Little Red Cap

SUMMARY

As the speaker leaves behind the metaphorical neighborhood of her childhood, there are fewer and fewer houses around, and the landscape eventually gives way to athletic fields, a local factory, and garden plots, tended to by married men with the same submissive care they might show a mistress. The speaker passes an abandoned railroad track and the temporary home of a recluse, before finally reaching the border between her neighborhood and the woods. This is where she first notices someone she calls "the wolf."

He is easy to spot, standing in a clearing in the woods and proudly reading his own poetry out loud in a confident voice. The speaker notes the wolf's literary expertise, masculinity, and maturity—suggested by the book he holds in his large hands and by his thick beard stained with red wine. She marvels over the wolf's physical features—his big ears, big eyes, and big teeth, which she seems to find both intimidating and sexy. The speaker seizes the moment, making sure that the wolf notices her youthful, innocent demeanor and buys her her first alcoholic drink.

The speaker addresses the reader, acknowledging that "you" might wonder why she pursues a relationship with the wolf. Then the speaker tells readers why: because of poetry. The speaker knows that the wolf will take her with him far into the forest, away from the familiarity of her home and childhood, to a frightening but intriguingly dark place filled with thorns and watched over by owls. The speaker undergoes a difficult journey in pursuit of the wolf, describing herself as crawling behind him through the woods, ripping and shredding her clothes in the process. Scraps of fabric from her red jacket get torn on branches and are left behind, like clues in a murder case.

The speaker loses both of her shoes in this pursuit as well, but eventually makes it to the wolf's intimidating lair. There, the wolf gives the speaker her first lesson, which he calls "the love poem"; the implication is that the two have sex. An eager and active participant in this experience, the speaker also acknowledges that this encounter with the wolf is brutal; she holds on tightly to his violently thrashing body throughout the night. She seems to expect (even relish) this treatment, however; she wonders, don't all young women love wolves? After this encounter, the speaker disentangles herself from the wolf's large paws and seeks out a white dove.

When the speaker shows this bird to the wolf, however, he immediately devours it in a single bite. The wolf licks his lips and casually refers to this as "breakfast in bed." Later, when he is asleep, the speaker sneaks over to a wall in the wolf's lair that is filled with enticing books. She is filled with intense pleasure and excitement upon seeing all these books, her response to reading so many words described in terms resembling an orgasm.

Time passes, however, and the speaker reflects on what ten years together with the wolf has taught her. She compares the oppressive nature of their relationship to a mushroom growing from, and thus figuratively choking, the mouth of a dead body. She has learned that birds—implied to be representative of poetry or art in general—and the thoughts spoken aloud by trees (meaning, perhaps, that art comes only from experience). And she has also realized that she has become disenchanted with the wolf, both sexually and artistically, since he and his art have grown old, repetitious, and uninspiring.

The speaker picks up an axe and attacks a willow tree and a fish, just to see what will happen when she wields power in the woods. She then uses this axe against the wolf while he's asleep, slicing him from his "scrotum" to his "throat," metaphorically destroying both his sexual power and silencing his poetic voice. Inside his body, she finds her grandmother's bones, which are "virgin white." The speaker discards of her dead lover in the same way Little Red Riding Hood discards of the wolf in the classic fairy tale: by filling his stomach with rocks and then sewing him back up. Then she walks out of the woods on her own, singing and with flowers in her hands.

THEMES

SEXUAL AWAKENING AND COMING OF AGE

"Little Red Cap" captures a formative experience in the speaker's transition from childhood to adulthood: her first sexual relationship. The poem alludes to the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, in which a young girl is hoodwinked and eaten by a wolf. This story is often understood as a metaphor for loss of sexual innocence, with the main character a naive girl led astray by a lascivious man. Duffy's poem flips this idea on its head, however, granting *her* Little Red Cap a sense of both sexual curiosity and personal agency that allows her to emerge from the experience with newfound independence. Sex, in Duffy's poem, isn't linked to a lamentable loss of purity, but rather is a powerful awakening and a major step on the path toward adulthood.

The poem begins "At childhood's end"—figuratively portraying childhood as a physical place that the speaker eagerly leaves behind before reaching "the edge of the woods," a place that represents the cusp between childhood and adulthood. It is

here that the speaker "first clap[s] eyes on the wolf." After describing her attraction to the wolf, the poem emphasizes the speaker's curiosity and agency as a young woman exploring her sexuality: *she* makes the first move in their relationship: "I made quite sure he spotted me." The poem then describes their first sexual encounter as "lesson one … the love poem," in which she "clung till dawn to [the wolf's] thrashing fur," again emphasizing the speaker's active participation in and enjoyment of the experience.

The fact that the speaker plays an active role in her affair with the wolf complicates the stereotype of an innocent young girl being taken advantage of by an experienced older man. *She* seeks out a sexual relationship with the wolf, knowing that it will usher her into a scary yet exciting new stage of life—adulthood. Her decision is an informed one: "The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods / away from home, to a dark thorny tangled place." She is aware of the potentially dangerous consequences of adult sexuality, but eager to explore them nonetheless.

To that end, the poem describes the speaker's first sexual encounter as a difficult journey: the speaker must "crawl in [the wolf's] wake," ripping and losing her clothes as she loses her innocence. The experience is far from gentle, but the speaker still triumphantly declares that she "got there," eager to reach sexual maturity regardless of the violence of her experience.

Once the speaker has gotten what she wanted from the wolf, however, their relationship begins to hold less appeal. Now that she too is a sexually mature adult, the speaker has nothing left to learn from the wolf. After ten years together, she has become disenchanted. The speaker takes an axe to the woods, the metaphor for her adolescence, "to see" how they react—suggesting that the speaker is curious to learn what it feels like to wield power for herself.

Finally, the speaker murders the wolf with an axe, "one chop, scrotum to throat," ending his power over her. By taking control over their relationship, and brutally insisting on its conclusion, the speaker asserts her agency as a sexual being. The poem concludes with the speaker having completed her transition to adulthood on her own terms. No longer the child she was before entering the woods, she emerges from the forest independent and empowered.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-11
- Lines 11-12
- Lines 14-22
- Lines 31-32
- Lines 32-34
- Lines 34-39
- Lines 39-41
- Line 42

ARTISTIC COMING-OF-AGE

In "Little Red Cap," the speaker's relationship with the wolf also facilitates her artistic coming-of-age. The two themes run in parallel: just as the poem's depiction of sexual awakening is defined by a journey from innocence to maturity, the poem depicts the speaker's artistic coming-of-age as a journey from inexperience to mastery, with the speaker exerting the power of her own poetic voice over the wolf's at the poem's conclusion. Ultimately, the poem depicts achieving artistic expression as a vital part of establishing personal agency, and as a method of empowerment for women in a male-dominated world.

From the start, the speaker is drawn to the wolf as much by his literary knowledge as by his sexual prowess, and hopes to learn from him. At the opening of the third stanza, she explicitly explains her motivations for pursuing the wolf: "I made quite sure he spotted me … You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry." Just as she hopes the wolf will initiate her into adult sexuality, she also hopes he will teach her what he knows about creating art.

Unfortunately, the wolf is as selfish a literary instructor as he is a lover. After their first sexual encounter, the speaker must disentangle herself from the wolf's firm grasp in order to search for her own poetic voice, independent of the wolf's influence. However, when she tries to share her poetry with him, the wolf callously gobbles up her offering ("one bite, dead") and goes back to sleep.

Nevertheless, as a result of their relationship, the speaker still gains access to the world of poetry, which the poem depicts as the real reward of their liaison. At the back of the wolf's lair, "where a whole wall was … aglow with books," the speaker has a deep, pleasurable response to the power of poetry. Indeed, the poem depicts her discovery of her own poetic voice as much more exhilarating than her sexual experience with the wolf, and also a vital step in her artistic evolution: "Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head / warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood." This stanza also captures the necessity for female artists to discover their *own* means of expression within male-dominated artistic tradition.

From then on, poetry plays a vital role in the speaker's growing maturity and is the means by which she empowers herself to leave the wolf and the woods. The sixth stanza's use of natural imagery suggests that the speaker's ability to better understand the woods indicates her growing artistic mastery, developed over ten years. It may have taken a decade "to tell … that birds are the uttered thought of trees," but in that time the speaker has become fully confident in this space. Wielding an

axe, the speaker begins to attack the woods, the symbol of her adolescence, and assert her own artistic voice and vision.

Importantly, the poem attributes the speaker's disenchantment with the wolf to his repetitious art, "the same old song ... year in, year out," as much as to his aging. It's time for the speaker to look elsewhere for artistic inspiration: to herself. When she murders the wolf, the speaker not only silences his voice, but carves out space for her own. At the poem's conclusion, she emerges from the woods alone but singing, suggesting that the speaker is fully confident in her poetic abilities. Having found her own artistic voice, she wields it triumphantly and independently.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 13-16
- Lines 23-30
- Lines 31-32
- Lines 33-36
- Lines 38-39
- Line 42

GENDER AND POWER

Even as "Little Red Cap" celebrates the empowerment of a young woman in search of sexual and artistic agency, it also examines the power dynamics at play when a girl's coming-of-age takes place at the hands of an older man. Through the subversion of a well-known fairy tale, the poem demands that the reader reconsider the roles of predator and prey within broader societal systems of gender and power. By foregrounding the violence that accompanies the wolf's sexual appetite, "Little Red Cap" makes the case that even in a consensual relationship, driven in part by female sexual agency, misogyny and oppression are still major forces. This is particularly true of a relationship like the one in the poem, where the power imbalance between the wolf and Little Red Cap reinforces patriarchal influences on relations between men and women.

From the start, when Little Red Cap pursues the wolf, the poem upends traditional understandings of predator and prey. Though she calls him "the wolf," it is *Little Red Cap* who preys on him, making "quite sure he spotted me, / sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif." Each of these descriptors imply innocence and inexperience, even frailty, which is not entirely inaccurate—the speaker is indeed a teenager with limited sexual experience. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to these attributes, the speaker shows an awareness of the role she must play to catch the wolf's eye, even as she subverts that role *through* her active efforts to embody it. In other words, the speaker knows she can play up her naiveté to attract the wolf—a fact that in itself reflects some of the twisted dynamics at play, given that the speaker's power comes, paradoxically, from her *lack* of power.

Though the wolf is initially introduced as more prey than predator, once he becomes interested in the speaker, the poem shows him dominating their relationship. He "leads [her]" into the woods, dominates her with his "thrashing fur" and "heavy matted paws," and "lick[s] his chops" as he crushes the speaker's first forays into artistic independence. Even if the speaker has sexual desire and agency, it's still being expressed *within* a broader world where men like the wolf hold more power. To that end, the poem does not shy away from depicting the violence and brutality of the wolf's sexual desire. The speaker notes "better beware" as she enters the "wolf's lair" before their first sexual encounter, and describes the clothes she leaves behind—both an act of undressing and a loss of innocence—as "murder clues."

Ultimately, as the speaker gains experience and wisdom, she realizes that despite having sexual agency, she still lacks true independence. The sixth stanza captures her disillusionment with the wolf and shows her growing awareness of the oppressive nature of their relationship. She compares her situation to a "mushroom / stopper[ing] the mouth of a buried corpse." By murdering the wolf, however, the speaker breaks free from the age-old power dynamic playing out between them and upends the patriarchal norms that have shaped her. What's more, when the speaker discovers "my grandmother's [virgin white] bones" inside the wolf's body, the poem implies that their relationship should be understood as part of a larger history of men exploiting women. It suggests that not only has the speaker exerted her own independence, she has also struck a blow at generations of male domination.

The final image of the speaker as triumphant and independent supports a reading of "Little Red Cap" as a feminist depiction of an empowered woman with agency. Nevertheless, the poem has taken great pains to show us that she does not emerge unscathed. In order to achieve true sexual and personal agency, she has had to withstand, recognize, and ultimately put an end to the predator and patriarchal norms that have shaped her coming-of-age.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 6
- Lines 11-13
- Lines 16-22
- Lines 26-27
- Lines 31-33
- Lines 34-36
- Lines 38-40
- Line 42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

At childhood's end, ...
... of the woods.

From the start, "Little Red Cap" subverts the classic fairy tale alluded to by its title. More commonly known today as Little Red Riding Hood, this classic fairy tale of a girl hoodwinked and eaten by a wolf is best known as a children's story. However, Duffy's poem opens "At childhood's end," making clear from the get-go that *her* "Little Red Cap" is less interested in childish tales and more interested in what comes next.

Additionally, this line introduces the poem's first extended metaphor by portraying childhood as a physical place, which the speaker can leave behind just like she might walk out of a neighborhood. Contributing to this metaphor are the use of "end" (a common suffix for street names in England, akin to "Road" or "Avenue") and a list of familiar landmarks on the outskirts of town: "The houses petered out / into playing fields, the factory, allotments." Each of these landmarks, especially the factory, paint the picture of a worn-out industrial town, and the further away the speaker goes, the emptier the landscape becomes, until all that's left are an abandoned railroad track and a "hermit's caravan" in line 4, emphasizing the area's isolation.

Along the way, in lines 2-3, the speaker describes the neighborhood allotments, or garden plots, as "kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men." This strange simile offers the poem's first hint at its interest in sexuality as a theme. By comparing two very unlike things—gardening and illicit love affairs—it gives readers a glimpse into the speaker's state of mind and her sexual curiosity as she exits her childhood. Last but not least, the use of asyndeton in these lines helps convey the sensation of moving further and further away, of more and more barriers appearing between the speaker's childhood and the "woods."

Finally, at the end of this long walk, "you came at last to the edge of the woods." This clear-cut boundary between childhood and the next stage of life symbolizes the cusp between childhood and adulthood. This line of the poem also contains the first of only two uses of the second-person: "*you* came at last to the edge of the woods." By using "you," the poem invites readers to imagine themselves in the speaker's shoes, walking out of our own childhoods up to the edge of the woods. The second-person also creates an effect of universality—"you" could be any one reader, or it could be all of us—suggesting that the journey out of childhood and into adulthood is a shared experience that everyone must face.

LINES 6-10

It was there ...
... had! What teeth!

The first stanza of "Little Red Cap" closes with a major moment in the poem: "It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf." This introduction of a first person speaker establishes Little Red Cap's perspective as the dominant one in the poem. It also introduces her as the instigator of her relationship with the wolf: *she* spots him first! (Her active role is further emphasized by the subtle use of assonance linking "I" and "eyes.")

Line 6 also introduces the most extensive extended metaphor of the poem: "the wolf." Throughout the poem, the older man with whom the speaker has a love affair is only ever referred to as the wolf. Though the next line indicates that the wolf is indeed a human man (as well as a poet) he is nevertheless only ever described with animalistic qualities. In lines 8-10, these include a "wolfy drawl," "hairy paw," and big ears, eyes, and teeth. By consistently depicting him as a dangerous animal (not to mention, the animal best known as the antagonist of the original fairy tale) "Little Red Cap" makes the wolf's predatory nature clear from the very beginning.

Nevertheless, this dangerous quality is part of what attracts the speaker's interest in the first place. Echoing lines from the original fairy tale, she exclaims: "What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!" In the fairy tale, the wolf's big features are traditionally presented as sources of fear. Here, however, they represent sources of excitement as well, in which the potential dangers and complexities of adult sexuality are part of what make it so thrilling and enticing. Likewise, the wolf's mature masculinity, symbolized by the "red wine staining his bearded jaw," is also a source of the speaker's attraction.

First and foremost, however, it is the wolf's literary expertise that catches the speaker's eye. She first notices that he is reading his own verse out loud, and then draws attention to the paperback in his hand. She herself has an interest in poetry, as seen in the irregular, internal rhyme scheme of these lines, created through strong assonance and consonance of the /ee/, /aw/, and /r/ sounds:

> He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
> in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
> red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears

The internal rhyme here achieves a sing-song quality, reminiscent of a nursery rhyme, another childish literary form similar to a fairy tale. So too does the intense use of alliteration and consonance, and the repetition in lines 9 and 10. Note the many /d/, /r/, /p/, /b/, /h/, and /w/ sounds, plus the anaphora of "What":

> He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
> in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
> red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
> he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!

The overall effect suggests that the speaker, despite her eagerness to leave girlhood behind, is still very much a child, out of her element and not as in control as she thinks as she approaches the wolf.

LINES 11-13

In the interval, ...
... my first.

In lines 11-13, the speaker captures the wolf's attention and their relationship begins. These lines are pivotal to the poem's thematic concerns, emphasizing the speaker's curiosity and agency as a young woman exploring her sexuality. *She* makes the first move in their relationship, saying, "I made quite sure he spotted me." Then she explains how she did so—ironically, by playing up the very thing about herself that she is eager to leave behind: her youth.

The speaker's use of clichés to describe her youthful air ("sweet sixteen, never been," which is an allusion to "never been kissed") shows readers that she is deliberately performing a role in order to attract the wolf's attention. She also describes herself as "babe, waif," both of which imply childishness, innocence, and even fragility. These characteristics are indeed accurate descriptions of the speaker, who is literally a teenager with limited sexual experience. Nevertheless, by demonstrating awareness of her need to play up this image—innocent young girl, naive and inexperienced—in order to attract the wolf's attention, the speaker subtly introduces the gendered power imbalance between the two. Even though *she* is the one who pursues *him*, she understands the need to make the *wolf* feel like the powerful one in this situation. After all, the societal norm (one might even say, cliché) is that of an older man seducing an innocent girl.

In this section of the poem, the poetic devices echo and reinforce the content. The assonance of "sweet sixteen, never been" catches readers' attention in the same way the speaker uses those qualities to catch the wolf's attention. The alliteration and consonance of "sure he spotted me, / sweet sixteen" and "never been, babe ... bought" achieves a similar showy effect.

Last but certainly not least, note the structure of the final line of the second stanza:

> ...and bought me a drink,
>
> my first.

This sentence is broken up not just between two lines, but across the second and third stanza as well. This achieves a dynamic effect, propelling readers from one line and one stanza into the next in the same eager, headlong way that the speaker pursues the wolf. There is the slight pause of the comma here, meaning some readers may or may not mark this as being enjambed—but the exact terminology isn't all that important here. What matters is how the breaking up of this line emphasizes the speaker's youth, dramatically drawing readers' attention to the fact that this is not just any drink, but her very *first*. This emphasis also highlights the sexual implications of "my first," foreshadowing the pivotal role that the wolf is about to play in the speaker's sexual awakening and coming-of-age.

LINES 13-16

You might ask ...
... eyes of owls.

Line 13 contains the poem's second and final use of the second person: "You might ask why." Here, the speaker is directly addressing her reader, acknowledging that they might be wondering *why* she chooses to pursue the wolf. This instance of authorial intrusion reaffirms the speaker's active role in her relationship with the wolf, while also implicitly admitting to readers that she understands the wolf's potential threat, and feels a need to justify her actions.

Within the same line, the speaker then answers her own question: "Here's why. Poetry." In other words, the speaker is most interested in the wolf as an artistic role model. Her coming-of-age is more than just sexual; she names and lays claim to her poetic ambitions, and suggests that they are her top priority. This is an important moment in the poem, as seen in its formal qualities. The poem's use of caesura in these short, staccato sentences adds a boldness to the speaker's declaration; the eye rhyme at the end of "why" and "poetry" deliberately draws readers' attention; and the repetition (technically, diacope) of "why" also adds weight and significance.

The speaker then continues to explain her interest in the wolf throughout lines 14 -16:

> The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,
> away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place
> lit by the eyes of owls.

Line 14 is another direct allusion to the fairy tale source material, in which Little Red Riding Hood journeys deep into the woods and is hoodwinked by a wolf. In the poem's case, however, the speaker is not being tricked, but instead consenting to be led by the wolf into the woods. This is an active and informed decision on her part. She knows full well that the wolf will lead her "away from home," or away from childhood. (This line builds on the extended metaphor of the first stanza in which childhood is symbolized by an old familiar neighborhood.)

Confident that the wolf will lead her across the boundary between childhood and adulthood, the speaker then describes what she anticipates on the other side: "a dark tangled thorny place." To some degree, this shows us that the speaker simply

doesn't know what to expect. After all, she's never been there before. However, the poem's use of natural imagery to describe the speaker's destination also makes for a nuanced and enticing metaphor. This "dark tangled" place represents both the mysterious world of sex as well as the intriguing world of poetry, and its thorniness shows readers that the speaker anticipates adulthood will be full of difficulties and obstacles. The use of asyndeton to describe it—not even a comma separates each word—adds an urgent quality to this place as well. Regardless, it is also a place that promises greater knowledge and wisdom, as symbolized by the "eyes of owls" keeping watch. (Owls are common symbols of wisdom in literature, dating back to Greek mythology.)

LINES 16-18

I crawled in ...
... lost both shoes

Lines 16-18 capture the arduous journey the speaker undergoes in order to consummate her sexual relationship with the wolf. They also begin to show readers the painful consequences of the power imbalance between the two. For starters, the speaker describes herself as "crawl[ing] in [the wolf's] wake," emphasizing once again that she must demonstrate submission in order to receive the wolf's affection.

As she crawls after him, the speaker rips and loses her clothes. Not only do these lines serve as a metaphor for the literal act of undressing, they also highlight the speaker's youth and innocence even as they capture the destruction of that innocence:

> my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
> snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes

Most vividly, the "scraps of red from my blazer" serve as an allusion to Little Red Cap's famous red hood, and remind readers of just how young the speaker is, since she is still wearing what is implied to be her school uniform. These "scraps of red" can also be interpreted as blood shed by the speaker as she loses her virginity. Along with the sexualized symbol of torn stockings and her two lost shoes, the speaker describes all of her clothing lost in the woods as "murder clues." This metaphor reinforces the poem's depiction of coming-of-age as a quest, or search, with clues to be picked up along the way; it also ominously implies that the speaker's first sexual experience was both brutal and deadly, putting an irreversible end to her childhood.

This section is characterized by enjambment and asyndeton, each line driving readers on to the next, just as the speaker moves forward in her journey. Additionally, the internal rhyme of "murder clues" and "shoes," and the repeated use of alliteration ("stockings/shreds/scraps/snagged/shoes", "blazer/branch/both") and eye rhymes ("crawled/wake", "shreds/red") continue to suggest that though the speaker is no longer a child, she is still not a fully-fledged adult or artist. Her poetry still has a childish, or inexperienced, quality to it.

LINES 19-22

but got there, ...
... love a wolf?

Once again, the poem uses enjambment, between lines 18 and 19 and the third and fourth stanzas, in order to mark an abrupt and hard-won advancement in the speaker's coming-of-age. Here, it is the moment of her first sexual encounter:

> ... I lost both shoes
> but got there, wolf's lair, better beware. ...

The speaker's awareness of the danger that the wolf presents has not faded—after all, she notes "better beware" as she enters his "lair"—but she still triumphantly tells readers she "got there." The back-to-back use of internal rhyme and alliteration in the first half of line 19, followed by the markedly less sing-songy rest of Line 19 and Line 20, also hints at an abrupt shift in the speaker's perspective as her virginal status comes to an end.

Importantly, the speaker refers to her first sexual experience with the wolf as "lesson one ... the love poem." This metaphor does a lot of heavy lifting. Firstly, it reinforces the power dynamic between the speaker and the wolf as inherently unequal: he is the teacher, his "breath ... in [her] ear," and she is the student. Secondly, it describes sex as a literary form, the love poem, reminding readers that through her relationship with the wolf, the speaker is not just coming-of-age sexually but also artistically.

Despite this power imbalance, the poem shows readers that the speaker remains an active, eager participant, "[clinging] till dawn to his thrashing fur." Though the rough language ("clinging," "thrashing") indicate that the speaker recognizes the violence of her experience, she is eager to reach sexual maturity regardless.

Line 22 also contains a subtle allusion to Sylvia Plath's poem "Daddy," which also depicts a damaging power imbalance between a young girl and an older man (in that poem's case, her father). "Daddy" contains the line, "Every woman adores a Fascist," which similarly asserts the notion that a toxic power imbalance is a universal (and perhaps even a necessary) part of young women's coming-of-age.

However, this poem's use of a rhetorical question in this moment—"for / what little girl doesn't love a wolf?"—also implies that that the speaker carries a little bit of doubt, or at

least is questioning her enjoyment of this troubling power dynamic.

LINES 23-27

Then I slid ...
... licking his chops.

Lines 23-27 capture the speaker's first forays into poetry. After her first sexual encounter with the wolf, she "slid[es] from between his heavy matted paws / and [goes] in search of a living bird – white dove."

The "living bird – white dove" may seem at first to be a symbol of purity and innocence. However, having already enthusiastically lost her virginity, it is unlikely that the speaker is "search[ing]" for her lost purity or innocence. Instead, her "search [for] a living bird" suggests that she is looking for more out of this new stage of life, namely the opportunity for artistic exploration that attracted her to the wolf in the first place.

The fact that she has to extract herself from the wolf's "heavy matted paws" suggests that he himself has no interest in facilitating the speaker's poetic ambitions. This interpretation is reinforced by what happens in line 25. The poem once again uses enjambment between stanzas to capture the abrupt and brutal way the wolf squashes the speaker's early attempts at poetry—the "white dove" flies "straight, from my hands to his open mouth. / One bite, dead." Her poetic offering, freely made, is not just dismissed but *consumed*. Next, the wolf refers to the speaker and her poems as "breakfast in bed" and "lick[s] his chops" just like the wolf in the fairy tale.

Evidently, as far as the wolf is concerned, the speaker is not a fellow poet, but a sexual object to be consumed. In other words, his predatory nature extends beyond the bedroom to the artistic sphere as well. Not only did the speaker have to use her sexuality in order to get close to her artistic role model, now she discovers that the poetic sphere she was so eager to enter is also a male-dominated space.

This is subtly indicated through the form, as well: the only instances of alliteration, consonance, and internal rhyme in this section occur when the wolf is gobbling up the speaker's poem—"One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said"—metaphorically putting her back into the place of a child or student. Otherwise, these lines begin to hint at the speaker's evolving poetic talent, as she uses longer, more complex sentences and unrhymed verse to describe her poetic search.

LINES 27-30

As soon as ...
... music and blood.

Despite his ineffectiveness as a literary mentor, by virtue of the wolf's relationship with the speaker, she has gained access to the world of poetry, which the poem depicts as her moment of greatest fulfillment.

In lines 27-28, she waits for him to return to sleep before she "[creeps] to the back / of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books." (Symbolically-speaking, the crimson and gold colors are suggestive of sex and lust, making for an interesting contrast with the actual depictions of sex and lust in this poem, which receive far less glowing treatment.)

Entering this poetic space, the poem makes clear, is the real reward of the speaker's relationship with the wolf, as seen in lines 29-30:

> "Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head / warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood."

These vivid, powerful lines portray the speaker's encounter with poetry as much more exciting than her sexual experience with the wolf. Indeed, the language is almost orgasmic, a flood of imagery that opens with epizeuxis, or unbroken repetition, reinforcing that it is the *words* with whom the speaker is having a moment of communion. She has discovered her own poetic voice, "alive on the tongue, in the head," and this revelation is both pleasurable and powerful. Once again, birds return as a metaphor for poetry: the speaker's poetic epiphany is "warm, beating, frantic, winged." It also touches something deep and bodily within her, recalling the sexual crimson and gold glow of the library, stirring both "music and blood." Here, too, the use of asyndeton adds urgency to the moment.

Not only do these lines depict a vital step in the speaker's artistic evolution, they also capture the necessity for female artists to discover their *own* means of expression within male-dominated artistic traditions. After all, the wolf has done nothing to help, and even presents an obstacle to the speaker's artistic growth. It is up to the speaker to sneak into "the back of the lair" in order to have her own direct, experience with poetry, which in turn empowers her to find her voice.

LINES 31-36

But then I ...
... rhyme, same reason.

The sixth stanza of the poem is largely made up of the speaker's reflections on her time in the woods with the wolf, and her growing disillusionment with him and their relationship. Tellingly, this stanza does not open with enjambment: the speaker is no longer rushing headlong into each new stage of this relationship. Instead, it begins, "But then I was young," hearkening back to the very first line of the poem, reestablishing and giving readers greater insight into the speaker's vantage point as she recalls her experiences with the wolf. Now, the speaker suggests, with the distance of time and age, she is better equipped to understand her experience: "It took ten years / in the woods to tell ..."

Using asyndeton to link a series of metaphors back to line 32,

the poem conveys just how much the speaker has learned over the past ten years. Firstly, lines 31-33 capture her growing awareness during that decade of the oppressive nature of her relationship with the wolf. First, she compares her situation to a "mushroom / stopper[ing] the mouth of a buried corpse," implying that she can only grow by silencing the wolf's voice, which holds all the power. Likewise, in lines 34-36, the extended metaphor of the wolf is given new dimension, when the speaker tells us that she's also learned:

> ... that a greying wolf
> howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,
> season after season, same rhyme, same reason.

No longer the intimidating yet sexy predator who first caught the speaker's eye, the wolf has lost his appeal. It's not just because he's grown old. Using diacope ("same old song at the moon, year in, year out / season after season, same rhyme, same reason") to emphasize the speaker's boredom and frustration, the poem suggests that the wolf's song, which represents not only his own poetry but the omnipresence of male poetic voices like his, has become tired and uninspiring. The speaker has realized that he has nothing new to say—or to teach her.

It's time for the speaker to look elsewhere for artistic inspiration: to herself. And, as lines 33-34 indicate, she now knows how. Once again, "birds" appear as a metaphor for poetry; after "ten years / in the woods," the speaker has learned "to tell that ... birds are the uttered thoughts of trees." The trees, of course, are part of the woods, this in-between place on the cusp of adulthood where the speaker has been living under the wolf's influence. Thus, symbolically-speaking, lines 33-34 suggest that the speaker's growing artistic mastery is the result of her time in these woods, or, more literally, the result of her deepening experience and knowledge. Good poetry, in other words, comes from the lived experience of growing older and wiser—just as the speaker has suspected when she first left childhood in search of the new stage of life.

LINES 36-40

> *I took an ...*
> *... my grandmother's bones.*

In lines 36-38, the speaker takes an axe to a willow tree and salmon, just "to see" how they respond to violence. Now confident of her place within the woods, she finally begins to exert her own power over this wolf/male-dominated sphere, which throughout the poem has served as the metaphor for her adolescence. These lines suggest that the speaker has begun to interrogate the role that violence played in her coming-of-age, and also that she is curious to learn what it feels like to *wield* such power for herself, rather than *receive* it.

The enjambment between lines 36 and 37 (and stanzas 6 and 7) highlights the speaker's agency, throwing the moment when she picks up the axe into sharp relief:

> ... I took an axe
> to a willow to see how it wept. ...

Similarly, the repetition of "I took," three times, emphasizes the speaker's growing strength and power. The steady, controlled rhyme and rhythm of lines 36-38 ("wept," "leapt," and "slept") also indicates her growing artistic mastery. Emboldened, the next time the speaker picks up her axe is to attack "the wolf / as he slept, one chop scrotum to throat," and murder him. This act of violence ends his sexual power over her, and silences his poetic voice (as the specific body parts imply). In doing so, the speaker has asserted her agency as a sexual being, and carved out a space for her own voice to be heard.

Inside the wolf's body, the speaker discovers her "grandmother's bones." This metaphor alludes to the original fairy tale, in which Little Red Cap's grandmother gets eaten first by the wolf. It also implies that the speaker and wolf's relationship can be understood as part of a larger history of men exploiting and silencing women. The line suggests that not only has the speaker exerted her own independence, she has also struck a blow at generations of male power over both the sexual and poetic spheres. That the bones are "glistening, virgin white" echoes the "white dove" of line 24, suggesting that the speaker's grandmother (and the other literary foremothers she represents) was also once a young poet, whose voice was swallowed up by the male dominance of the literary canon.

Importantly, though this stanza contains several allusions to the fairy tale source material, including the use of an axe to murder the wolf, unlike the fairy tale, it is the speaker who frees herself, rather than requiring rescue by a woodsman.

LINES 41-42

> *I filled his ...*
> *... singing, all alone.*

Line 41 ("I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.") is an explicit allusion to the original fairy tale, in which Little Red Cap (with help from the woodsman) fills the wolf's belly with stones and sews him back up. In the fairy tale, the wolf wakes back up after the attack, but can no longer chase after Little Red Cap because of the heavy weight of the stones. Though the wolf in Duffy's poem is certainly dead, her Little Red Cap performs the same actions on the wolf's body, metaphorically ensuring that he remains in the woods (and her past) forever.

In line 42, the speaker emerges "out of the forest with my flowers." No longer the child she was before entering the woods with the wolf, the speaker has completed her transition to adulthood on her own terms. She carries with her the only souvenir she wishes to take into adulthood: flowers. This

natural imagery builds on but replaces the metaphor of the birds, and seems to suggest the speaker's poetic ambitions have finally bloomed into full fruition, and taken a new form. Tellingly, the form of the poem also mirrors this development. The alliteration of "forest" and "flowers" draws particular attention to this evolution, and the switch from "woods" to "forest" hints that the speaker has already begun to see (and tell) the story of her coming-of-age through a new, more mature lens.

Likewise, the fact that the speaker is singing out loud suggests that she is proud of her poetry. Her voice has replaced that of the wolf's, whom we first met reading *his* verse out loud. Having overcome a number of obstacles in order to find her own unique poetic voice, the speaker wields her talent triumphantly—and independently. The poem takes care to note that she is alone, drawing our attention to this fact with its final internal rhyme ("stones"/"alone"). This final image ties a triumphant bow on the journey, showing us a speaker who has truly left "childhood's end" and come of age of her own accord.

SYMBOLS

BIRDS

Throughout the poem, birds serve as a symbol for poetry and knowledge. When the speaker first follows the wolf into the woods in stanza 3, she imagines him leading her "to [the] dark tangled thorny place" of adult sexuality and poetry. That place is also described as "lit by the eyes of owls." This is the first, subtle instance of birds making a symbolic appearance, representing the poetic wisdom and knowledge the speaker hopes to find within the woods.

More overtly symbolic is the moment in the final line of stanza 4, when the speaker untangles herself from the wolf and goes "in search of a living bird – white dove –". This "living" bird represents the speaker's artistic ambitions as she enters a new stage of life. Her first poems are symbolized by a "white dove," since the speaker is still in the process of coming-of-age artistically. Though she has lost her virginity by this point in the poem, her poetry is still innocent and unformed.

After that "white dove" gets eaten by the wolf, the speaker uses his library to grow her artistic experience. Here, in a moment of literary ecstasy, she describes her discovery of her poetic voice as a "warm, beating, frantic, winged" experience, again conjuring bird-like imagery.

By stanza 6, after spending a decade with the wolf, the speaker informs readers that she has learned "to tell ... that birds are the uttered thought of trees." Once again, the birds represent poetry, and this time the speaker can confidently trace their origins to the "trees" within the woods where she has been evolving as an artist.

Interestingly, when the speaker exits the woods, there is no symbolic bird accompanying her; instead, she carries flowers. However, the poem does describe her as "singing," which is of course something that birds also do. Having come-of-age artistically, the speaker no longer needs the birds to serve as metaphors; now she, the poet, sings her own song.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "lit by the eyes of owls."
- **Lines 24-25:** "went in search of a living bird – white dove – / which flew, straight, from my hands to his open mouth."
- **Line 30:** "warm, beating, frantic, winged"
- **Lines 33-34:** "that birds / are the uttered thought of trees"
- **Line 42:** "singing"

THE WOODS

The woods take on a symbolic meaning throughout the poem. They first appear in line 5, still at a distance: the speaker leaves "childhood's end" and approaches "the edge of the woods." The poem's emphasis on "the edge" makes clear that this is a crucial boundary, and that what lies beyond that boundary is significant. Since childhood is behind the speaker, then naturally the woods symbolize the stage of life that lies ahead: adulthood.

Woods are often dense, dark, and hard to navigate, which makes them a particularly ripe symbol for the complexities of adulthood. The speaker herself describes them as "a dark tangled thorny place" (and, importantly, identifies that place as distinctly "away from home," her childhood). In her eyes, the woods represent both the intriguing world of adult sexuality and the mysterious world of poetry. Both of those interpretations carry through the rest of the poem, as the speaker develops into a sexually mature and artistically powerful adult within the woods. This is particularly evident in stanza 6, when the speaker says "it took ten years in the woods" for her to realize her own poetic power and grow disenchanted with the wolf.

In lines 37 and 38, the speaker even attacks elements of the woods—a willow tree and a salmon—as she begins to interrogate the role that violence played in bringing her into the woods, and wield it for herself. This moment can be interpreted as the speaker attacking her own adolescence, dismantling the final trappings of youth that have kept her from fully achieving adult maturity.

Finally, in the poem's final line, the speaker leaves the woods an empowered, independent woman. For the first time, the woods are referred to as "the forest," perhaps indicating that the speaker has already begun to search for new symbolic language now that she is out of the woods and full-fledged adult at last.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "the edge of the woods."
- **Line 14:** "deep into the woods,"
- **Line 15:** "dark tangled thorny place"
- **Line 19:** "got there, wolf's lair, better beware."
- **Lines 31-32:** "ten years / in the woods"
- **Lines 36-38:** " I took an axe / to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon / to see how it leapt."
- **Line 42:** "Out of the forest"

WHITE AND RED

Throughout the poem, the colors white and red are used symbolically to represent innocence and maturity, respectively. (Color frequently serves a symbolic purpose in fairy tales, adding to this poem's fairy tale qualities as it tackles Little Red Riding Hood from a new perspective.)

White is the color of purity, innocence, and youth. The speaker's first attempts at poetry are symbolized by not just any bird but a pure "white dove." Likewise, her grandmother's bones, which represent the generations of women before her who have been repressed sexually and artistically, are also described as "virgin white." Their color implies that they never had a chance to mature.

In contrast, the wolf is first introduced with "red wine" staining his jaw, immediately marking him as older and more sexually mature than the speaker. The "scraps of red" from the speaker's blazer also hint at her maturing sexuality, symbolizing drops of blood as she loses her virginity and innocence at the wolf's hands. Later, she describes the wolf's library as "crimson," which tells us that the world of poetry is also a mature, adult space.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "red wine"
- **Line 17:** "scraps of red"
- **Line 24:** "white dove "
- **Line 28:** "crimson"
- **Line 40:** "virgin white"

GRANDMOTHER'S BONES

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker finds "the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones" inside the wolf's body. This is firstly an allusion to the original fairy tale, in which the heroine's grandmother is eaten by the wolf. However, since Duffy's poem lacks a grandmother character, it becomes clear that these bones are serving a more symbolic purpose. Here, rather than representing a literal grandmother, they become a stand-in for the generations of women who have preceded the speaker. They, too, have been oppressed by men, whether by having their voices silenced by the male literary canon, or by finding themselves on the other end of an exploitative sexual relationship. By murdering the wolf, and freeing her grandmother's bones, the speaker symbolically empowers not just herself but the women who have come before her.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 40:** "the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones."

BOOKS AND POETRY

There are several references to books and poetry throughout the poem. The wolf is first spotted with "reading his verse out loud ... a paperback in his hairy paw," and later the speaker creeps into his library, "aglow with books," in order to discover poetry for herself. Of course, line 13 explicitly uses the word "Poetry," as the speaker justifies her motivations for seeking out a sexual relationship with the wolf.

These can all be understood as literal references to books and the art of poetry, since the poem's characters are both poets. Nevertheless, they should also be interpreted as symbolic, carrying more weight than just a physical object or mundane subject matter. Throughout the poem, it is clear that the speaker views books and poetry as gateways to knowledge, and as the path to adulthood. It is the wolf's poetic expertise that first catches her eye; poetry that motivates her to pursue a relationship with him; and poetry that gives her the most gratification as she comes-of-age. By the poem's conclusion, it is only because the speaker has mastered the art of poetry and (violently) made space for her uniquely female voice that she is able to officially transition into adult life. Clearly, books and poetry are more than just ordinary objects; they symbolize, in many ways, free expression and the possession power.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "reading "
- **Line 8:** "paperback "
- **Line 13:** "Poetry."
- **Line 28:** "aglow with books."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The entirety of "Little Red Cap" is an allusion to the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood." (First published in 1812 by the Brothers Grimm, the story was originally called "Little Red Cap," just like Duffy's poem.) Though her poem offers a feminist reinterpretation of the story, with an empowered Little Red

Cap driving much of the action, there are a number of instances where the poem directly alludes to its fairy tale origins.

The first, of course, is the title itself. The second are its characters: a young girl on the brink of maturity, an allusion to Little Red Cap herself; and the older man she has an affair with, who is always referred to by the title "the wolf." This is of course an explicit allusion to the "Big Bad Wolf" of the fairy tale, who pursues the heroine and (in some versions) gobbles up both her and her grandmother before they are rescued by a passing woodsman. The wolf is even described using lines from the fairy tale—"What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!"—and is consistently given animalistic traits, such as hairy paws and fur.

The speaker's journey "deep into the woods" is also an allusion to the plot of the fairy tale. Both the poem and the fairy tale show their heroine having some harrowing experiences in the woods, including being caught by the menacing wolf. In the poem, the speaker is a consensual participant in their relationship (unlike the fairy tale, where Little Red Riding Hood is first tricked and then eaten) but the centrality of the allusion tells readers that there's a predatory side to the wolf in the poem, as well.

Other allusive references to the fairy tale include:

- the "scraps of red" torn from the speaker's school blazer, which of course are allusions to the famous red hood of the fairy tale character;
- the image of the wolf and the speaker in bed together, which conjures up the fairy tale image of the wolf in bed, dressed in grandmother's clothing;
- the phrase "licking his chops," which echoes the fairy tale wolf's consumption of Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother
- the axe that the speaker uses to kill the wolf, which is the same weapon used in the fairy tale;
- the grandmother inside the wolf's body;
- the act of filling the wolf's belly with stones and sewing him up, which also takes place in the original fairy tale, in order to weigh the wolf down and prevent him from chasing after Little Red Riding Hood again;
- the flowers carried by the speaker as she leaves the woods might allude to the opening of the original fairy tale, when Red Riding Hood wanders off the path to her grandmother's house because she is picking flowers, which is how the wolf finds her.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "till you came at last to the edge of the woods. / It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf."
- **Lines 9-10:** "What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!"
- **Lines 14-19:** "The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods, / away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place / lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake, / my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer / snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes / but got there, wolf's lair, better beware."
- **Lines 26-27:** "How nice, breakfast in bed, he said, / licking his chops."
- **Lines 38-41:** "I took an axe to the wolf / as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw / the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones. / I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up."
- **Line 42:** "Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone."

ASSONANCE

"Little Red Cap" is concerned with the end of childhood, and assonance is one of the most common techniques it uses to convey childishness or innocence. The most prominent effect it achieves, particularly in stanzas 2-4, is that of a sing-song or nursery rhyme cadence, which mirrors the speaker's childishness at the beginning of the poem. Later, as the use of assonance fades away or become more controlled, it indicates the speaker's growing maturity.

For example, stanza 2 is rife with /ee/ and /aw/ vowel sounds:

> ... clearing, reading his verse out loud
> in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
> red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
> he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
> ... he spotted me,
> sweet sixteen, never been ...

Here, the introduction of the wolf—despite his predatory nature—is cloaked in the reassuring repetition of a children's story, so that some of the warning signs, like his big teeth, go unheeded. Likewise, though the speaker thinks of herself as more mature than she really is, the assonance of "sweet sixteen, never been" and "babe, waif," reminds readers that she really *is* play-acting at being an adult, using scripted lines and behaviors, and may not fully understand the consequences.

Stanza 3 is full of assonance as well. Here, the repetition serves as enticement:

> The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,

The repeated /ee/ sound lulls readers into the woods right along with the speaker. Later in the stanza, the internal rhyme of "murder clues" and "both shoes" likewise makes light of something that should be much scarier: the speaker's brutal

disrobing and loss of innocence. The same can be said for the assonance of "but got there, wolf's lair, better beware." Later the assonance in "One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said." serves a similar purpose, reflecting the easy nonchalance with which the wolf destroys the speaker's offering.

By stanza 6, however, the assonance is more controlled. "Season after season, same rhyme, same reason," the speaker complains of the wolf, and now the cadence is less sing-songy, more explosive, more of a threat. Indeed, in the next sentence, the speaker murders the wolf. Likewise, we see assonance in the internal rhyme of "wept," "leapt," and "slept," as she deliberately practices using her axe before turning it on the wolf. Paired with the consonance of those hard /pt/ sounds, the effect is far more brutal.

Finally, assonance appears one last time, rhyming "old," "stones," and "alone." The long /o/ sound sounds lonely, but it also sounds more mature than the bright assonance of the early stanzas, in the same way that the speaker herself has grown more mature.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "petered"
- **Line 2:** "fields"
- **Line 6:** "I," "eyes"
- **Line 7:** "clearing, reading," "out loud"
- **Line 8:** "drawl," "paperback," "paw"
- **Line 9:** "staining," "bearded jaw," "ears"
- **Line 10:** "teeth"
- **Line 11:** "he," "me"
- **Line 12:** "sweet sixteen," "been," "babe, waif"
- **Line 13:** "my," "might," "why," "why"
- **Line 14:** "lead me deep"
- **Line 17:** "shreds," "red"
- **Line 18:** "clues," "shoes"
- **Line 19:** "there," "lair," "beware"
- **Line 26:** "bite," "dead," "nice," "breakfast," "bed," "said"
- **Line 27:** "slept," "crept"
- **Line 28:** "gold, aglow"
- **Line 29:** "tongue"
- **Line 30:** "blood"
- **Line 31:** "young"
- **Line 36:** "season," "season," "reason"
- **Line 37:** "wept"
- **Line 38:** "leapt," "wolf"
- **Line 39:** "slept," "scrotum," "throat"
- **Line 40:** "bones"
- **Line 41:** "old," "stones"
- **Line 42:** "alone"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is one of the primary poetic devices used throughout "Little Red Cap." Every stanza contains at least one, and usually several, long sentences that break across multiple lines. The effect is a breathless forward motion, propelling readers through the poem with the same excitement as the speaker, particularly in the first two stanzas, as she exits her childhood and first encounters the wolf. In stanza 6, in which the poem delivers a list of what the speaker has come to realize after spending ten years in the wolf, the enjambment continues to drive readers forward, but this time the effect is a mounting sense of frustration.

Enjambment also occurs between stanzas in this poem:

- "I lost both shoes / but got there"
- "white dove - / which flew, straight ... to his open mouth"
- "I took an axe / to a willow"

The second stanza might also be considered enjambed, depending on the reader; though there is indeed a comma after "drink," the sentence doesn't actually come to a rest until the following line.

Those instances all serve as abrupt ruptures. Though they likewise create a sense of forward motion, these uses of enjambment also help highlight major moments in the speaker's development on her journey to adulthood. Because the line break occurs across stanzas, there is slightly more of a deliberate pause (both visually and when read out loud), which opens up interpretative space for both the speaker and the reader to interrogate what's happening in the poem.

For example, take the enjambment between stanzas 3 and 4 (lines 18 and 19):

> snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes
> but got there, wolf's lair, better beware. ...

The speaker loses both shoes as she chases after the wolf, and the abrupt break in the line reflects this sense of toppling, clumsy forward motion. It also creates a sense of inevitability; the speaker surges along, not even pausing for a breath, seemingly propelled into the wolf's lair. And after the white space of the stanza break, the speaker triumphantly declares she "got there." Enjambment here suggests that readers ought to linger longer on the ominous implications of the speaker's chase. Why has she had to go to such lengths to win the wolf's attention? Was it really worth it? The enjambment itself doesn't answer these questions, but it does prompt readers to ask them.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "out / into "

- **Lines 2-3:** "allotments / kept"
- **Lines 7-8:** "loud / in"
- **Lines 9-10:** "ears / he"
- **Lines 15-16:** "place / lit"
- **Lines 17-18:** "blazer / snagged"
- **Lines 21-22:** "for / what"
- **Lines 23-24:** "paws / and"
- **Lines 24-25:** "dove – / which"
- **Lines 27-28:** "back / of"
- **Lines 31-32:** "years / in"
- **Lines 32-33:** "mushroom / stoppers"
- **Lines 33-34:** "birds / are"
- **Lines 34-35:** "wolf / howls"
- **Lines 36-37:** "axe / to"
- **Lines 37-38:** "salmon / to"
- **Lines 38-39:** "wolf / as"
- **Lines 39-40:** "saw / the"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

There are three major extended metaphors taking place across "Little Red Cap." The first is introduced in the very first line: "At childhood's end." From the start, childhood stops being an abstract concept, and becomes a metaphorical neighborhood that the speaker has to physically exit by walking up to the edge of the woods. Though this extended metaphor primarily appears in the first stanza, it lays the foundation for the entire poem and the metaphors and symbols that follow. Line 15 also uses this metaphor, when the speaker directly contrasts "the woods" of adulthood with "home," another way of referring to her childhood, since childhood is the metaphorical neighborhood in which she grew up.

"The woods," of course, are the second extended metaphor. Set up in contrast to "childhood's end," they represent a borderline space between childhood and adulthood throughout the poem, which readers can perhaps consider adolescence or young adulthood. By metaphorically making this stage of life a physical place, the poem is able to use imagery and symbolism to deepen and complicate the metaphor, particularly in stanzas 3 and 6.

Last but not least, the most extensive extended metaphor in the poem is "the wolf." Meant to represent the speaker's older lover, he is always referred to as "the wolf." This metaphor achieves a number of purposes. Firstly, it's the foundation for the fairy tale allusion to "Little Red Cap." But it's also the big interpretative clue of the poem, suggesting that even when the speaker is most besotted with this older man, he is still "a wolf," a predatory figure as dangerous as he is alluring. His role, helping the speaker come-of-age both sexually and artistically, is pivotal.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "At childhood's end,"
- **Line 6:** "the wolf."
- **Line 8:** "wolfy drawl," "hairy paw,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!"
- **Line 14:** "The wolf,," " I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,"
- **Line 15:** "away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place"
- **Line 19:** "wolf's lair,"
- **Line 27:** "licking his chops."
- **Line 34:** "a greying wolf"
- **Lines 35-36:** "howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason"
- **Line 38:** "I took an axe to the wolf"

METAPHOR

"Little Red Cap" is full of metaphors used to describe the world and experiences of the poem. This makes sense, since the speaker is herself a poet, turning to figurative language to make sense of this key transition in her life.

For example, as the poem captures the speaker's first sexual encounter by describing her ripped and torn clothing, the speaker conveys the brutality of the experience (and its irreversible effect) by metaphorically describing her discarded clothes as "murder clues." Likewise, sex with the wolf is "lesson one" and "the love poem," transforming the encounter into both a moment of sexual instruction and a literary form.

When the speaker discovers her poetic voice, that moment is also conveyed via metaphor. "Words" are described as "alive," "warm, beating, frantic, winged" and implicitly compared to "music and blood." All of these figurative comparisons transform poetry into a bodily experience, thereby conveying the magnitude of this moment in the speaker's life.

Birds are another metaphor used throughout the poem, taking on a larger symbolic resonance. The "white dove" of stanza 4 represents the speaker's early attempts at poetry, while the "birds" that "are the uttered thought of trees" in stanza 6 (while no longer pure white) represent the speaker's more mature poems. Stanza 6 brims with natural metaphors, comparing the speaker's oppressive relationship with the wolf to "a mushroom / stopper[ing] the mouth of a buried corpse" and the wolf's repetitious and domineering poetic voice to "the same old song" being howled at the moon. Finally, when the speaker emerges from the forest, she holds a bunch of flowers, which take on metaphorical meaning as well—these are the only souvenirs she brings with her out of the woods, suggesting that her poetry has achieved full bloom.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 18:** "murder clues."
- **Line 19:** "Lesson one"
- **Line 20:** "love poem"
- **Line 24:** "a living bird – white dove –"
- **Line 29:** "Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,"
- **Line 30:** "warm, beating, frantic, winged; ," "music and blood."
- **Lines 32-33:** "a mushroom / stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse"
- **Lines 33-34:** "birds / are the uttered thought of trees,"
- **Line 35:** "howls the same old song"
- **Line 42:** "Out of the forest I come with my flowers, "

REPETITION

Repetition in "Little Red Cap" is often used for emphasis, drawing the reader's attention to pivotal moments in the poem. In stanza 2, the anaphora and epistrophe of "What big ears he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!" highlights the speaker's attraction to the wolf, as well as warning readers (and her) of the potential danger he presents.

Anaphora (along with parallelism) appears again toward the end of the poem, each time underscoring the speaker's determination and empowerment; the repetition here makes it feel as though the speaker is practicing with the axe, using it on plants and fish before attempting to take down the wolf:

> ... I took an axe
> to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon
> to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf ...

Stanza 5, line 29, contains a brief moment of epizeuxis, in which the speaker marvels, "Words, words" and then goes on to describe her ecstatic response to these words. The back-to-back repetition here makes clear that "words" are the most important thing to the speaker's development into adulthood, more valuable even than the wolf himself. (This moment can also be read as a subtle allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, implicitly comparing the speaker of this poem to one of literature's loftiest intellectual role models, who also repeats, "Words, words, words.")

In stanza six, the poem uses diacope as the speaker complains that the wolf "howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason." The repetition imbues these lines themselves with a sense of "sameness," thereby expertly evoking the very thing the lines are talking about. This controlled form of repetition helps convey the speaker's growing frustration, and indicates her growing mastery over her poetic voice as well.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!"
- **Line 13:** "You might ask why. Here's why."
- **Line 29:** "Words, words"
- **Lines 35-36:** "same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason."
- **Lines 36-38:** "I took an axe / to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon / to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf"

ALLITERATION

"Little Red Cap" is littered with alliteration. Arguably there is not a single line in which this device does not appear, though some moments are stronger than others. Alliteration often helps to emphasize certain phrases and to create connections between words. For example, note the alliteration between "wolf" and "woods" in lines 5 and 6; though spaced out, these sounds clearly create an echo that will resound throughout the poem. It's fitting that these two things are connected via sound, given that both facilitate the speaker's coming of age.

More broadly, like the poem's use of assonance and consonance, the repetition of sounds reminds readers of nursery rhymes or children's stories. On the one hand, this might emphasize the youth of the speaker. Take lines 11-12, which, as we note in this guide's discussion of assonance, draw attention to the speaker's immaturity. The song-song like sounds make it seem like the speaker is simply repeating scripted lines and behaviors as she flaunts her innocence to the wolf, and, as such, that she may not fully understand the consequences of her actions yet:

> ... I made quite sure he spotted me,
> sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,

Alliteration—again, like the poem's use of assonance and consonance—also adds a musical quality to the language, which lends the poem a feeling of lightness, despite the mature subject matter. Take lines 17-20, in which the speaker is crawling through the woods to follow the wolf:

> my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
> snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes
> but got there, wolf's lair, better beware. Lesson one that night,
> breath of the wolf in my ear ...

These lines are full of /s/, /r/, /w/, and /b/ sounds. Note that

alliteration can refer to shared sounds at the beginning of words as well as at the start of stressed syllables, hence why we've marked the /w/ sound in "beware" as alliterative with "wolf"—a sonic connection that underscores how dangerous the wolf is.

Lastly, alliteration is also a very showy poetic device, especially used in such an enormous quantity. This makes sense for a poem about poetry. Language, and all the ways it can be manipulated and magnified, is on full display here.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "petered"
- **Line 2:** "playing," "fields," "factory"
- **Line 3:** "mistresses," "married men"
- **Line 4:** "caravan"
- **Line 5:** "came," "woods"
- **Line 6:** "was," "there that," "I," "clapped," "eyes," "wolf"
- **Line 7:** "clearing"
- **Line 8:** "wolfy," "paperback," "paw,"
- **Line 9:** "wine," "bearded," "big"
- **Line 10:** "he had," "big," "he had"
- **Line 11:** "spotted"
- **Line 12:** "sweet sixteen," "been, babe," "bought"
- **Line 13:** "my," "might," "why," "why"
- **Line 14:** "wolf," "would," "woods"
- **Line 15:** "away"
- **Line 16:** "wake"
- **Line 17:** "stockings," "scraps," "blazer"
- **Line 18:** "snagged," "branch," "both"
- **Line 19:** "but," "wolf's," "better beware"
- **Line 20:** "breath," "wolf," "was"
- **Line 21:** "fur, for"
- **Line 22:** "doesn't dearly"
- **Line 23:** "his heavy"
- **Line 24:** "went," "white"
- **Line 25:** "which," "flew," "from," "hands," "his"
- **Line 26:** "bite," "breakfast," "bed"
- **Line 27:** "soon," "slept"
- **Line 28:** "where," "wall was," "gold, aglow"
- **Line 29:** "Words, words were," "truly," "tongue"
- **Line 30:** "warm," "beating," "winged," "blood"
- **Line 31:** "But," "took ten"
- **Line 32:** "to tell"
- **Line 33:** "buried," "birds"
- **Line 35:** "same," "song," "year," "year"
- **Line 36:** "season," "season," "same," "same"
- **Line 37:** "willow," "wept," "salmon"
- **Line 38:** "see"
- **Line 39:** "slept," "scrotum," "saw"
- **Line 40:** "glistening," "grandmother's," "bones"
- **Line 41:** "belly," "stones," "stitched"
- **Line 42:** "forest," "flowers"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is a frequently-used poetic device within the poem. It often helps to convey the sense of a dramatic monologue, in which the speaker is telling her own story and adding phrases as they come to her. The first example occurs within the first few lines, as the speaker leaves childhood behind, and describes the landmarks she passes along the way. The lack of conjunctions in this laundry list feels both conversational, introducing us to the poem's tone, and meandering, mirroring the actions taken by the speaker as she walks away from her childhood. Not until she reaches the woods does the use of asyndeton end, with "till," emphasizing the long journey the speaker has taken:

The wolf is introduced in a similar manner in stanza 2, each of his attributes stacking one on top of the other without any coordinating conjunctions:

> He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
> in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,
> red wine staining his bearded jaw.

And the same, of course, can be said for how the speaker describes herself: "sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif."

Later, as she crawls after the wolf, asyndeton emphasizes the speaker's process of disrobing, and the way one item after another gets lost or torn:

> I crawled in his wake,
> my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
> snagged on twig and branch, murder clues.

Asyndeton pops up again when the speaker finds the wolf's library. The influx of phrases without any conjunctions creates a sense of chaos, mirroring the intense, ecstatic response the speaker has what she reads:

> a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books.
> Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,
> warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.

The speaker's disillusionment with the wolf is also conveyed throughout asyndeton, each metaphor a clause branching off her original statement that "it took ten years in the woods / to tell":

> that a mushroom
> stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds
> are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf
> howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,

season after season, same rhyme, same reason.

Ultimately, the device's greatest achievement is its conversational tone, drawing readers in to the speaker's story, and helping them understand what she has to say.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "At childhood's end, the houses petered out / into playing fields, the factory, allotments / kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men, / the silent railway line, the hermit's caravan, / till you came at last to the edge of the woods."
- **Lines 7-9:** "reading his verse out loud / in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw, / red wine staining his bearded jaw."
- **Line 12:** "sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, "
- **Lines 16-18:** "I crawled in his wake, / my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer / snagged on twig and branch, murder clues."
- **Lines 28-30:** "where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books. / Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head, / warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood."
- **Lines 32-36:** "to tell that a mushroom / stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds / are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf / howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out, / season after season, same rhyme, same reason."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Lines 21-22, "for / what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?" contains the poem's only use of a rhetorical question. Like the moment when the speaker addresses the reader and says, "You might ask why," this rhetorical question invites the reader into the poem.

This time, however, by nature of the rhetorical question, the poem and speaker do not deliver an answer. It is up to readers to decide whether they agree with the speaker's implication that all little girls "dearly love a wolf." It's a fraught concept—that all young women enjoy, on some level, being brutalized, or at the very least treated only as sexual objects. That said, the question isn't necessarily sincere; the speaker might be mocking a societal idea that young women long to be dominated or lusted after.

The poem's use of a rhetorical question in this moment may also imply that the speaker may not know how *she* feels. Perhaps, at the time, she did enjoy sex with the wolf, but is now looking back through older eyes and feels differently. Perhaps she wonders if she was only doing what she thought she was *supposed* to do in going along with the wolf. And perhaps not! The interpretation is left to readers' imaginations.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "for / what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?"

CAESURA

As makes sense for a narrative poem, "Little Red Cap" contains a good deal of caesura. As she tells her story, the speaker pauses and reflects, and her conversational tone is full of clauses and asides, as she adds detail and description. Just about any mid-line comma in the poem can be considered a moment of caesura, but there are a few instances when this device is used for a stronger effect.

The first comes in lines 9-10, when the speaker exclaims over the wolf's features: "What big ears / he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!" These are the only exclamation points in the whole poem, and the caesura they create has an emphatic effect, showing readers the speaker's enthusiasm and excitement.

Similarly, in line 13, the caesura of "You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry," helps show readers the speaker's attitude in this moment. Her choppy sentences draw readers' attention, and the hard end-stops convey her determination (and potentially some defensiveness, as well). In the next line, the momentary aside of "I knew," sandwiched between two commas, does similar work, as the speaker makes sure to remind readers that she is entering this situation without any blinders on.

Two other notable instances of caesura employ dashes. Once again, they draw attention to important symbols and moments. The first occurs in line 24, when the speaker first sets off in search of her own poetic voice ("living bird - white dove -"). The second takes place in line 31, as the speaker takes stock of her youth at the beginning of the poem—"But then I was young – and it took ten years"—and then begins to reflect on everything she learned in the ten years after that.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "end, the"
- **Line 2:** "fields, the factory, allotments"
- **Line 3:** "kept, like mistresses, by"
- **Line 4:** "line, the"
- **Line 7:** "clearing, reading"
- **Line 8:** "drawl, a"
- **Line 9:** "jaw. What"
- **Line 10:** "had! What," "had! What"
- **Line 11:** "interval, I"
- **Line 12:** "sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and"
- **Line 13:** "first. You," "why. Here's why. Poetry"
- **Line 14:** "wolf, I knew, would"
- **Line 15:** "home, to"
- **Line 16:** "owls. I"

- **Line 17:** “shreds, scraps”
- **Line 18:** “branch, murder clues. I”
- **Line 19:** “there, wolf’s lair, better beware. Lesson”
- **Line 20:** “ear, was”
- **Line 21:** “fur, for”
- **Line 24:** “bird – white”
- **Line 25:** “ flew, straight, from”
- **Line 26:** “bite, dead. How nice, breakfast,” “bed, he”
- **Line 27:** “chops. As,” “slept, I”
- **Line 28:** “lair, where,” “crimson, gold, aglow”
- **Line 29:** “Words, words,” “tongue, in”
- **Line 30:** “warm, beating, frantic, winged; music”
- **Line 31:** “young – and”
- **Line 33:** “corpse, that”
- **Line 34:** “trees, that”
- **Line 35:** “moon, year in, year”
- **Line 36:** “season, same rhyme, same reason. I”
- **Line 37:** “wept. I”
- **Line 38:** “leapt. I”
- **Line 39:** “slept, one chop, scrotum,” “throat, and”
- **Line 40:** “glistening, virgin”
- **Line 41:** “stones. I”
- **Line 42:** “flowers, singing, all”

VOCABULARY

Petered out (Line 1) - Decreased or faded gradually before coming to an end. To say "the houses petered out" means that at the outskirts of this neighborhood there are fewer and fewer houses, until finally there are none.

Allotments (Line 2) - In British English, an allotment is a plot of land rented by an individual for growing vegetables or flowers. It comes from the verb "to allot," which means to distribute something in portions or pieces.

Hermit (Line 4) - Someone who retreats from society and lives in solitude, especially for religious reasons. In the poem, this may be the speaker adding a touch of fable or magic to her description of somebody living by themselves.

Caravan (Line 4) - British English for a trailer or mobile home. This suggests the hermit, or person living in solitude, is living out of a mobile home.

Sweet sixteen, never been (Line 12) - "Sweet sixteen" is a coming of age party celebrating a teenager's 16th birthday. It is most commonly celebrated by girls, and has become a cliched way of referring to this particular time of a girl's life. "Never been" is the beginning of another teenage cliché, "never been kissed."Taken together, this phrase evokes all the stereotypes and expectations of teenage girlhood, particularly those related to coming-of-age and gaining sexual experience.

Babe (Line 12) - A shortened form of the word "baby," or slang for a girl or woman, especially one who is sexually attractive. In the poem, this word both reinforces the speaker's youth and marks her as sexually desirable young woman.

Waif (Line 12) - An extremely thin and usually young woman. Sometimes used to describe a woman's ill health, here it can be understood as another way to highlight the speaker's youth, and perhaps imply her frailty or fragility.

Stockings (Line 17) - Pantyhose, or tights, which are worn over the foot and leg, usually by women.

Lair (Line 19, Line 28) - The resting or living place of a wild animal. Also used to describe a hiding place, usually with ominous or negative intent, i.e., a villain's lair.

Aglow (Line 28) - Glowing, especially with warmth or excitement.

Frantic (Line 30) - Physically, marked by fast, frenzied, or disordered motions. Likewise, can also mean feeling emotionally disordered or out of control.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Little Red Cap" is not written in a traditional form, such as a sonnet or a villanelle, and does not have a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, it is written in free verse, which was the poetic norm by the late 20th century, when Carol Ann Duffy was writing this poem. It could be considered a dramatic monologue, in that it does consist of a first-person speaker's uninterrupted reflections, although the speaker does address the reader, which some believe violates the dramatic monologue's tradition.

Each of the poem's seven stanzas is exactly six lines long, a uniformity that stands out mostly because such uniformity is not present in other aspects of the poem. The other most consistent formal aspect of the "Little Red Cap" is its regular use of enjambment, between both lines and stanzas. This creates a free-flowing sense of narrative movement, which carries readers through the speaker's story and the poem. Between stanzas, it also adds weight and significance, drawing extra attention to key moments in the speaker's coming-of-age experience. (We discuss this more in the Poetic Devices section of this guide.)

METER

"Little Red Cap," is written in free verse, which does not have meter, and is typical of late 20th century poetry, when Duffy was writing. Interestingly, the first line, "At childhood's end, the houses petered out," is written in iambic pentameter, a traditional form of poetic meter that dates back to the era of John Donne and William Shakespeare. Iambic pentameter means there are five iambs—poetic feet with an

unstressed-**stressed**, or da DUM, rhythm—per line:

> At **child**- | hood's **end**, | the **hou**- | ses **pet**- | ered **out**

From there on out, however, the poem resists any regular meter, as if to prove even within the meter of the poem itself that adulthood is more complex, and less predictable, than childhood.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not have a regular rhyme scheme. Throughout "Little Red Cap," however, Duffy does often use a great deal of assonance and internal rhyme to create an overall childish effect that emphasizes the poem's focus on the end of childhood, and echoes its fairy tale source material.

The early stanzas in particular are full of examples: for instance, note the sing-song rhyme created by "drawl," "paw," and "jaw" in lines 8-9:

> in his wolfy **drawl**, a paperback in his hairy **paw**,
> red wine staining his bearded **jaw**.

There's also "sweet sixteen, never been" in line 12 and "got there, wolf's lair, better beware" in stanza 4.This irregular but persistent rhyme shows how the speaker is still evolving out of childish language and patterns even as she takes determined steps toward adulthood and maturity.

Tellingly, in stanza 5, as the speaker matures, the poem begins to use less internal rhyme. When the wolf gobbles up the speaker's poem, however, belittling her artistic ambitions, she resorts again to her old internal rhyme habit: "One bite, **dead**. How nice, breakfast in **bed**, he **said**." The rhyme here also creates a sense of flippancy, reflecting the casual disregard with which the wolf devours the speaker's bird (which can be understood as a symbol for her poetry; more on that in the Symbols section of this guide).

In the final stanza of the poem, however, Duffy uses a regular internal rhyme scheme for several lines:

> to a willow to see how it **wept**. I took an axe to a salmon
> to see how it **leapt**. I took an axe to the wolf
> as he **slept**. ...

Just as the poem is newly in control of its rhyme scheme, the speaker is newly in control of her situation. The effect is empowering, capturing the speaker's assertion of her independence and agency, and her desire to wield violence rather than receive it.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is Little Red Cap, as suggested by the title. Throughout the poem, she uses the first-person perspective, recounting her journey from childhood to adulthood. Her relationship with the wolf, and the fact that her journey echoes that of the fairy tale heroine, all suggest that readers are meant to understand this speaker as a version of Little Red Cap herself.

More specifically, within the context of this poem, Little Red Cap is a teenage girl. The speaker describes herself as "sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif" and tells readers that the drink the wolf buys her is her first. She is still wearing a school blazer when she follows the wolf into the woods, and later refers to herself as a "little girl" when she is with the wolf. Many moments in the poem, including the metaphor "lesson one ... the love poem" implicitly refer to sex, affirming that the speaker is still young enough that this is her first sexual experience.

Throughout the poem, the speaker's main goals are to explore her sexual curiosity and artistic ambition. She plays an active role in her relationship with the wolf, and is the first to spot him and approach him. She is clearly curious about sex, and drawn to the wolf's maturity. But more than just a teenage girl interested in sex and love, the speaker is also a poet. She cites her interest in poetry as her main motivation for pursuing the wolf, who is himself a poet, though he turns out to be a failure as a literary mentor.

Nevertheless, as the poem progresses, the speaker grows more and more infatuated with the written word. Stanza 5 captures her determination to master poetry despite the wolf's indifference, and contains the poem's most ecstatic moment ("Words, words were truly alive on the tongue ... music and blood"), as the speaker discovers her poetic voice for the first time. Poetry proves the means by which the speaker frees herself from both the woods and the wolf, further emphasizing its key role in the speaker's development.

In stanza 6 ("But then I was young ..."), the speaker explicitly describes the many ways she's grown up over a decade spent with the wolf. One of those ways includes her development into a mature artist. The natural imagery and metaphorical language in the sixth stanza is rich and nuanced, implicitly evoking the speaker's maturation even as she describes it for us. This stanza also contains the line, "But then I was young." Coupled with the poem's use of the past tense in its early stanzas, this line makes clear that the speaker is looking back on the events of the poem as she recounts them for us in the present-day. This self-reflective lens allows for the speaker to simultaneously capture her genuine sexual curiosity and excitement as a young girl, even as she now sees (and conveys) the wolf's predatory role in their relationship in a new, more damning light than she did back then.

By the end of the poem, the speaker has achieved what she set out to do. At first the victim of violence, subject to the wolf's desires, the speaker takes charge at the poem's conclusion, performing acts of violence against the woods and ultimately murdering the wolf. No longer a little girl wowed by the wolf's life experience and literary expertise, the speaker has obtained life experience and poetic expertise of her own, and is ready to assert full agency over her future. As she exits the woods, empowered by her poetic talent, the speaker notes that she is now "all alone," a full-fledged, independent adult.

SETTING

"Little Red Cap" begins at "childhood's end," a space that the speaker metaphorically likens to the edge of a neighborhood. Certain details in this stanza hint that this neighborhood is based on industrial Midlands England, where Duffy herself grew up. There are playing fields, a factory, and a "silent railway line," suggesting that this area has seen better days. That is indeed true of the Midlands during the era when Duffy was growing up and industrialization was slowing down. Once the teeming site of the Industrial Revolution, heavy industry began to decline in the 1970s and 1980s.

Beyond this depiction of "childhood's end" as a typical Midlands neighborhood, however, the poem largely takes place in the metaphorical space of "the woods," which comes to represent adulthood in all its teeming complexities. The poem does take care to note a clear boundary between "childhood's end" and what lies ahead, by first describing the long journey away from the neighborhood of childhood, and then firmly establishing there is an "edge" of the woods the speaker must cross in order to enter.

Other settings in the poem include the wolf's lair, which the speaker reaches after a difficult journey that symbolizes her loss of innocence; and the library at the back of the wolf's lair, where the speaker gains access to the magical world of books and poetry.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

“Little Red Cap” appears in Carol Ann Duffy's fifth collection of poems, *The World's Wife*. Considered a feminist poet, Duffy often focuses on themes of gender and power in her work, exploring topics related to women and their lives that have long flown under the radar. This is certainly the case for *The World's Wife*. The poems in this collection focus on famous female figures from history, mythology, the Bible, and other popular cultural texts, or on fictional female counterparts to famous male figures.

Duffy returns often to the form of the dramatic monologue, as is the case for "Little Red Cap." She is known for her ability to slip into just about anybody's perspective with empathy and nuance, and for giving voice to people on the margins of society. She's also well-known for her love poems, and cites Pablo Neruda as one of her formative influences. As she once said in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, "I'm not interested, as a poet, in words like 'plash'—Seamus Heaney words, interesting words. I like to use simple words, but in a complicated way." Her everyday language, humor, and wit make her work highly accessible for modern-day audiences, and are among the reasons it is so frequently taught in schools.

"Little Red Cap" and *The World's Wife* as a whole can also be understood within the literary context of feminist revision. Perhaps best articulated by poet Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," this school of thought argues for the necessity of fresh female perspectives on society's oldest texts and most familiar stories in order to finally give voice to women's lived experiences, as well as help women situate themselves within literary history. Fairy tales, as some of the oldest and most malleable cultural stories, have been a popular subject of feminist re-vision. For instance, Angela Carter's groundbreaking collection of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber* , is made up entirely of feminist takes on fairy tales, and contains three different versions of "Little Red Riding Hood." In this light, Duffy's work, particularly the poems in *The World's Wife*, can be seen as building on and contributing to a new feminist literary canon.

In 2009, Duffy was appointed the United Kingdom's Poet Laureate—the first woman and first openly LGBTQ poet to hold the position. She stepped down from the role in 2019.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The poem takes place in a broadly contemporary time period: the wolf buys the speaker a drink, she wears a modern-day school blazer, there are factories and playing fields in her hometown. These are passing details, however, and for the most part time (outside of the speaker's own aging process) is irrelevant to the poem's concerns. As an allusion to a familiar fairy tale, the poem can almost be said to take place out of time altogether, in the mythological, fabled time when fairy tales occur.

Of course, fairy tales themselves are very much influenced by their historical contexts. They were originally oral stories, before being written down by famous collectors such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm in the 18th and 19th centuries. This was the era of Romanticism, a cultural movement that emphasized nature, free expression, and spontaneous emotion, in contrast to the scientific, intellectual age of Enlightenment that came before. The Grimms in particular situated their collection of fairy tales within the Romantic movement, claiming that each story was an unedited

cultural artifact, a preservation of Germany's oral folkloric tradition, transcribed word-for-word from rural storytellers.

Up until the 1970s, the idea that fairy tales were received oral tradition was the norm. However, scholars now believe that the Grimms heavily edited their stories in order to fit the romantic style and mood of their time. (Indeed, you can track the changes in language and content from the first 1812 edition to the seventeenth edition in 1864.) This discovery that fairy tales and folklore were "standardized" by men like the Grimms coincided with the arrival of the feminist movement, both culturally and literarily. For years, women had taken issue with the moralistic tone of many fairy tales, including Little Red Riding Hood, which often prescribe sexist rules and roles for girls and women to follow.

Learning now that those morals were not "authentic" to these stories, and that a richer female history of storytelling had been papered over, fairy tales became a popular source for feminist writers, including Anne Carson, Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Jeannette Winterson, and, of course, Carol Ann Duffy. Their work is often twofold: excavating the female voices of authentic folkloric traditions, and upending the misogynistic morals and stereotypes enforced by the "classic" fairy tales collected and written down by men by re-writing those same stories from a contemporary feminist perspective.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — A video of "Little Red Cap" being read out loud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPpEqhK4Y24)
- The Original Fairy Tale — The 1812 fairy tale "Little Red Cap," as set down by the Brothers Grimm. (https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm026.html)
- Duffy's Biography and More Poems — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation on Duffy's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carol-ann-duffy)
- Review of "The World's Wife" — A review of "The World's Wife," the collection to which "Little Red Cap" belongs, by Jeannette Winterson. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/jeanette-winterson-on-carol-ann-duffys-the-worlds-wife)
- Interview with Carol Ann Duffy — An interview with the poet, towards the end of her term as UK Poet Laureate. (https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/11/the-srb-interview-carol-ann-duffy/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CAROL ANN DUFFY POEMS

- Education For Leisure
- In Mrs Tilscher's Class
- Valentine
- Warming Her Pearls
- War Photographer

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Malordy, Jessica. "*Little Red Cap.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Malordy, Jessica. "*Little Red Cap.*" LitCharts LLC, October 28, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/carol-ann-duffy/little-red-cap.