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The Babe in the Woods

Feminist Views on 21st Century Cinematic Retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood'

ABSTRACT
Hvorfor bruger mainstream filmen klassiske eventyr og det overnaturlige til at behandle emner om pigers seksuelle debut? I artiklen argumenteres der for, at eventyret tillader en postfeministisk nostalgi i kønsspørgsmål ved at gøre brug af det overnaturlige. Sådanne fortællingers popularitet kunne være et symptom på unges tiltagende søgen efter seksuel kontrol og regler. I artiklen konkluderes det, at brugen af eventyr inden for film har mulighed for at udvikle en positiv og fremadsynet feminisme, men at den indtil videre har opnået større succes med at muliggøre en postfeministisk nostalgi.

Why does mainstream cinema increasingly make use of classic fairy tales and the supernatural in order to address issues surrounding girls' sexual debut? I contend that the fairy tale allows for postfeminist nostalgia in gender issues because feminist awareness is undermined by the supernatural. The popularity of such narratives could be symptomatic of a perceived lack of boundaries to young people's early sexual exploration. This article concludes that although the fairy tale framework in film has the potential to popularise a modern feminism, it has gained its greatest following by allowing for a postfeminist nostalgia.

EMNEORD:
Eventyr, film, feminisme, seksualitet.
KEYWORDS:
Fantasy, film, feminism, sexuality.

The classic fairy tale is often referenced in the narratives and styles of films that have enjoyed mainstream success in the 2000s and 2010s. Films that directly use the narratives of classic fairy tales are frequently children's or family-friendly films that fall into the categories of comedy, fantasy, or animation.[1] My question is: What role does the fairy tale narrative play when it makes a transition from cheerful family films into films dealing with difficult and sometimes painful issues relating to early sexuality? Examples of this phenomenon from the last ten years include the teen 'menstruation-horror' film *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett, 2001), which uses elements of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' narrative; the sexual coming of age drama, *My Summer of Love* (Pawlikowski, 2004), which references 'Sleeping Beauty'; the horror-comedy *Teeth* (Lichtenstein, 2007), which uses the narrative of 'Little Red Riding Hood'; The Sleeping Beauty (Breillat, 2010), a surreal dream scenario in which a young girl discovers sex; *Sleeping Beauty* (Leigh, 2011), an erotic film in which a young woman works in a brothel as "the sleeping beauty"; *Red Riding Hood* (Hardwicke, 2011), a film attempting a 'dark and sexy vision' of the classic tale; and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012), the first part of a trilogy and a sinister and melodramatic re-visioning of the tale aimed at teenagers. In the near future, both 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Cinderella' are set for re-imagining in *Maleficent* (2014), and a rumoured film starring teen idol Emma Watson respectively. This list could not exclude the teen phenomenon *The Twilight Saga* (Hardwicke, Weitz, Slade, Condon, 2009-2012), which has particularly strong links to the 'Little Red Riding Hood' story and the plot of which centres on loss of virginity and destruction through sex. In the Australian indie hit *Somersault* (Shortland, 2004), a pubescent girl is cast out of her home, wears red, and attracts a dark male at a wooded mountain resort. An article on the film highlights the fairy tale connection: "The mood is sexy, emotive, imbued with the quality of a fairy tale. Abbie Cornish [who plays the lead] is at once a 21st-century girl and a babe in the wood, facing perilous encounters" (Sherwin, 2005).

So, what is a 21st-century girl combined with a "babe in the wood"? What accounts for the modern-day preoccupation with the fairy tale narrative in stories about female sexual debut, and how does this add to the status of female sexuality and agency as portrayed in popular culture?

This study will be informed by a feminist perspective and will analyse contemporary films in order to investigate the uses of the fairy tale in relation to the past and present state of feminism, especially with regards to the cultural portrayal of female sexuality. The term 'fairy tale' is here understood as the most popular and well-known fairy tale narratives, most of which were popularised by the Brothers Grimm in the 19th century. I have further narrowed the focus by concentrating on the fairy tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' because this story has always had sexual maturation in young women as its main theme.

1. Examples include: the Shrek series (Adamson, Asburym, Vernon, Miller, Mitchell, 2001-2010), Ella Enchanted (O'Haver, 2004), A Cinderella Story (Rosman, 2004), The Brothers Grimm (Gilliam, 2005), Happily N'Ever After 1 and 2 (Bolger, Kaplan, Gordon, Kirkland, 2007-2009), Hoodwinked 1 and 2 (Edwards, Edwards, Leech, Hogan, 2006-2011), Enchanted (Lima, 2007), Sydney White (Nussbaum, 2007), Stardust (Vaughn, 2007), Tangled (Howard, Greno, 2010), Puss in Boots (Miller, 2011), and Mirror Mirror (Singh, 2012).

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I compare this narrative and its socio-political history to the postfeminist backlash and its stronghold in the media. I argue that one important signifier of postfeminism in film is a nostalgic indulgence in fantasies concerning traditional patriarchal relationships and gender roles. Through analyses of films aimed at teenagers that use the narrative structure of 'Little Red Riding Hood', regardless of specific genre, I will explore how these relate to postfeminism and feminism. In the analyses of *The Twilight Saga* and *Red Riding Hood*, I argue that the fairy tale aspect might hold such potent attraction because it presents a patriarchal gender structure through covert use of the magical and the supernatural. The fairy tale's potential as a more transgressive vehicle is illustrated in the analysis of Teeth. Here, the fairy tale allows for a feminism that is individual and modern, *illustrating* that the fairy tale could hold potential for popularising a modern feminism after all.

'LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD' FROM HERO TO VICTIM

In the following, I will briefly outline important changes that have occurred with regards to the fairy tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' over the past 400 years and what these changes communicate about past and present gender roles. In fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes' *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood,* he argues that the tale of the red-cloaked girl is of immense importance for the creation of a cultural ideology that he terms the 'Little Red Riding Hood Syndrome'. This syndrome is described as a "cultural configuration of legalized terror," which Zipes links to the socio-religious changes that occurred during the Renaissance and Reformation (1983, 53). These changes arguably caused the original folk tale to be appropriated by the ruling classes for political reasons and resulted in something that has gained immense symbolic power in its portrayal of cultural gender stereotypes that are still with us today.

The story of 'Little Red Riding Hood' is thought to have its most recognisable beginnings in France in the 16th or 17th centuries, where it existed as an oral tale called 'The Story of Grandmother' (Zipes, 1983, 5-6). In the story, a little girl goes to visit her ill grandmother, who lives in a cottage in the woods. On the way, she meets a werewolf, who she befriends. The werewolf runs ahead of the girl to the cottage and eats the grandmother. The girl arrives and is told by the wolf to burn her clothes and get into bed with him. Realizing that the werewolf intends to kill her, the girl begs to go outside to relieve herself and then escapes. In the oldest-known version of the oral tale, the girl escapes the wolf by her own cunning and is neither saved by others nor eaten, both of which occur in later versions of the tale. Zipes (1983, 7-8) reads the story as a celebratory tale of a young girl entering puberty and continuing the female line of the family, replacing the older woman, her grandmother. The sto-

ry is remarkable for creating a situation that deals openly with both death and sex. Of central importance to this study is that the girl is not ultimately punished for her sexual allure or curiosity and that taking her place in the matriarchy is worth celebrating. Within 100 years of this, in 1697, 'Little Red Riding Hood' ('Le Petit Chaperon rouge') was published for the first time by the Frenchman Charles Perrault in his *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé*. Perrault is credited with creating the literary genre of the fairy tale, and his cause in both his literary and political career was that of 'civilising' Europe. His versions of many of today's most famous tales ('Little Red Riding Hood', 'Bluebeard', 'Cinderella') thus took the original oral folk tales and turned them into texts of a "bourgeois-aristocratic" moral education, which aimed to improve the manners and minds of children and young people (Zipes, 1983, 10-11). Perrault presented 'Little Red Riding Hood' as a moral tale about the dangers of being an attractive young woman. In order to make the moral of the tale crystal clear, he added a prologue that warns young ladies of good breeding not to speak to strangers, for even the most docile-seeming man may turn out to be a 'wolf'. It is also Perrault who appears to have added the famous red cape. Zipes (1983, 9) writes that the reason for the red cape as invented by Perrault is unclear, but at the time, red was popularly associated with the devil, sin, and passion. Seen from this perspective, the tale becomes one of a pretty girl who wears red, the colour of sin; who is inappropriately forward with a potentially dangerous stranger; who is distracted by beauty and pleasure on her way; and who gets into bed with a 'wolf' and is eaten. In other words, it became a lesson for young girls to resist all sensual pleasures and urges, as indulgence would warrant severe punishment. Perrault's version of the tale was such a huge success that it was, as Zipes (1983, 14) notes, "one of the few literary fairy tales in history which, due to its universality, ambivalence, and clever sexual innuendos, was reabsorbed by the oral folk tradition." Thus, when the brothers Grimm were collecting their tales from the peasant population in 19th century Germany, it was almost certainly the Perrault tale, or something very close to it, that was recounted to them by Marie Hassenpflug, who was of mixed French and German descent (Zipes, 1983, 14-15). But before the tale was published again in 1812, the brothers Grimm made further amendments to suit the emerging strict moral codes, which would later find full expression in the Victorian Era. Inspired by the tale 'The Wolf and Seven Kids', a hunter now saves both the girl and her grandmother from the belly of the wolf. The Grimm version is notable for introducing the patriarchal man, the hunter, who functions as either a potential father figure or husband and who is essential to the women's salvation and forgiveness for their transgressions in the woods. The child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1975, 205) usefully describes the figure of the hunter in the fairy tale as one who "dominates, controls, and subdues wild, ferocious beasts" and who represents "the subjugation of the animal, asocial, violent tendencies in man." The hunter's appearance in the story at the dawn of

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Victorian repression and self-control is, with Bettelheim's interpretation in mind, no coincidence.

More than a century later, the eminently popular Grimm fairy tales received new and increased critical attention. According to Zipes (2002, 238-240), this critique was instigated in Germany in the late 1960s by a new generation of literary critics and teachers, among others, as a counter-reaction to the nationalist pedestal that the Brothers' Grimm fairy tales had occupied during their childhoods. The Grimm versions of the fairy tales were criticised for portraying an outdated and patriarchal societal structure, which needed re-visiting. The renewed interest in the fairy tale was complex in character and mostly sprang from criticism of what the fairy tale had stood for previously at the same time as being seen as a potential site for rebellion. This dual quality to the genre's cultural renaissance is not nonsensical, as the potential for retelling possesses in it an inherent critique. Fairy tale scholar Vanessa Joosen (2011, 2) observes that a fairy tale retelling not only has links to earlier versions of a tale but that it is in itself a direct part of the body of literary critique of fairy tales. The fairy tale genre, then, encompasses a continuous evolution in which every retelling pays homage to the story's cultural history and power as well as critiques it and adapts it for the specific purposes of the time and place into which it is retold.

Second-wave feminism and the fairy tale

The fairy tale's potential was especially embraced by second-wave feminists in the 1970s. One of the main catalysts for the feminist readings, which attacked both the versions of the Brothers Grimm and the films of Walt Disney, was Marcia K. Lieberman's 'Some Day My Prince Will Come' (1972). In this article, Lieberman argues that young girls are shown examples of women who are passive, domestic, and portray conventional modes of femininity. Furthermore, the real 'ability' of the females in the stories is often centred on physical beauty. She believes that the stories leave little or no room for alternative readings. The aspects of the fairy tale that Lieberman fails to address are the more complex trails of various moral codes and differing historical 'voices' within even the very patriarchal tales. Because of its immense cultural baggage, the fairy tale is never solely one writer's work, and this has the potential to be the carrier of differing messages. Other feminist writers specifically addressed these broader issues and sought out feminist voices *within* classic fairy tales. Important examples of these critiques include Angela Carter's versions of tales published in her short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Carter utilised the various known versions of the tales in order to create narratives that attempted to highlight the primal fear and desire in the stories. Compared to Lieberman, Carter is remarkable in her attempt to deal with *nature* rather than culture. She seeks out human transcendence rather than battling or debunking patriarchal culture as Lieb-

erman and her followers did. Almost looking from a perspective in which patriarchy never existed, the protagonist in Carter's version of 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'The Company of Wolves', successfully unites the patriarchally divided virgin and monstrous witch in one character, as the virgin girl accepts and literally embraces the wolf. Carter also wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of *The Company of Wolves* from 1984, in which Little Red Riding Hood turns into a wolf herself when faced with her own sexuality. This altered ending of the film can be similarly read as the virgin accepting her wild sexuality as symbolised by the wolf.

With this brief history of this particular fairy tale in mind, I will now discuss the uses of the fairy tale in contemporary mainstream cinema, exploring how and why films draw on these past incarnations. I believe that the term 'postfeminism' can still be attributed to many of present-day presentations of women, especially in popular culture, and after a short presentation of the term, I will argue why postfeminism has found a potent partner in the classic fairy tale.

A POSTFEMINIST 'LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD'

Postfeminism is a term that attempts to describe the tendencies related to the 'aftermath' of second-wave feminism. For the sake of this study, I employ the term to describe a backlash *against* feminism, and I will refer primarily to the work of feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie.

Postfeminism holds that the second wave took care of gender inequality and that feminism today is outdated and unnecessary. This is in contrast to contemporary feminism, called the 'third wave', which holds that the struggle for equality is still necessary. The main difference between today's third-wave feminism and the second wave is an individual rather than an essentialist view of gender (Pinterics, 2001, 15-21).

A seminal text, which was an early exploration of the term postfeminism, is Tania Modleski's *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age*. Written in 1991, this text criticised a postfeminist tendency in the media to undermine feminist action against male oppression. Many feminists, McRobbie among them, continue to deplore the increased focus on romantic pursuits over all others as a very negative trend in popular culture. McRobbie (2004, 255-264) argues that this represents a backlash against the progress made in equal rights in the workplace by the second wave and creates a desire for a return to the domestic sphere of marriage, house, and children. She highlights the American TV series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2002) as well as the two British films about Bridget Jones (2001, 2004) as poster children for postfeminism in popular culture. The protagonists in all of these examples are career women, but the postfeminist dis-

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tinction is that they all take their right to work for granted and that the real struggle for these women lies in attracting a man – the man – who they will marry. Thus, postfeminism does not deny the headway made for women but claims its benefits without a continued struggle to maintain it.

The combination of characters who are independent career women but who have strong desires to give themselves to a traditional man in the patriarchal marriage ceremony illustrates that there is some ambivalence at the heart of postfeminism. Feminist consciousness is present in the postfeminist protagonist, but this may only be skin deep. When defining postfeminism, Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (2009, 15) articulate how even a superficial feminist sentiment can make acceptable what could be a directly anti-feminist message: "In particular, the popular media is criticised for co-opting feminism's language of choice and empowerment and selling women an illusion of progress that ends with subjugating and oppressing them even further and on more unconscious levels." The postfeminist protagonist can only happily indulge in fantasies of patriarchal gender roles because feminism is, however briefly or superficially, acknowledged. A film presenting a fantasy of patriarchal gender roles must then find a way of illustrating the woman's undoubted feminist independence whilst also disarming it. In the following, I will continue addressing these issues but will focus on postfeminist tendencies in films aimed at teenagers.

Postfeminist girlhoods

> In our postfeminist era, a girl may well feel that she does own her body, but that still leaves her with the problem of whether that means renouncing her sexual innocence or holding on to it – a personal dilemma that, in the past, tended to be resolved for the individual within the social community to which he or she belonged and who shared similar moral values. (Sabbadini, 2012, 225)

As the above statement by psychologist and film theorist Andrea Sabbadini relates, the issues surrounding virginity may have taken on a larger life than is warranted in Western society, ironically because of a lack of boundaries. Traditional family patterns have possibly given way to confusion as to who will set the rules. This is related to the term 'detraditionalisation', which is described as a postmodern and post-structuralist effect that centres authority on the individual rather than on traditional essentialist conditions. Paul Heelas, editor of a book on the subject, describes it thus: "Detraditionalisation involves a shift of authority: from 'without' to 'within'. It entails the decline of the pre-given or natural orders of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of disorder

and contingency which is thereby generated" (1996, 2). What this statement points to is that if a current backlash against feminism is evident in various areas of society, it might be an unavoidable reaction to the liberties won by the movement of the second wave – liberties that are relatively recent in our society. It appears, then, that a 'teenage postfeminism' is potentially just as aware of contemporary feminist rights but is simultaneously concerned with boundaries or a lack thereof, not least in the area of sexuality.

The fairy tale to the rescue: The Twilight Saga *and* Red Riding Hood

I propose that the fairy tale has the potential to present the following 'solutions' for a teenage lack of boundaries: The fairy tale has the power to symbolically reinstate an 'outer' aggressor, which necessarily makes the modern female protagonist, even with a feminist awareness, succumb to passivity. The fairy tale creates an environment in which decisions regarding a girl's sexuality are not made by the girl herself because there is some supernatural impediment to this decision.

An example of this dynamic in current popular culture is present in the much-attacked *Twilight Saga*, consisting of four bestselling books, which were made into five box office hit films from 2008-2012. *The Twilight Saga* as a phenomenon has already received considerable academic attention, not least feminist, and has previously been compared to the tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood'.[2] I will also discuss the *Twilight* films as they are undeniably part of the trend that I seek to highlight here.

The Twilight Saga features the 17-year-old heroine, Bella Swan, as she moves to a new town in a heavily forested part of Washington State. At her new high school, she falls in love with the mysterious Edward Cullen, who lives with his large family in a house in the woods. Bella soon discovers that the Cullens are all vampires but begins a romantic relationship with Edward anyway. The Cullens are moral vampires who do not drink human blood although they long for it constantly. Bella also befriends Jacob Black, a Native American teenager, who turns out to be a werewolf. Jacob is also in love with Bella. Although tempted by Jacob, Bella ultimately marries Edward. They finally have sex, after which Bella becomes life-threateningly pregnant and gives birth to a child. In order to save Bella's life, Edward turns her into a vampire.

In relation to 'Little Red Riding Hood', I interpret *The Twilight Saga* as a young girl's choice between the wild wolf and the controlled hunter. I interpret the character of Jacob Black as representing the wolf's untamed nature and sexuality and Edward Cullen as the patriarchal hunter, who must keep all natural urges in check. Bella resists Jacob's open ardour and yearns passionately for Edward and that which

2. For example, Margaret Kramar: 'The Wolf in the Woods: Representations of "Little Red Riding Hood" in Twilight' in Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon, 2011, edited by Giselle Liza Anatol.

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he denies her: sex. Edward resists Bella until after they are married in order to protect her from his mad hunger for her blood. Importantly, Edward takes away Bella's responsibility for her own sexual debut and experience as he blames his insistence on abstinence on the supernatural threat that he poses. Take away the supernatural, and Edward is nothing more than a controlling patriarchal man, mortal enemy of the wild wolves who tempt female transgression. Thus, in *The Twilight Saga*, the vampire manages to historically set back issues surrounding responsibility with regards to sex for the girl as she need not decide when she wants it to happen (and she somehow feels that it is unnecessary to think of birth control when she finally does have sex). Although the films take place in the present, Bella finds a kind of gateway into a perceived simpler time – an unrealistic nostalgia for the past. Bella is the Little Red Riding Hood of the Brothers Grimm and of the 19th century, one who cannot be trusted to take responsibility for her own sexuality and nature but must instead lean on the hunter.

Red Riding Hood (2011) is in direct accordance with the issues presented in *The Twilight Saga.* Once again, the girl's love interest holds back sexually because of a supernatural threat, leaving her with no responsibility in the matter.

Red Riding Hood is about a young woman, Valerie, whose village (set some time in the Middle Ages) is plagued by a werewolf. She is in love with Peter but is afraid that he is the shape-shifting wolf as the wolf displays a sexual interest in her. Finally, it is revealed that her own father is the werewolf, and he bites and infects Peter before he is killed. Peter then leaves in order to learn how to control and suppress the curse of being a werewolf, after which he will return to consummate his relationship to Valerie.

In this tale, giving into one's desire – symbolised, as always, by the wolf – is seen as downright sick and deviant. The wolf, Valerie's father, displays his unbridled desire through an incestuous interest in his daughter. Thus, to an even greater extent than in *The Twilight Saga,* the control of sexual desire is seen as being the only desirable option in a man. Peter, when he is turned into a wolf, rises above his desire to kill, just as Edward in *The Twilight Saga* rises above his urge for human blood.

The term 'abstinence porn' has been tellingly attached to the teenage allure of *The Twilight Saga* (Seifert, 2008). This term implies that the portrayal of forced abstinence in the films is erotic but that this erotica is connected to the self-satisfying masturbatory sphere of porn rather than to a more realistic engagement with another person. The term can also easily be attributed to *Red Riding Hood,* as sex in this film can also only take place after sexual urges have been mastered and controlled. What these two films offer a teenage audience is potential familiarity with their own sexual responses, without the added stress of considering another person. These

films are indeed porn for those who fear actual sexuality, and as such, teach nothing – or very little about – sexual coming-of-age. From the fairy tale point of view, the films utilise the supernatural to create unrealistic and unnatural situations rather than using the relationship between the girl and her love interest to explore the often-frightening reality of sexual debut.

A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST 'LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD'

The analyses of *The Twilight Saga* and *Red Riding Hood's* appeal chime with my description of postfeminist escapism, but I believe that the fairy tale in film, added to these findings, has the potential for a more transgressive reading more in line with that of Angela Carter. The fairy tale has arguably maintained a real power to address problematic and difficult issues surrounding sexuality by embodying a nameless fear of a supernatural monster. The nameless fear in films dealing with early sexuality, as I see it, is very much connected to the fear of the unknown in oneself and in one's partner. If you were to give in to the monster or the wolf in spite of this fear, the risk would simply be too great because you are the only one who is responsible for the outcome. Notably, *none* of the main protagonists in the fairy tale films addressed here have any boundaries set by a parental or societal authority to lean on or rebel against. They are alone in the woods and alone with that wolf. The fairy tale that deals with teenage sexuality has, then, a real possibility of addressing head-on the difficulties and benefits in the aftermath of a successful women's liberation. The fact that there is a contemporary trend of fairy tale films aimed at teenagers opens up the potential for both the comforting and challenging aspects of the fairy tale genre to be explored and craved for by a generation of teenagers seeking escapism and guidance or both. *The Twilight Saga* and *Red Riding Hood* were both comforting postfeminist fantasies, but in the following, I will analyse the 'Little Red Riding Hood'- inspired film *Teeth* (2007) as an example that deals unflinchingly with a dangerous, difficult, and transformative sexuality.

The wolf within: Teeth

Teeth is a low-budget teen film straddling the art film and B-movie genres. The film has a surreal and fairy tale-like quality, which is also noted by Jack Zipes (2011, 418), who includes *Teeth* in his list of 'Little Red Riding Hood' film adaptations.

Teeth had relatively strong box-office success in 2007 and was also a Sundance Film Festival winner. Thanks to an original and memorable premise and a cheerful style, the film managed to enter popular culture at the same time as it was lauded for its successfully subversive handling of female sexuality. I read the narrative structure of *Teeth* as a feminist retelling of 'Little Red Riding Hood' that presents the wolf as not only a threat external to the ingénue in red but also as a threat from within. As

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in Angela Carter's *The Company of Wolves*, the girl herself turns into a 'wolf' when faced with a traumatic sexual encounter. The wolf, in this case, is a toothed vagina.

In *Teeth,* the protagonist, Dawn, lives in a suburban town near a power plant with her mother, stepfather, and stepbrother. She is a spokesperson for the Christian chastity group at her high school and has pledged to remain a virgin until marriage. Her pledge is marked by wearing a red glass ring. While taking a walk with her (boy) friend, Tobey, in the forest, he attempts to rape her. To Dawn's own shock and surprise, his penis is bitten off by her vagina, and he runs away. Later, she realises that she can enjoy sex but that she can sever her partner's penis at will. Dawn's mother dies, and Dawn discovers that her stepbrother is to blame. Dawn seduces her stepbrother, who has always had an inappropriate interest in her and severs his penis as a punishment for her mother's death.

I contend that this film manages to express a challenging and feminist – rather than postfeminist – portrayal of its young protagonist's sexual coming of age. *Teeth,* while also conveying a rather angry feminist message, manages to convert this anger into an optimistic conclusion about sexual empowerment. I think that *Teeth's* use of the fairy tale is the main reason the film manages to portray extreme feminist resistance to male violence as something palatable to a broader audience. Marking the film a fairy tale gives Dawn an elemental and non-political quality, which very successfully brands Dawn's feminism as personal, individual, and modern.

Whereas the previous examples of mainstream protagonists exhibited a free sexual desire opposite a controlled man, *Teeth's* Dawn initially sets her own boundaries through a conservative moral framework and backward view of women. The fact that she is played with wide-eyed silliness by Jess Weixler implies that the audience is supposed to think her beliefs ignorant at best. In fact, from a postfeminist standpoint, her blatant belief in abstinence is too *un*ambiguous to be comfortable. As opposed to *The Twilight Saga*, which sneaks in a message about abstinence by using the supernatural threat to 'disarm' feminist awareness, *Teeth* openly and provocatively flaunts its heroine's neo-conservatism and thereby sets it up for an inevitable fall.

Dawn's move away from her conservative beliefs comes with her attraction to Tobey. Shortly after meeting him, she starts having sexual fantasies about him, significantly, while the full moon shines outside her window. The full moon signifies the time when the werewolf traditionally appears and here also denotes the arrival of the sexual beast within the woman. Sure enough, when Dawn reaches her hands into her underpants while fantasising about Tobey, she suddenly hears a large roar, and she withdraws her hands with a start. Dawn's sexuality is awakening, and it is ferocious. This scene also indicates that, in reality, Dawn is afraid of what is inside of

her and is using the chastity group as a means of hiding her fear within. Importantly, Dawn is surrounded by lecherous and predatory men, so if she gives in to them, it is her own responsibility. This situation opposes the narratives presented in *The Twilight Saga* and *Red Riding Hood.* And Dawn's first crush, Tobey, is no moral vampire; he rapes her when she gives him the chance. Dawn's fear of what is inside them both turns out to be justified, as Tobey shows no control, and her vaginal teeth bite off his penis.

This little red riding hood also wears a red item, but this time its symbolism is somewhat different. Dawn starts out with the opposite moral compass to that of Little Red Riding Hood, and her red 'clothing' is a red glass ring given to her by the chastity club to signify that she will wait. Ironically, the ring of chastity has a similar effect to the red cape, as it is exactly this that sets tongues wagging. As a reviewer of the film, Carina Chocano (2008), says, "evangelical obsession with chastity results in people thinking and talking about sex constantly, putting them in a state of perpetual, hysterical excitement." The film exhibits how chastity makes both abstainers and those around them highly focused on sex. Dawn is, as a result of her open abstinence, the aim of intense sexual attention: from the boys at school, who make bets about who can get her to break her vow; to her stepbrother, who believes that Dawn is really saving herself for him; to Tobey, who promises abstinence to get close to her. Ironically, wearing the red item in Teeth attracts sexual attention – just as the red cape does in its various ways for *Little Red Riding Hood.*

Male 'wolves' are everywhere in *Teeth,* most obviously displayed in Dawn's predatory, sexually violent, and dog-owning stepbrother. When the stepbrother causes the death of Dawn's mother, Dawn's vengeance brings out the wolf in her at its most powerful. Dawn transforms from victim to hero. Just as the death of the grandmother leads Little Red Riding Hood to become an actual wolf in *The Company of Wolves,* the older female generation gives way to the dawn of the ingénue's sexual maturation in *Teeth.* As Dawn comes to terms with her own sexuality and the menacing teenage boys in her life, the film portrays her as increasingly *human* and less the neo-conservative stereotype. In *The Twilight Saga,* Bella strives for the model-like glamour of the beautiful vampires and as a result becomes less real. Dawn's control-free sexuality increases her beauty and confidence, rather than having to 'kill' or suppress true desire as Peter, Edward, and ultimately Bella must. *Teeth's* feminist message is, then, that true survival as a woman comes when you put up a fight against oppressive powers and embrace your own body and sexual nature.*Teeth's* feminist empowerment thus mostly comes through revealing, and thereby dealing with, an extreme worst-case scenario of teenage fear of sex. From a female point of view, the twofold anxiety concerning whether "something is wrong with me" as well as a general un-

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known about sex is potent – and the horror of *Teeth* for men is, I think, self-explanatory. Exposing these teenage fears so openly and violently benefits from use of the fairy tale, which adds symbolism and timelessness. *Teeth* appears to have succeeded moderately in popular culture, despite a view of women's rights that is not ambiguous. There is no postfeminist nostalgia or confusion, and its directly feminist stance could be thought unpalatable in a media industry that cashes in on the postfeminist allure of *The Twilight Saga*. Therefore, *Teeth* is a surprising success.

CONCLUSION

Can the fairy tale in film portray a challenging feminist navigation of early sexuality and sexual debut in girls? This study found that this is indeed possible and that the fairy tales' frequent use in both independent and mainstream film paints a diverse picture of today's feminism and youth culture.

The use of tendencies of postfeminism and feminism in this study maintained the link between issues surrounding gender roles and the fairy tales as relevant. I found that a postfeminist stance appears in fairy tale films for and about teenage girls, which expresses itself in an escapist nostalgia for patriarchal gender structures regarding sex and love. When transferred to teenage culture, this escapism can be doubly attractive because of a perceived lack of boundaries set by society and family, which makes the teenager desire boundaries through cultural consumption. The fairy tale has the added advantage of canvassing our culture's reliance on outdated and conservative gender structures through its use of the supernatural as a boundary for a contemporary girl with feminist awareness. It is no surprise to find that the mainstream films make use of the fairy tale's most escapist and canvassing qualities. In the cases of *The Twilight Saga* and *Red Riding Hood*, the makers have struck teenage gold with their updated and postfeminist fairy tales, which indicates that postfeminist nostalgia, as I have identified it, is still attractive and contemporary. But as is evident from the relative success of the feminist example of *Teeth*, the appeal of the fairy tale is broad enough to be used for more challenging purposes. The fairy tales' ability to canvas messages of a more cultural and political nature is by no means limited to nostalgia and backward escapism. As is evident in *Teeth*, the fairy tale can potentially bypass current negatively loaded associations of second-wave and third-wave feminism as well as the uneasy and ambiguous postfeminism. By appealing to a thematic timelessness and an individual and personal portrayal of sexual debut, *Teeth* can support a feminist stance more related to Angela Carter and third-wave individual feminism. The fairy tale's ability to make a theme seem transcendent thus allows for a less cultural stance on feminism and transfers focus squarely onto the individual experience. The fact that the fairy tale holds such a 'grip' on the youth of today is an interesting and not wholly negative phenomenon, seen from a feminist

perspective, as these modern fairy tales may continue to evolve and to begin to embrace the fairy tale's inherent possibilities for resistance and guidance.

The findings of this study highlight that there may be a continued attraction to fantasies about patriarchal gender roles but that the very genre of the fairy tale exhibits such potential for diversity and attraction in itself that it manages to appeal to extremely wide audiences and that this attraction may ironically be the seed of change in mainstream media. Just as the fairy tale previously 'smuggled in' patriarchal longings, so may it smuggle in a viable and modern feminism.

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