

Little red riding hood: Breaking stereotypes and embracing strength

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Fairytales can be seen as improbable stories. Yet can be identified as 'story literary or folk that has a sense of numinous, the feeling or sensation of the supernatural or the mysterious' Lane, Marcia. *Picturing a Rose: A Way of Looking at Fairy Tales*. The earliest known use of the word established back in the 1600s and its most conventional meaning being 'children's story about magical and imaginary beings and lands; a fairy story' *Fairy tale - definition, meaning & synonyms* (2013) *Vocabulary.com*. For centuries, artists and illustrators have been re interpreting Fairytale stories in one's own way. Whether this being sexual, morality, ritual and rebirth, it is clear to see that illustrators have a powerful way of creating storytelling visuals through these classic tales. Throughout this essay I will be exploring and discussing the tale of Little red riding hood through the Lense of artists Paula Rego and Kikki Smith. I will be identifying their interpretations and the connection of a feminist approach to writings of history.

Paula's suite includes a series of 6 images and are all produced in pastels. Through this series we are taken through the journey of little red riding hood captured in an alternative telling of this well known story. Paula uses her own skills to reshape fairytales towards 'redressing gender and societal inequalities' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press. Paula plays with feminine roles and explores the context of turning male dominance on its head. Paula 'undermines the tale proper by relying on its endurance and familiarity' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press.



Paula Rego 'Happy Family - Mother, Red Riding Hood and Grandmother' 2003

The image is unclear to have a specific time nor date and is not pictured in any particular century. The image is completely central to Paula's understanding of the tale, and features no background, the detail is focused on the characters rather than their surroundings, this gives the viewer the opportunity to focus their attention on the storytelling through character visuals. The first image we see, we are introduced to the main female characters. It is pictured to have little red riding hood embracing the comfort and love from her mother. The red is prominent throughout the image and is featured in both light and dark tones. It is unclear of the relevance of the background character but is seen to be the grandmother, perhaps this was a way for Paula to interpret some of the traditional story qualities into her work and is a way of foreshadowing things to come. The blank space around the characters almost creates a powerful barrier within the image, perhaps a barrier shielding the two against the bad things in the world. There is a rather empowering feel to the image and the way the characters have been placed, by putting them in the front they are seen to be rather powerful and independent, which is almost a contradictory to the original tale of red riding hoods character.



Paula Rego 'The Wolf' 2003

Here, we are introduced to the character of the wolf. It is interesting that Paula has decided to interpret the wolf as a human character rather than anthropomorphise the wolf such as most artists have done throughout the history of the tale. This man is not any of the ordinary, he is not pictured in the usual scary intimidating outfit that we would usually expect. He is seen 'standing and dressed in a dated and effeminate exercise outfit, complete with a sweatband' Bonner, S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding*

Hood , UCL Press. The man isn't seen to be standing in a menacing manner yet is rather compelling. Paula has posed the man with his hands on his hips and unbalanced, he seems powerless. It is interesting that Paula has chosen this route for the character visual and reiterates the fact that people don't have to initially look frightening for their true intentions to be evil, and there is something quite fearful of that truth.



Paula Rego 'The Wolf Chats Up Red Riding Hood' 2003

This is the first time we are introduced to both red riding hood and the wolfs interaction. The girl is positioned obediently at his feet, the way she has painted the little girl lower than him evokes a sense of fear, as if the man is above her in a way. Although this is not the case, there is still a sense of power and resilience within her aura. She is pictured sceptical, with her arms crossed mimicking his attempt as he 'chats her up'. Again, we can see the same pink scarf that was introduced in the first image on her apparent grandmother. You can tell Paula has tried to incorporate some of the original elements of this tale, yet with a more powerful female role. The girl is seen to not be wearing the red cape that we know her by, could this be a suggestion that maybe her identity has already disappeared? It is clear that Paula uses a lot of foreshadowing throughout her work. Red riding hood 'looks to be in control of the situation' and not appearing in immediate danger. Yet seems 'bored but allowing the wolf to play out his role' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press.



Paula Rego 'mother takes revenge ' 2003

In this next image it becomes apparent that the wolf has succeeded in killing red riding hood, as he is sat undisturbed with a distended stomach laying on which seems to be the girl's coat. It is interesting that Paula has decided against adding blood and gore to the image, which almost gives it a more relaxed feel, despite the fact it is the complete opposite and is rather sinister. The mother is seen 'prodding his stomach with a pitchfork in revenge' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press, yet with a very sustained composure, the complete opposite emotion that one would imagine in this scenario. Throughout the images the women continuously remain powerful and resilient, the way in which Paula positions the women luring over him gives her that dominance.



Paula Rego 'Mother wears the wolf's pelt' 2003

In this last image of the series the mother is pictured triumphant. It is clear she has been successful in claiming her revenge and is seen sitting confidently wearing a new wolf skin around her neck. The mother is pictured satisfied and almost pleased with herself, which again evokes the sense of power and independence. The way in which Paula has re interpreted the story into capturing a strong female role is very powerful. Unlike the original tale, the mother overcomes the wolf in an act of revenge, without the help of a male rescuer. However, tells the story through the lense of the mother and 'challenges the psychoanalytical readings and empowers the female figure' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press. The message challenges the original oppressive tale of female weakness and gives it a new meaning and ends with a self-assertive female character.



Kiki Smith 'Lying with the wolf ' 2001

This delicate yet large scale of ink on paper is a small series of works executed by artist Kiki Smith. Lying with the wolf is one from the short stories which includes a female based on Little red riding hood. It is one of many that captures 'women's relationships with animals, drawing from representations found in visual, literary, and oral histories' young, D.A. (no date) *Kiki Smith, lying with the wolf* , Khan Academy. It has been noted that Kiki's re interpretations of the fairytale Little red riding hood represent a feminist approach. Her interpretations are on the opposing end in contrast with the original tale, which is widely known as the wolf dominating the girl and ends with the wolf eating her. Whereas this version is pictured with the girl laying calmly with the wolf, in no state of panic or distress. It is pictured in almost an intimate setting, with the girl laying nude and vulnerable with this wolf in her arms. She is wrapped around the wolf, comforting and composed, the wolf tamed and controllable, with no sense of threat nor danger. Both figures seem to be nurturing each other, Kiki turns a story that is rather violent and

sinister and evokes a tenderness moment between the wolf and the girl. 'Instead of presenting them in their traditional roles as predator and prey, Smith re-imagined these characters as companions, equals in purpose and scale' young, D.A. (no date) *Kiki Smith, lying with the wolf*, Khan Academy. The story can be seen as a metaphor of power in human relationships, and even in the original tale, that the male/wolf characters are continuously dominant over the female. Patriarchal societies especially throughout history have typically granted power to men, while women remain 'dependant' on the male and submissive to his needs. However, this story contradicts that idea and portrays the female in an equal role to the man and neither overpower the other.



Kiki Smith 'Born' 2002

This striking image is open to interpret as the viewer wishes, what you see is what you chose to see. This image has an element of resurrection, again with the connection between human and the natural world and 'cultural constructs of femininity' Art Gallery NSW, n.d. Born 2002 by Kiki Smith. The image portrays two female characters, a younger girl and an older woman. Perhaps Kiki was sticking with the idea of the young girl and her grandmother, however completely changing the narrative therefore they have the power over the wolf instead. These two characters seem to be emerging from the wolf's stomach covered in blood again with ease and tranquil. The story is completely turned on its head as these characters are repositioned with power and dominance. It gives a sense of rebirth as the girl and her grandmother are reborn into the world plunging out of this wolf's stomach, where they are no longer victims of submission and carry a new relationship to power, strength and resilience. This character who is usually feared for their wildness, is now turned on its back in a state of vulnerability, as if all the danger has been stripped away.



Kiki Smith 'Rapture' 2001

In this bronze sculpture we are again introduced to the idea of death and rebirth. We witness the woman stepping out from the wolf's belly, as if she has been born from the beast. The symbolism of 'Little Red Riding hood' is still evident here, the wolf is present, and although the cape and hood aren't, we are still able to identify the tale. When analysing the sculpture further we are able to view the idea in two different ways. It may represent the women emerging from the wolfs stomach in an act of independence and resilience, however, could also present the metamorphosis of the wolf into woman. The re interpretation of the Grimm tale is interesting here, Rapture 'extends the Grimm version to suggest that the girl's consumption is symbolic of initial sexual experience and maturation' Bonner , S. (2006) *Visualising Little Red Riding Hood* , UCL Press. It's the juxtaposition of both stories where they meet somewhat similar but are completely different views. Recalling Grimms original tale, where the woodcutter (male) saves the little girl and her grandmother from the stomach of the wolf, furthermore 'Rapture' which pictures this strong nude character stepping out as a woman independently alone without the help of a male rescuer.

There is a continuous theme of resilience, power, and independence throughout both Kiki Smith and Paula Rego's works, it is interesting to see how we can compare both ideas and concepts within this one fairytale. They both deal with an important approach to feminist narratives, alternatively the strength of their women is prominent throughout the pieces in contrast with the original tale where the wolf overpowers the female and she is left as the victim, none of their women are victims yet are liberated. There is a subtle violence within both where they were able to get their point across without all the blood and gore, which is rather powerful. Paula re directs the tale focus to the mother where the story is told through her lense, where she is the dominant one, and not the wolf. Paula has turned the history of male dominance on its head and challenges the oppressive tale of female weakness, it is interesting that Paula decided to give the wolf a

(Victoria Miro, n.d.)gender to portray this narrative. Whereas Paula interprets the story through the mother, Kiki focuses on the complicity between the girl and the wolf alone, sometimes they are joined as one through 'Born' and 'Rapture' where they are reborn from the wolf, elsewhere they are companions, seen in 'lying with the wolf' where they are in each other's arms neither in panic nor distress. It is clear to witness the feeling of resilience within both, the mother pictured in Paula's suite powers through even after discovering the wolf has eaten her daughter, furthermore the woman in Kiki's sculpture pictured emerging with power from the wolf's stomach which can be interpreted in the way of the woman saving herself. It is interesting to see the materials used for both and how completely different they are, yet still have a connection of meanings. Kiki Smith has incorporated a bronze sculpture into her gallery, by creating a life size instalment it gives the audience a more clearer view of the piece and its meaning. Whereas Paula has used oil pastels and strict colour palettes to incorporate her story, both are different but completely effective and relevant. We can also see the use of placement in both and the way that evokes different emotions throughout. In conclusion, both artists rework the original narrative and undermine the gender stereotypes, anticipating changing the attitudes of identity and discrimination. These artists discover a new and extensive range of topics and explore their potential for change. These artists aim to subvert and expand on the traditional values they represent, which is why both artists are powerful and most importantly, relevant.

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