

The Werewolf, by Angela Carter + A Feminist Halloween

1940-1992, British writer. Gothic literature

Source: *The Bloody Chamber & Other Stories* (Vintage Books, London, 2006)
About 800 words, 1 page + Notes on feminist research on the sources for this story



Photo by Fay Godwin, 1976

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 *naif* 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 forests 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 lolling 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 in 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 dead.

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

About Angela Carter

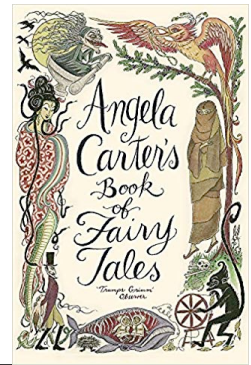
Wikipedia: "novelist, short story writer, poet, and journalist, known for her feminist, magical realism, and picaresque works. She is best known for her book *The Bloody Chamber*, which was published in 1979. In 2008, *The Times* ranked Carter tenth in their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945"."

A Feminist Halloween. Some Further Info & Activities designed by MF (2019)

To my students: At the moment, I'm discovering Angela Carter (2019) -- you see, I'm not much of a Gothic reader! But I have to say that for years I've been reading and re-reading the stories she collected from oral traditions from all over the world in this amazing, beautiful, unexpensive, hard-cover book published by Virago, which you can get for yourselves as a lifelong bedside table present, and also give as a present.

Language. Picture Dictionary

Match the pictures with the word or phrase in the story and find a sentence you would use them in even if it's not in the same word class or meaning!



Language Questions. Answer some & share your answers in class!

- A. What's the name of a house made of logs? What's "to let out a sob"? What's the connotation, the behind-the-scenes story of "some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not"?
- B. Find your own full sentence using the following phrases: 1. dark and smoky, 2. ___ hung up to cure, 3. a string/wreath of ___, 4. with portraits of the ___, 5. to put in front of ___, 6. bleak township, 7. born on the night of ___, 8. a drying ___, 9. a blue-eyed ___, 10. a starving ___, 11. heard a freezing ___, 12. leaving a trail of ___ behind, 13. wrapped up (adj), 14. toughened (adj), 15. a fretful ___, 16. so thickly, 17. pelts of ___, 18. out into ___, 19. the edge of ___, 20. so loud people heard, 21. a festering wound.
- C. Use the following verbs in a sentence you can use: 1. glimpse (ways of seeing) 2. snatch away, 3. keep out, 4. dig up, 5. trudge (ways of walking/movement), 6. drop, 7. seize (ways of holding), 8. go for (something), 9. slash off (ways of cutting), 10. lollop off (ways of walking/movement), 11. wipe (also: something clean on sth), 12. pull back, 13. squawk, shriek (ways of shouting), 14. come rushing in, 15. moan, 16. shake (also: shake off).
- D. Omission of the relative pronoun of the relative clause: where is it? Find similar sentences so you can practice. Oral drilling in class with your examples. [Take her] *the oatcakes (I've baked for her)*
- E. Dying & Being Murdered: To starve, to die of thirst, to stone someone to death, to die of fright at the sight of something or someone, to fall dead, to beat someone to death.

Thinking. About Feminist Research on "Red Riding Hood" & Reflections on What's Cruel & Disgusting Perrault's and the Grimm's versions of the story they called "Red Riding Hood" were patriarchal versions of an Italian, XIVth century (?) oral tradition story intended to teach girls to be confident, resourceful, strong, brave... Quite the opposite! Cautionary tales, warning "girls" to stay home and depend on good men, because bad men would eat them up if they were bad, and they would deserve it for being bad!

In this 12-page essay, you can read the original oral tale, "The Grandmother's Tale", and find a reliable review of the state of affairs around this issue (unfortunately, there are terribly disinformed sites on the internet): <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b303/51730a17e7cdc4e8f7729bf935c611ff5cc5.pdf>. Here's my translation published at Mujer Palabra http://www.mujerpalabra.net/creadoras/mp/caperucita_michelle.htm

If you are surprised about the kind of wild things like poo (related to natural bodily functions) or cannibalism (OK, that's kind of terrifying!), let me tell you that the oral tradition in our planet by all kinds of peoples is a bit like that. In any case, if you step back and consider *our* stories, they're full of cruelty, it's just we're *used* to them -- take the case of depictions of war & torture, including rape.

My Review. Going back to "Werewolf," for me it's true to the spirit of the original oral tale because the girl is empowered, and it connects with the present because it tells us about our past: its terrorizing power comes from how close part of what is told it is to real life, meaning how it was common old or solitary women were persecuted, tortured and murdered. So that is why I consider it a very good story.