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By Nature

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Warning: Discussion of violent rape and murder.

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"Little Red Riding Hood," a classic tale of adventure and danger, leaves a lot to be desired. Past the logistics of getting a wolf into a nightgown, a common criticism of the story is how things seem to happen to the women characters, and yet they never get to make any of the choices. Comparing newer versions of this classic tale, Roald Dahl's "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" from 1982, and Francesca Lia Block's "Wolf" from 2000, allows the reader to imagine what the story could look like if the women were allowed to make some different choices. After examining these two stories, one can gather that following the general "Little Red Riding Hood" format, when the author increases the women's agency they also increase the explicit violence, and sometimes even the sexual implications.

Looking back at the oldest versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," the story has always contained violence. The basic story structure without the flowery language — girl meets monster, monster eats grandma, monster eats girl, large man kills monster — is gruesome, to say the least. A common thread throughout these versions of the tale is the emphasis on masculine violence. The wolf and the woodsman are testosterone-filled creatures, and the only characters knowingly hurting other characters. The wolf's masculinity is emphasized by the image, one frequently made comedic in versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" throughout time, of the scary wolf-monster in an old woman's clothing. The idea of this creature dressed feminine is a joke, a punch line — it is funny that the "big bad wolf" is in woman's clothing because it is so far from what the audience's understanding of what it is to be a wolf. The element of masculine violence is specified under a more specific category: predatory violence. Predatory violence, unlike other forms of violence like vengeance and crimes of passion, has one hard and fast rule: those who are bigger and stronger win. A literal predator, a wolf, is the embodiment of that type of violence, making the women prey. Newer versions of the story, versions that give the women more agency than their predecessors, start to wear down this predator-prey violence structure in the narrative. As Francesca Lia Block so eloquently wrote of her story's narrator, "[…] I am not a victim by nature," (Norton 382). No, she is not.

It is difficult to argue that the classic women in "Little Red Riding Hood" are physically bigger or stronger than the masculine characters. Both in the Block adaptation and the Dahl adaptation, the women are openly described in ways that fit the "prey" characterization. In Dahl's poem, both the grandmother and the girl are described as small and little. Their ages — the grandmother's oldness and the girl's youngness — are emphasized repeatedly. Neither woman, it seems, are in prime fighting state. In Block's version, the girl is the unfortunate epitome of the prey stereotype, being the victim of sexual violence by a much older man in a position of power over her. Though not as explicit, the grandmother in Block's story is also described as weaker, with the author again pointing out her age and her thin legs, lacking the muscle definition of the bodybuilder grandmothers sometimes seen in niche magazines. So how

does one weaker, smaller, or older defeat the monster? For Dahl and Block, the answer is to find some semi-automatic assistance in the form of guns. Whether pistol or shotgun, being armed seems to level the playing field. There is little mention of where these women obtained the guns — both the little girl in Dahl's poem and the grandmother in Block's story just seem to have them. These weapons suggest that, for the girl and her grandmother, taking action is deadly for their opponent. There is no in-between with this type of behavior — shooting someone in these stories is harming them with the intent to kill, every time. This may not be a bad thing, as both stories the women's violence is clearly self-defense, though it does force a reading wherein the stories seem to advocate for self-arming oneself as a default for protection (an idea for which many advocates for ending sexual violence and predatory behavior do not subscribe). Regardless of the political undertones of the firearms in the story, it is clear that the typical "prey" characters, when taking action, are taking the violent and deadly option.

Despite this connection, there is a stark contrast in these two stories, which is the use of sex and sexuality. For the little girl in Dahl's poem, there is a covert sexual image, the one of the gun being pulled from the girl's underwear. Though this seems to be a pre-pubescent child, making it difficult to add a sexual layer to her story, the placement of the gun is in the text and therefore should be examined. It can be read a number of ways. A less explicit reading may say that the gun being in her knickers is a sign that the violence of the weapon is physically close to her, possibly even a part of her. Feeding into the male violence discussed previously, it could be that having a literal "gun in the pants" makes her more masculine. The gun is made into a phallic symbol, and that implies that having power, because the sexist world in which these stories were written cannot separate men, phallic symbols, and strength. Finally, a harsher reading may just be linking sex and violence, suggesting that one cannot go without another — a difficult message for a little girl in a hood. The sexual and pseudo-sexual elements (as rape is rarely sexual) are much more overt in Block's story. The girl in "Wolf" is brutally and repeatedly raped and this is one of the main catalysts for her taking action in her situation (though, importantly, not the main reason). Her two main decisions in the story, leaving for her grandmother's house and killing her monster, are partially driven by the violence that was committed against her. The two stories grapple with the sexual elements drastically differently, yet both consciously include them, which make it difficult to leave out in analyzing the overarching messages that these stories are trying to put forth.

There is one more interesting aspect of these stories that ties them together. Both of the girls are happy, or at least not unhappy, to have just killed their villain. No remorse, or guilt, or even shock is displayed by either of the girls — quite a strange reaction for a child who has just committed murder. Block's protagonist not only says, "I wanted to kill him," (Norton 385) prior to the shooting, but also "[…] she didn't do it. It was me. I have no regrets about him," (Norton 385) after the death had taken place. This leaves little room for interpretation. She is fine with her decision, though slightly less pleased than the girl in Dahl's story. In that story, Dahl writes, "The small girl smiles," (Norton 360) before she takes out her gun and kills the wolf. In addition, the girl wears the pelt of her antagonist as a badge of honor, proudly displaying the animal skin as a replacement for her iconic red hood and cloak. This is a statement concretely illustrating the girl's pleasure in her actions, violent thought they may be, and exiting the story without a shred of doubt, remorse, or confusion. She is truly a model to young women everywhere.

Though the structure, the length, many of the themes, and the fact that they were published nearly twenty years apart creates clear differences in both Dahl's "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf" and Block's "Wolf," there is an underlying progression within them both.

When the women of this story are given choices and allowed to make decisions, they make particularly violent ones. These decisions, justified though they are, are of the murderous sort and have some variety of a sexual tie-in. The women elevate themselves from the prey woman archetype with weapons, hunt their masculine attackers, and seem to generally enjoy their experience. What does this say about how women are viewed? Less than complexly, as it appears that women are either hapless victims or murderous children, with no middle ground. For Dahl and Block, in a kill-or-be-killed world, the women always kill, and the wolves always get shot in the face.