

The Company of Wolves is a 1984 British gothic fantasy horror directed by Neil Jordan and starring Sarah Patterson, Angela Lansbury, Stephen Rea and David Warner. The film is based on the werewolf stories of the same name in Angela Carter's 1979 short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*. Carter herself co-wrote the screenplay with Jordan, based on her earlier adaptation of *The Company of Wolves* for radio. This was Carter's first experience of writing for film. However, it was also only Jordan's second feature film as director. *The Company of Wolves* was filmed in Shepperton Studios in England. It belongs to the second wave of great werewolf films which appeared in the 1980s. A cycle which included *The Wolfen* (1981), *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), *The Howling* (1981), *Silver Bullet* (1985), and *Teen Wolf* (1985).

Throughout the course of the film, a number of wolf/werewolf stories are interspersed into the main narrative as tales told by several of the characters: So, we hear Granny's tale to Rosaleen; Granny's second tale to Rosaleen; Rosaleen's story to her mother; Rosaleen's story to the huntsman/ wolf. Laura Mulvey has explained how these layers of storytelling and belief are excavated through the power of cinema, moving through a young girl's temporary appropriation of the story for her own interior psychic needs, to the social setting of oral of storytelling, and then to the exteriorisation of the irrational in the ancient belief in monsters – particularly werewolves.¹ In the cinema, worlds can shift from one to another without verbal explanation. The cinema creates links and cross references that are akin to the unsettled workings of the mind or the tangled displacements of collective fantasy.

Story-telling, folklore and fairy tale are crucial to our understanding of the film ('Never stray from the path, never eat and windfall apple and never trust a man whose eyebrows meet in the middle', Angela Carter). Red Riding Hood does of course stray from the path, gathering flowers and giving expression to her fancy, but in doing this she brings about her grandmother's downfall and her own. Thus, by negative example, the reader learns what a good girl should be like. In fact, the moral tells us that pretty, well-bred young girls should never talk to strangers, otherwise they will be swallowed by wolves. They must exercise control over their sexuality or be devoured by a dangerous wolf.

¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Cinema Magic and the Old Monsters', *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago: 1994), p. 239 Lorna Jowett, 'Between the Paws on the Tender Wolf: Authorship, Adaptation and Audience', *Angela Carter New Critical Readings*, pp. 33-43.

In the oral folktale the peasant girl is savvier and meets the challenge of her would-be attacker but when the story becomes a written tale, through Charles Perrault in 1697, the girl is more naïve and culpable, and it becomes a narrative of disobedience and punishment.

From this story one learns that children (and I quote)

Especially young girls

Pretty, well-bred and genteel,

Are wrong to listen to just anyone.

And it is not at all strange,

If a wolf ends up eating them.

I say wolf but not all wolves

Are exactly the same.

Some are perfectly charming,

Not loud, brutal or angry,

But tame, pleasant and gentle,

Following young ladies

Right into their homes, into their chambers,

But watch out if you haven't learned that tame wolves are the most dangerous of all.²

Look out for direct references to this version of the tale in the film. The first English edition of the Grimm brothers' 'Little Red Cap', appeared in the 1820s. Little Red has no idea what a wicked beast the wolf is and so is not afraid of him. In some versions 'Red Riding Hood' the girl and her grandmother are rescued by a huntsman, with the added moral 'never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it'.³ The tale here is made more suitable for children with an explicit moral. It is also sanitised and gentrified in the process. Red Riding Hood is no longer a simple village girl she is now the

² Charles Perrault, 'Little Red Riding Hood', 1697, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York: Norton, 1999), pp. 11-13.

³ Brothers Grimm, 'Little Red Cap', 1820, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar, pp. 13-16 (p. 14).

epitome of innocence and must learn to fear her own curiosity and sensuality. The narrative purpose corresponds to the socialisation of young girls at the time.

This takes us to Carter's radical rewriting of 'Little Red Riding Hood' and its representation in the film. Carter, with her characteristic love of the hybrid, restored the werewolf to the little red riding hood story. The werewolf that had been written out of it long ago. The werewolf contributes a more explicitly sexual theme that is only implicitly present in the moralising versions of the tale by Perrault and Grimm. The modern young girl's interior confusion of desire and anxiety links back to the grandmother's stories of werewolves. Here we can associate social repression with sexual regulation and thus sexual repression.

As in *The Company of Wolves*, Rosaleen come to terms with the wolf inside the charming hunter in such a way as to suggest that she is accepting, not so much of the bestiality of men, as of the presence of her now recognised, but unrepressed sexuality. The unknown terrors of the outside are now known, and while they might still haunt the interior mind, fantasy is more on the side of subversive desire than irrational fear.

In Carter's 3 wolf stories, 'The Werewolf', 'The Company of Wolves', and 'Wolf Alice' the little girl discovers in different ways that she is 'meat for no one'. She takes control by refusing to be frightened and she learns that there is so much more to life than 'eat or be eaten'. Also, that being a victim is not much fun. She comes in the process to a particularly useful realisation that 'some wolves are hairy on the inside'. 'I'm nobody's meat not I' (this wonderful 'hairy on the inside' quote is repeated by Granny in the film).

Despite the feminist stance, Lorna Jowett argues that feminist critics have been wary of the film's negotiation of horror, sexuality and violence⁴. However, Carole Zucker argues that it is one of the rare films of the horror genre because it chose a female character as its main subject, and it displayed a genuine concern for a woman's problems from a decidedly feminist perspective.⁵ Yet scholars and viewers might be confused as to whether Carter and Jordon's film can be defined as horror. Certainly, the film provides some arresting images – from the final transformation scene where a wolf emerges snout first from the huntsman's

⁴ Lorna Jowett, 'Between the Paws on the Tender Wolf: Authorship, Adaptation and Audience', *Angela Carter New Critical Readings*, pp. 33-43.

⁵ C. Zucker, 'Sweetest Tongue has Sharpest Tooth', the dangers of dreaming in Neil Jordon's *Company of Wolves*, *Literature film Quarterly*, 28.1 (200), 66-71

mouth, to the strange egg Rosaleen finds in a treetop nest. Jowett argues that the visuals in *The Company of Wolves* are not restricted to the ‘spectacular body horror special effects’ that form expectations of a werewolf film after the success of an *American werewolf in London*, directed by John Landis, and *The Howling* directed by Joe Dante (both in 1981). These can feature ground breaking effects as sequences in their set piece transformations. Similar scenes in *The Company of Wolves* can position the film as a kind of horror film, if not a traditional example.⁶

Music and imagery establish a level of realism and the opening is set in the contemporary world, but this soon yields to a more theatrical, non-naturalistic look and sound, that includes surrealism and overt symbolism. Louise Watson comments that ‘red dominates the palette of the company of wolves, representing preening (lipstick), temptation (red apple), and menstruation (death, blood)⁷. The theatricality and outright fantasy of certain scenes mitigates the werewolf transformation scenes, situating them too as fantasy violence. Jordan, for instance, describes Granny’s death, where she smashes to pieces like a china doll, as ‘one of those moments you realise you’re looking at a story’ and clearly both Carter and Jordon played with levels of fantasy and surrealism in writing the screen play and realising it for the film (sorry about the plot spoiler but I think anyone that has red LRRD expects Granny to die).

The werewolf. Carter’s work in seeking to challenge gender norms for women, inevitably challenges masculine roles and representations too. *The Company of Wolves* does this by contrasting assertive female protagonists with images of male abjection, as well a masculine power and violence. The werewolf, like Frankenstein’s monster, is defined as much by the pain they themselves experience, as the pain they cause others. Peter Hutchings has argued that the male werewolf is an object of pathos as well as of horror.⁸ The emphasis on horror in the *Company of Wolves*’ transformation scenes foregrounds the abject male body, not female terror. The director Neil Jordon recalls his desire to find an actor who could convey both physicality and an animal quality, causing him to select a dancer for the part of the huntsman/wolf (Micha Bergese). Crofts even suggests that the *Company of Wolves* film presents an image of male birth, as the wolf emerges from the huntsman’s mouth in the final

⁶ Jowett, p. 33.

⁷ L. Watson, *The Company of Wolves*, BFI Screen online [accessed 28 Feb 2020].

⁸ Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (London: Longman, 1994)

transformation.⁹ During the transformation scenes the female characters never respond with fear alone, and Rosaleen never screams during the final transformation. I agree with Jowett that in presenting abject males and mostly unshrieking females, the story, the radio play and the film are each engaging with the existing sado-masochistic power relations in the traditional tales. Carter's stories sketch what later films, novels and TV series explore at length – challenging combinations of violence and heterosexuality. Changes instigated by Carter, have become a key element in horror, especially as constructed for female audiences.

The ending of Carter's story in *The Bloody Chamber*, where Red Riding Hood falls asleep 'between the paws of the tender wolf' was possibly too radical for a commercial film in 1984 (though Jordon gestures towards it).¹⁰ Today werewolf lovers and vampires, regularly sleep between the paws of assorted tender wolves and monsters (in *Twilight*, *True Blood*, etc.). I'm not going to give away the ending of the film but just be warned - Carter loved the magic of 'once upon a time' but she was not at all comfortable with 'happily ever after'.¹¹

We will be launching our book *In the Company of Wolves, Werewolves, Wolves and Wild children* after the film. You might be interested to know that the original radio broadcast of the *Company of Wolves* in May 1980 finishes with a story told by a werewolf about a little girl who is abandoned as a baby on a mountainside and who is suckled by wolves in a cave. This shows Carter's interest in feral children – what would happen if someone grew up in the wild, outside social convention, and learned more about life from animals than humans? These are questions that we also ask in our book. We also explore the ways in which the Red Riding Hood story demonises the wolf – creating the image of the Big Bad Wolf that filled our childhood nightmares.

⁹ See C. Crofts, *Anagrams of Desire: Angela Carter's Writing* (Manchester: MUP, 2003)

¹⁰ See Jowett's discussion of the ending of the film, p. 41.

¹¹ See Christopher Frayling, *Inside the Bloody Chamber* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 38.