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Retelling Fairy Tales in Wordless Picture Books

This proposal explores the creation of a wordless, illustrated picture book, based on the traditional fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*. Rather than retelling the narrative in a conventional way, it reimagines the story through a contemporary, feminist lens, focusing on themes of transformation, independence, and disobedience. Central to this is the idea of embracing the wild, instinctive nature of the wolf, linking it to human behaviour through an anthropomorphic perspective. In doing so, the project challenges the traditional portrayal of the wolf as something purely threatening, instead presenting transformation as a source of power and self-discovery. The story follows a young girl who becomes a werewolf, shifting her role form passive victim to active subject, and in doing so challenges the expectations typically placed on female characters within fairy tales. This concept is also informed by a personal interest in transformation, rooted in a childhood fascination with becoming a wolf, which reflects a broader curiosity surrounding identity, instinct, and the appeal of the 'wild'. I will be exploring fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, particularly *Little Red Riding Hood*, alongside werewolf mythology and its evolving meanings. I will also examine retellings of traditional tales and connect these themes to the use of wordless narratives.

Wordless

The first key word to discuss is 'wordless.' The initial interest in this concept developed from a visit to the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Standing beneath the ceiling frescoes created by Michelangelo (c. 1512) made me feel like I was standing inside of a picture book without words, and each panel was a double page spread. I was guided by the storytelling

techniques and interpretation of the artist through the nine panels that told the biblical story of the creation of life.



Figure 1: *Sistine Chapel ceiling* (Michelangelo, c. 1512) photograph by author, 2026

Although there were hundreds of languages spoken in the room, there was a shared understanding of the paintings above us. This shows that meaning can be communicated universally through visual form. In the context of religious storytelling, Michelangelo's work can be seen as a powerful act of visual retelling, influencing how audiences engage with and understand narratives. This led me to consider how meaning shifts when stories are communicated through images rather than text, and how interpretation becomes more open and subjective.

These ideas can be further explored through the theories of John Berger and Roland Barthes. In *Ways of Seeing* (2008), Berger argues that the way we see images is shaped by each individual and their own cultural experiences, suggesting that visual meaning is never fixed, and the readers interpretation will change the narrative. Similarly, Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author' proposes that meaning is not created by the author alone, but instead developed by the reader (Seymour, 2017, p.14-16). When applied to my own project, these theories become central to the way I will create my own narrative through visual imagery alone, as the absence of text will remove a large part of my guidance and place a greater emphasis on the reader.

This can be seen in contemporary wordless picture books such as *The Wave* (Lee, 2008), which uses composition and gesture to create a narrative pushed solely by visual

interaction (Figure 2). The size and structure of the book also influence how it is experienced, emphasising the spatial relationship between the characters and the ocean. The picture book tells the story of a relatively light and contained moment, where movement across the page guides the reader's interpretation of a single environment. The blue being the prominent colour in the illustrations highlight the ocean as a main character and its importance in the story.



Figure 2: *The Wave*, Suzy Lee, 2008.

In contrast, *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) communicates a complex and emotionally layered illustrated book about migration through the same qualities of a wordless narrative. (Figure 3). The absence of text has been used purposely to reflect the protagonist's disorientation, to create a space for the reader to step inside the world tan has created and experience the uncertainty of the characters and challenges the reader to write the story through visual clues alone. Its structure and sequencing across panels rather than the

double page illustration seen in *The Wave*, also demonstrates how time and pacing can be conveyed entirely through image (Tan, 2006).



Figure 3: *The Arrival*, Shaun Tan, 2007.

Further examples such as *The Only Child* (Guojing, 2015) and *Little Red* (Vidal, 2012) continue to demonstrate how wordless narratives rely on pacing and symbolism to communicate concepts without text. The titles of wordless picture books also play an important role in shaping interpretation, as they provide an initial framework for meaning. For example, *Little Red* immediately signals its connection to the traditional fairy tale, with

the colour red acting as a key symbol, whereas *The Only Child* suggests themes of isolation and imagination before the narrative even begins (Figure 4,5). It could be argued that the title weakens the idea that the reader is the author as suggested by Barthes and Berger, as it manipulates the direction of the narrative. The title of my wordless narrative will be something I explore further to see if it is truly needed.

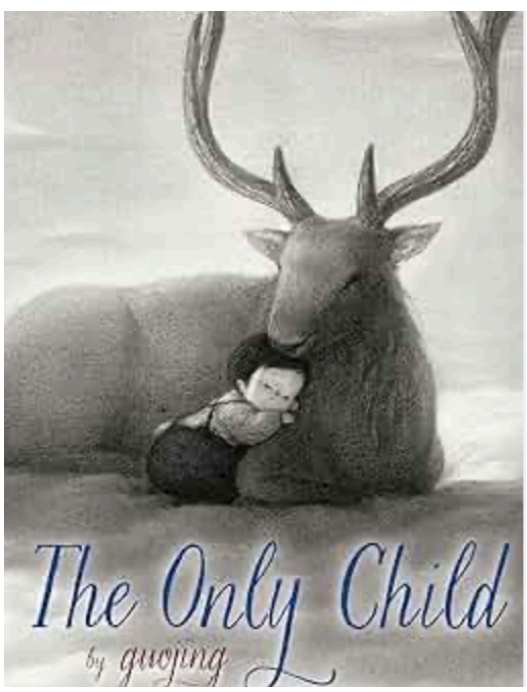




Figure 4: *The Only Child*, Guojing, 2015. Figure 5: *Little Red,* Vidal, 2012.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that wordless storytelling does not reduce meaning, but instead opens the possibilities of new meanings. This approach to narrative directly informs the development of my practical project, in which I explore these techniques through a wordless illustrated picture book. I will use visual storytelling methods

such as symbolic colour, contrasting red with muted grey pencil tones, influenced by the work of *Le Petit Chaperon Rouge* (Concejo, 2015), alongside gesture, expression, and body language to communicate the protagonist's transformation and development.

Fairy Tale

The second key word to discuss is 'fairy tale'. Before they were written down, they began as oral stories, spread throughout communities where most of the society would know the narrative. In the 18th century, The Brothers Grimm collected and recorded these stories to preserve the authentic German folk traditions, and emphasise their religious morality (Opie, 1976, p.119). "Moreover, the Grimms narrowed the definition of a fairy tale and transformed the tales into stories to educate children" (Zipes, 2012, p.177). Key fairy tale theorist Jack Zipes argues that the Grimm's did not record stories faithfully, and instead refined them through a religious lens, manipulating and influencing behaviour and being used as a tool to teach children how to behave (Zipes, 2006).



Figure 6: Illustration by Arthur Rackham from *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1909). From *The Essential Grimms Fairy Tales* (2025)

"A girl, a wolf, a meeting in the woods. Who doesn't know the story of little red riding hood?" (Orenstein, 2002, p.3). *Little Red Riding Hood* is universal and instantly recognizable. By selecting such an iconic fairy tale for my practical project, I draw on the readers existing familiarity with the story, allowing their prior knowledge to subtly inform their interpretation, while I guide them through my illustrated picture book and challenge these original concepts. The Grimm's version tells the story of a young girl who embarks on a journey through the woods where she meets the wolf who tricks her and takes advantage of her kind nature. The wolf "devours" the female characters in the story, which are rescued

by the huntsman character, a male, who is the hero of the story and ends in little red riding hood learning the lesson not to be disobedient and go into the woods. “As long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so” (Grimm and Grimm, 2025, p.101-107). This reinforces the ideals that females should behave and follow orders, and that wolves are dangerous and cunning.

The wolf is used throughout many of Grimm’s fairy tales, and the meaning of the animal has evolved over time. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim interprets the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* as a symbol of the child’s unconscious and fears (1991, p.167-183), whereas I would like to argue this concept and use the wolf to symbolise bravery and awareness. In mythology, the wolf is often linked to the idea of the werewolf, a figure that embodies the loss of human control and becomes a beast. Told throughout the Romans, Greeks and Vikings, the werewolf was something to be feared or worshipped, and to reflect the animalistic traits of our inner self (Beresford, 2013, p.7). My protagonist will become a werewolf not to symbolise the lack of a choice given to females but to flip the story and give power and identity, creating her own direction.

Retelling

The final key word to discuss is retelling. Artists take traditional narratives such as fairy tales and mythology and rework their original meanings to challenge and critique them. Familiar plots are revisited and questioned, particularly in relation to gender, power, identity, and

morals. In today's context, feminism is a key influence, and my personal project aims to subvert traditional female roles and empower them, creating a more equal balance between male and female representation. The work of Jack Zipes is central here, as he argues that fairy tales are not fixed texts but are open to reinterpretation depending on cultural context. "Our lives are framed by folk and fairy tales, but in the framework, we never fill in the meaning of tales for ourselves" (Zipes, 2002, p.11). This has influenced my practical project, where I aim to create a space that forces the reader to narrate the story for themselves.

Artists have retold stories across different media such as animation, where Disney reinterpreted fairy tales by softening their darker elements, making them more accessible while reinforcing traditional morals and gender ideals, which contemporary retellings often challenge. In film, Catherine Hardwicke's *Red Riding Hood* (2011) offers a darker, more sensual take, subverting the female character's usual obedience. In literature, Angela Carter transforms fairy tales into feminist critiques in *The Bloody Chamber* (2006), emphasizing female intervention, desire, and power. In children's picture books, Anthony Browne's *The Tunnel* (2008) uses visual symbolism such as the boy dressed as a wolf to encourage readers to question familiar stories and societal archetypes (Figure 7).

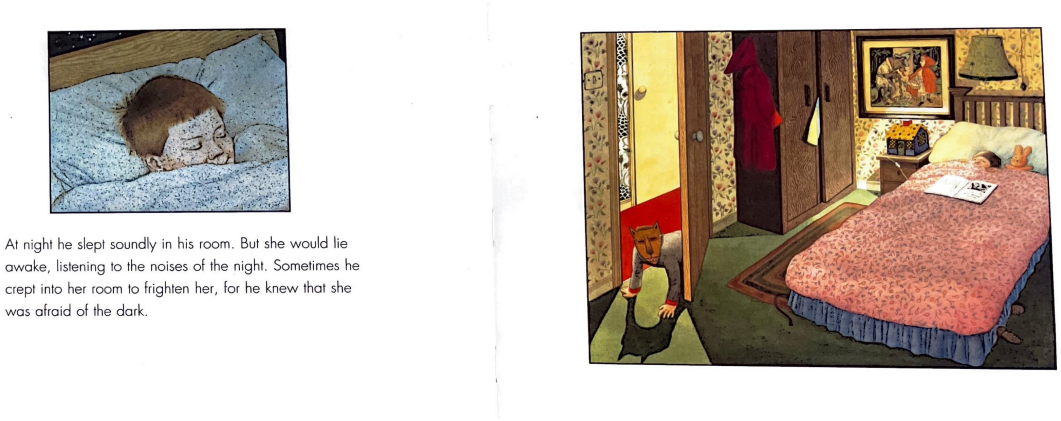


Figure 7: *The Tunnel*, Anthony Browne, 2008.

Fine artists Su Blackwell and Kiki Smith also reinterpret fairy tales in conceptual ways, both using exhibition pieces to show their interpretation. While Blackwell creates sculptures of miniature worlds (Figure 8), Smith creates large scale artwork that explores her identity and the relationship between girl and wolf (Figure 9). Both artists challenge how narratives are understood, showing that retelling is not just repetition, but a new perspective.



Figure 8: *Lying With the Wolf*, Kiki Smith, 2001. Figure 9: *Into the Dark Woods,* Su Blackwell, 2021.

Smith's work has influenced my own practical project to help me engage with my protagonist's role as the wolf. As commented on by Carter, "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster" (cited in Bacchilega, 1997, p.52), this reflects the symbolism behind me choosing to make my protagonist the 'monster'. By her becoming the wolf, I am retelling little red riding hood as the one to be feared, for she is the heroin of her own story without the need of a male character to make her narrative interesting.

Looking at the three keywords collectively, 'wordless', 'fairy tale', and 'retelling' begin to connect in a way that shapes how narrative, and meaning is understood. 'Wordless' introduces the role of interpretation, asking the reader to actively engage with the story rather than follow a fixed path. In contrast, 'fairy tale' offers a familiar structure and set of symbols that are instantly recognizable, even without words. The girl character, the forest setting, the red item of clothing and the wolf character, speak to the reader through visual imagery alone and 'retelling' builds on this by opening space for these narratives to be challenged. Bringing these ideas together creates a tension between tradition and change. The wordless format strengthens the impact of the retelling and changes it to a new level of interpretation, as my critique on a traditional narrative is then dissected by the reader and reimagined. At the same time, the use of fairy tale symbolism keeps the narrative anchored, making any subversions more noticeable. The relationship between the three concepts feeds

directly into my practical project, and by relying entirely on visual storytelling, it brings a unique perspective to retellings.

Overall, these connections lead me to the question, how can wordless narrative affect the interpretation of traditional fairy tales, and how do readers construct meaning through images? Does this create a space for readers to experience narrative, character and symbolism in ways text-based retellings cannot? Alongside this for my practical project it also raises the question what happens when girls become wolves, and females write their own stories?

Proposed Practical Project

This research gives me the foundations to develop my practical project, where I will be creating a 32-page wordless picture book, retelling the traditional fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*. I will be using the original character to influence the themes and ideas but challenging the original story with a feminist approach. My character will become a werewolf, and explore themes of transformation, independence, and disobedience, contradicting the morals of fairy tales and stereo typical gender roles. She will explore and embrace wildness and freedom and venture out into the forest, which will be the main setting of the story. As this will be a wordless narrative I will tell the story through visual imagery, sequences, and symbolism, as well as gesture, expression, and colours, but with the reader 'filling in the gaps' with their own interpretation. Throughout the narrative there will

be challenges and subtle hints to society expectations of females, such as her parents wanting her to be a certain way, and I will show this through facial expressions and gestures. The target audience for this book is 4-8, however, this is a flexible range as it may be changed to a more mature audience as the project develops.

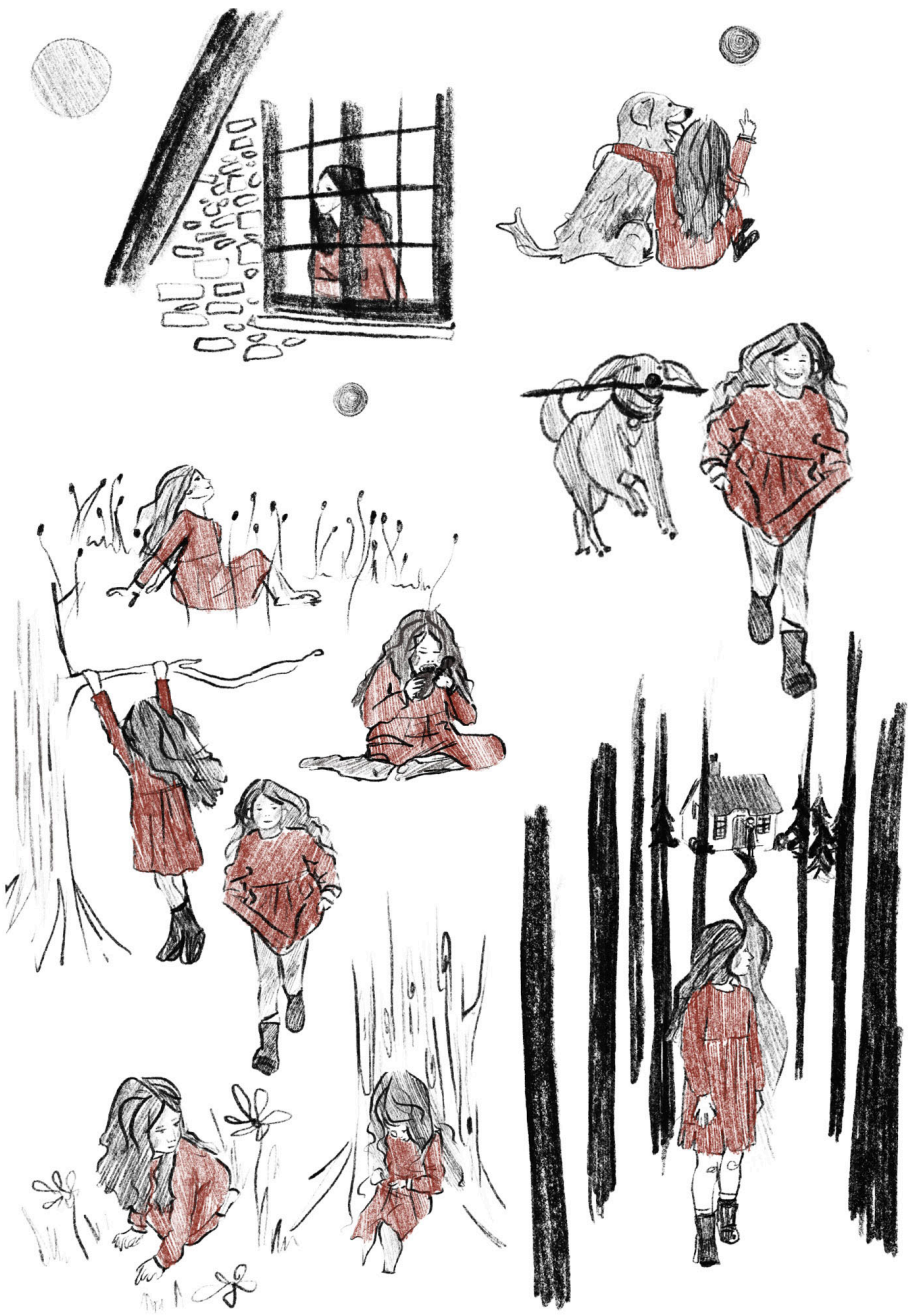


Figure 10: *Sketches for practical project,* illustrated by author, 2026.

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