have so far been forced to learn.*

**Keywords:** advertisement, gender roles, Little Red Riding Hood, popular culture, wolf

### 1. Introduction

Popular culture, of which advertisements are only one aspect, heavily relies on the mass media and constantly renegotiates the changes in values and hierarchies. Whereas highbrow texts highlight the aesthetic, popular culture challenges the social, activating class, gender or race conflicts (Fiske 2005:211, 219).

Within the realm of popular culture, *appropriation* – or 'poaching', as it is called by Certeau (1984:174-176), Fiske (1989:143-145) and Jenkins (2006:40-41) – and *relevance* are keywords in the re-interpretation and re-writing of canonical texts. As they convey the ideologies of mainstream culture, canonical texts are not relevant for marginal and subordinated groups such as women or gays, who seek to create relevance for their own groups, thus revolting against certain ideas and representations prescribed by mainstream culture, and creating new meanings for themselves.

As brief narratives that illustrate our contemporary consumerist mentality, advertisements are no exceptions. Although they sell an illusion, an ideal of well-being and seductiveness, adverts also play with and reframe the dominant Western canon to which the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* also belongs. Many literary and social critics have approached the story, for example, Zipes (1993) and Orenstein (2002), demonstrating its popularity in terms of the many rewritings, appropriations and interpretations the tale has had over the centuries.

The story of Little Red Riding Hood is perhaps the most enchanting of all, given the large number of rewritings and adaptations not only in English, but in virtually all European languages. Like all fairy tales, the classic Little Red Riding Hood story deals with social expectations and touches on issues related to family, morality, budding sexuality and relationships between the sexes. The story has made a career and, in time, has seen numerous

adaptations. However, as Orenstein (2002:6) notes, in modern times, Red has become “an ode to Lust”, with a strong emphasis on the sexuality of the young woman (no longer the little girl). Whereas in past versions of the tale, Red was supposed to promote the lesson of obedience and proper behaviour, in pop culture, however, she is constantly portrayed as a femme fatale, all grown-up and confident in her own sexuality (cf. Șerban 2012:123-124, 132). Viewed as part of the culture of subordinated marginal groups, pop culture texts featuring Red Riding Hood claim female agency, independence and intelligence, as well as equal standards for men and women.

Similarly, the figure of the Big Bad Wolf has for centuries fascinated people all over the world and stirred the imagination of writers and film (or animation) directors alike. Traditionally associated with Evil and ravenous appetites, the wolf is a deeply erotic character that disguises himself, seduces (Perrault’s version, 1889) and/or swallows up innocent young girls (the brothers Grimm version, 1812). What I aim to do in this paper is to revisit the fairy tale canon and explore some of the *wolf’s* reincarnations in order to see how realities change. How is *he* imagined by the 21<sup>st</sup> century pop culture? How do *his* agency and power change? What (new) message does he convey? To answer these questions, I shall look at three fairly recent advertisements that adapt the classic Little Red story for the screen: “Red Bull” energizer (February 2010), “Chanel no. 5” (featuring actress Estella Warren, late 1990s) and “B.U. Heartbeat” (featuring Tyson Kuteyi, 2008) perfumes. I will explore not only how such commercials reframe the dominant Western cultural pattern, but if they also undo the lessons both men and women have so far been forced to learn.

## **2. And What about the Big Bad Wolf?**

Fairy tales permeate our lives and define us (Orenstein 2002:10-11), shaping our socializing skills, our social networks and expectations (about love, sex, marriage), showing us rules of behaviour and lessons to learn. One very important characteristic of fairy tales is, however, the fact that they evolve in time, recording not only elements of human experience but also the particulars of a place and age. Just as Red Riding Hood changes in time, so does the wolf in her story. On the one hand, commenting on the evolution of the wolf in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jack Zipes (1993:63) argues that there are versions of the famous fairy tale “that rehabilitate the wolf” (not just the girl) and that “undermine the assumptions of the traditional cultural patterns.” He further explains 1- that wolves are no longer a real threat for humans, as they are now almost extinct in the West, 2- that wolves are no longer threatening as representations of sexuality, and also 3- that wolves have come to be associated with our inner nature and our destruction of it. Following Zipes’ train of thought, and considering the exacerbation of sexuality nowadays and the pop culture popularization of darker sexual practices (for instance, BDSM in E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades Trilogy*, a bestseller around the world since its initial publication in 2011), the wolf poses less of a danger than it used to. The wolf thus appears to have relinquished part of its threatening power, if not to have lost it (almost) completely.

On the other hand, popular culture encourages us to read the wolf as a representation of the rebel, who has come a long way from Perrault’s or Grimms’ versions of the tale. A compelling research study performed among US college students (Grayson 2008) showed that girls are attracted to “bad boys” because, when young, girls are repeatedly told that if a boy is teasing, callous and overbearing, he means quite the opposite. A young woman would thus grow up to think that the worse a man treats her, the more he finds her attractive and loves her. The study further revealed that the young men who possessed what psychologists call “dark triad traits” such as extroversion, callousness, narcissism and impulsive behaviour would be more successful in attaining short-term goals, as well as in seeking short-term

sexual relationships. Peter Jonason, leader of the investigation team, compared the identified type of “the dark triad bad boy” to a modern James Bond figure, “a man with little empathy for others, a penchant for fast cars and even faster women” (Grayson 2008).

Another interesting and fairly recent study draws on previous research into “women’s desire for sexy, dominant, and charismatic men” as linked to “their monthly ovulatory cycle” (Durante et al. 2012:1), but also examines a psychological mechanism that motivates women to pursue a relationship with the “sexy cad” type of man. According to research, ovulation alters women’s perception of some traits in the type of men who prefer a short-term mating strategy. In the eyes of ovulating women, such men appear more physically attractive, masculine, adventurous, competitive and charismatic – and consequently, genetically fit for procreation –, while also coming out as more committed partners and more investing fathers (Durante et al. 2012:2-3). The study concludes that, by altering women’s perception in relation to sexy cads, ovulation gives women the “extra ‘push’” they need to start intimate relationships with such men; simultaneously, ovulation seems to highlight women’s sense of their own uniqueness, as each one believes herself to be “*the one* who finally reins him [i.e. such a sexy cad] in” (Durante et al. 2012:10, my emphasis).

Such psychological studies provide a valid explanation not only as to why Red falls prey to the wolf in the classical fairy tales, but also as to why women in general are attracted to and fall in love with “bad boys”. In the light of such research, the wolf in the Red Riding Hood fairy tales may also be regarded as an animalistic version of the “sexy cad” (Durante et al. 2012:1), a rebel who breaks the rules and stirs young women’s hearts in his pursuit of short-term goals, be it hunger or sexual appetite. Although it is not my aim here to investigate the reasons behind Red’s attraction to the wolf, I believe the psychological approach is important in understanding the relationship that builds between these two characters, a relationship which will evolve in time and which will consist especially in a transfer of power from the wolf to the girl in red, as we shall see in what follows.

### 3. Wolf Stories

As Canadian author Margaret Atwood (2000:344) would have it, “[a]ll stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is” – even though the wolf is just a secondary character or a mere prop. The particular choice of the three advertisements to be discussed here was determined by their female target audience, and it is also based on my seeing them on TV or on the internet, after which I began to wonder what made them so successful given that they ran on Romanian national television channels for several months.

Two other important aspects that all the commercials under scrutiny have in common are the absence of the patriarchal authority figure *per se* – i.e. the rule-enforcing woodcutter – and of the Grimms’ setting – i.e. the forest proper. Nevertheless, other characters of the classical storyline – such as the mother, and even the hunter – blend into the wolf, challenging his portrayal as a lascivious creature always ready to enact a rape fantasy. The main focus is rather on the empowered young woman, the “self-maintenance heroine” (Orenstein 2002:5), who has taken matters into her own hands and lives life to the fullest (“Chanel no. 5”), is determined to seduce the wolf of her choice (“B.U.”), or help stronger and wiser women prove themselves by hunting him down (“Red Bull”). What all commercials seem to convey is that wolves are very much a part of Red’s life, and that she has grown so used to dealing with them that she can actually twist them round her little finger.

But let us now see how the wolf’s power and agency have changed or adapted to our contemporary pop culture and what message, if any, he is supposed to convey.

#### 3.1. Wolf-deserting (“Chanel no. 5”, late 1990s, replayed in 2007)

True to the pop culture representation of Red as a mature femme fatale, the “Chanel no. 5” advertisement features a young woman in her late 20s dressed in a short but smart red dress, entering a vault in search of a perfume to take to her grandma’s in the little basket she carries. As Red chooses her perfume and seductively massages it into her neck skin, viewers are shown a black wolf appearing from behind a wall, most likely lured by the fragrance. As Red leaves the vault with her basket and puts on her red cape, heading for the big gilded double doors that open as if by miracle, the wolf almost catches up with her. Hearing him, however, Red turns and points an accusing finger at the wolf, shushing him. This cut reminds of the classic illustration of the story, when the mother sends the little girl with the basket of goods to the ill grandmother’s house, raising a warning and simultaneously accusing finger so as to draw the child’s attention not to stray from the path. Here, however, the wolf has come far (and, for him, not in a good way) from the “bad boy” or “sexy cad” of the traditional fairy tale; he is now silenced and left behind, sitting on his hind legs and, as Red exits, he starts howling. The close-up on the wolf from behind makes us see the situation from his perspective; consequently, we are also left behind. The following over-the-shoulder cut limits the perspective and the character’s power, conveying a feeling of sadness and at the same time suggesting punishment. Here, the wolf is reduced to a tamed watchdog that ultimately gets abandoned in the confinement of domesticity, while the young woman is free to roam the city streets in search of Parisian nightlife rather than the way to grandma’s house, as her heading towards the Eiffel Tower may suggest.

Gender roles are clearly reversed here and stereotypical patterns broken. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are no longer confined to the domestic space, but can make themselves a career and become independent, while simultaneously living an exciting social life, all of these being associated with the use of the French perfume. The wolf-cum-dog, symbolic of both the guardian-chaperone, as well as of French author Perrault’s disguised seducer, is left howling at home, which disempowers, debases and infantilizes him. His howl doubled by Red’s authoritative parental attitude (she does not want to hear any comment) also indicates the image of a child who is denied adventure outside of the home and who is left crying for his mother. But the howl may also suggest loneliness and, as Red has deserted him, the wolf is calling out for his lost mate.

The forest has been replaced by the vast interior of a chateau, connoting aristocratic refinement and French sophistication. In this setting, the perfume highlights the young woman’s desirability, making her more attractive in the eyes of the men she will meet outside the chateau.

The overall message is that morality has changed with the times. Popular culture in general, and pop romances in particular, show that women can be independent, confident, desirable, seductive and active. However, the drawback lies in the fact that, in order to be all of this, women have to highlight their sexuality, flaunt their bodies, and disguise their intelligence. The underlying message of such commercials is that desirability is associated with the wearing of sophisticated French perfume and revealing clothes that may just happen to be red.

Of the three advertisements, this one shows a rather long-term relationship between Red and the wolf since they share a home, and the taming of the wolf must have taken Red quite some time to complete. By contrast, the next two commercials will imply short-term relationships: on the one hand, a possible one-night stand, while on the other, a chase.

### **3.2. Wolf-grabbing (“B.U. Heartbeat”, 2008)**

The advertisement opens with a shot of Red's room as she prepares to go out. Throughout the clip, the music encourages women in general and the protagonist in particular to "be yourself". We see Red in the background, from the feet upwards as she descends the stairs, sprays some perfume on her neck and then puts on a red-hooded jacket. This shot suggests that Red is stepping down from the pedestal where patriarchal thinking has placed her, and has adapted to more modern times. Walking towards the club, ironically called "Grandma's House", she passes by a graffiti forest and a few young men (symbolic of wolves prowling in the woods) who try to impress her with their dancing. Unsuccessful, one of them tries something original; he gives her a red lollipop, which the girl takes without even looking at him. Her gesture comes to contradict one of the basic rules that parents teach their children, namely that one should not accept things from strangers. Furthermore, the lollipop recalls the temptation scene in the Bible, with Red as a second and already 'corrupted' Eve offering the candy to the bodyguard-cum-Adam, turning him into an accomplice in her seduction game. Moreover, the bodyguard's lack of hair and not very muscular body singles him out as a 'tough guy'. Simultaneously, the character of the bodyguard also recalls the figure of Cerberus (through the fur collar and the heavy chain around his neck), guardian to the gates of Hell, to whom she offers the candy in exchange of admission into the club-cum-netherworld, as a space of modern urban courtship and sexual initiation.

As Red arrives at the club, she tries to coax the bodyguard into letting her enter but does not manage until she gives him the lollipop. On the point of getting inside the club, her eye is distracted by a "sexy [and silent] cad", a dark-haired young man in a black leather jacket showing off an "I-don't-really-care" attitude (the embodiment of the rebel), whose hand she grabs and they both go in, while the bodyguard nods his head in approval.

Unlike the "Chanel no. 5" commercial, "B.U. Heartbeat" targets middle class young girls who live in urban areas. The forest and its 'wild' dangers are suggested by means of graffiti art and a group of teenaged boys – or would-be "sexy cads" – who unsuccessfully try to impress the young woman that passes them by.

If in the previous advertisement, we saw the wolf depicted as a tamed and debased watchdog, "B.U." features three hypostases of the traditional wolf character: firstly, the fur-coated bodyguard with the wolf skull medallion reminds of the tale's hunter by actually wearing his trophies; secondly, the wolf skull and the fur are symbolic of the fairy-tale character as such, although long dead; and finally, the young man in the black leather jacket is the embodiment of the rebel, who defies all norms and conventions. Nevertheless, they are all overpowered (again) by Red, who sweetens the bodyguard by offering him a smile and the lollipop, and who, after a short exchange of appraising glances, drags the rebel into the club. She thus challenges courtship conventions and gender roles, by becoming active in the game of seduction and pursuing the 'wolfish' guy of her choice. Men are rendered as passive or, if active (like the dancing teenagers), manifesting a childish behaviour.

The perfume targets non-conformist middle class young women, who belong to a very modern, urban, graffiti-dominated subculture, and who have learnt to bend the rules to their advantage, emphasizing their sexuality in an attempt of self-discovery. Similar to the "Chanel no. 5" ad, "B.U. Heartbeat" deals with morality issues in terms of sexuality and desirability emphasized through clothing – particularly fabric (fur or leather) and colour (red or black) – and, of course, through the alluring fragrance of the perfume advertised.

### **3.3. Wolf-hunting ("Red Bull", 2010)**

Of the three commercials chosen, nevertheless, "Red Bull" highlights Grannie as the embodiment of a huntress, a lively matriarch who delights in collecting wolf-skins to adorn her walls and floor. As the animated advertisement begins, we see Grandma lying in bed,

reading in her room decorated with wolf-skins. Through the opening door in comes Little Red, portrayed as a young child, bringing the basket of goodies, among which the energizer. When she sees the child, the old woman energetically jumps out of her bed and asks her granddaughter if she has brought any “Red Bull”. Once she drinks it, she becomes even livelier and wants to set off hunting wolves. The commercial ends with both females giggling, as if sharing in on a private joke, and thus turning the viewer into an accomplice to their plan. Here, grandma has overlapped with the hunter of the Grimms’ variant of the fairy tale: “Now let’s go hunt down some wolves”, she says.

Drawn in black and white, with only Little Red’s cloak coloured red and Grannie’s nightgown dotted with pink hearts, the ad focuses on women’s empowerment and family bonds in general, and on grandma as (romantic) huntress in particular. Also, the girl’s red cloak, the only lively coloured object, brings intertextuality into the foreground, reminding the more informed, highbrow audience of the famous Spielberg film *Schindler’s List* (1993). Similar to Spielberg’s film, where the red coat worn by a young girl, who appears occasionally throughout the film, points to both innocence and its loss, in the “Red Bull” commercial, Little Red will probably join her grandmother in the hunt, as Grandma’s last line suggests through the use of the inclusive formula “Let’s go”.

The commercial also touches on age-related behaviour, playing on the viewers’ assumptions of how old and young women behave. For instance, upon entering Grandma’s house, Little Red makes a courtesy, symbolic of old-fashioned education and a parody of aristocratic manners. On the other hand, while interacting with her granddaughter, Grannie manifests childish behaviour, as she throws away the book she has been reading, she jumps out of bed and hops about, thrilled with her present.

From a social point of view, this advert addresses ordinary, lower middle-class women, as suggested by the interior of the grandmother’s house, her old-fashioned nightgown and both females’ rather crude manners. Again, there is no forest, but a sparsely furnished room, where Grandma-cum-huntress lives. Furthermore, the commercial toys with the idea of the hunt as a traditionally British aristocratic and upper middle-class pastime, only to transform it into a lowbrow need to vent one’s age-related frustrations. After drinking the energizer, Grannie seems somewhat desperate to prove – especially to herself – that she is still young and very energetic, something that the advertised product will also provide for others in her situation. The two females seem to share a private wolf-joke, to which the viewer is also invited, provided s/he knows the original story. The wolf is here disembodied, and actually eliminated as a character from the narrative; he plays no other part than that of a decorative object (a mat and a tapestry/headboard). Furthermore, he is ridiculed by Grandma, who jumps out of bed onto the wolf-skin rug, causing its mouth to open wide and then close.

Unlike the previous perfume advertisements, which deal with morality issues in terms of sexuality and desirability, the “Red Bull” commercial focuses on the feminist rather than the moral aspect of hunting as a pastime. What Grandma indirectly teaches her granddaughter is that wolves must be hunted down because they are inherently bad, while the hunt itself will empower her. Besides stressing the vitalizing effect of the energizer, the underlying message of the advert seems to also touch on women’s empowerment and agency by alluding to a typically masculine activity: hunting. Given that the wolf does not appear as a character proper, we may conclude that he has completely lost agency and transferred his power to the two women.

#### 4. Conclusions

After 300 years of dominating patriarchal perspectives on the Red Riding Hood narrative, with male characters cast as principal agents (the seducer and the saviour), gender

roles are challenged and reversed. Nonetheless, while Red regains the agency she lost once with Perrault's variant and becomes empowered through "the ability to control her [own] behaviour through *choice*" (Şerban 2012:132, emphasis in the original), the wolf is increasingly marginalized. Twenty-first century retellings of the classical Red Riding Hood story constantly highlight Red's sexuality, portraying her as a seductive young woman, whereas the wolf is debased. Issues related to morality are still underlying the narrative, but they concern female agency in courtship and male-associated practices such as hunting. If in older variants of the story, desirability was associated with chastity, the very libertine society today seems to encourage promiscuity, especially among women, by means of the media.

The ads examined showed the wolf first as a silenced, punished and crying pet, then a silent rebel with no agency, and finally, a decorative object. The wolf appears thus no longer as the "sexy cad" (Durante et al. 2012:1) of earlier fairy tales, but an increasingly marginalized, muted and disembodied character that seems to have switched places with a Red whose sexuality has become a source of empowerment, agency and freedom of movement.

While playing on fairy-tale patterns, challenging or reversing them, commercials also convey the mentality of our consumerist society and provide an insight into the contemporary popular culture targeted especially at the younger generation, simultaneously emphasizing the way humans, as well as relationships between men and women, change.

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