Becoming a Woman

The Semiotic and Symbolic, Represented in the Heroine of *Wolf*
by Gillian Cross

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Þórný Sigurjónsdóttir

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Kt.: 160684-2679

Supervisor: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir

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Summary

This essay explores, through feminist and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, how Cassy, the teenage protagonist of *Wolf* (1990) by Gillian Cross, goes against culture – represented by her grandmother – towards the wild semiotic to become a woman. The title page of *Wolf* offers this description of Cassy: “*Of course Cassy never dreams*, Nan always said. *She has more sense, to be sure. Her head touches the pillow and she’s off, just like any other sensible person. There’s been no trouble with dreams, not since she was a baby*” (1). Her grandmother is sure that Cassy has reason enough not to dream, but later on in the story, when Cassy lives with her mother on Albert Street, she enters the fantasy of the semiotic through her Red Riding Hood dreams, where she faces her hidden desires and the sexual wolf. Cassy has not dared to enter the feminine semiotic before as she has been following the dictates of culture, or the symbolic, all her life, where all that is woman, wild and bodily, is disparaged. Also, she does not want to become like her own mother, and face her bodily side connected to the wild and sexual. It is important, as Julia Kristeva sees it, to return to the *chora*, which is dominant in a child’s life in its infancy, to reach puberty.

Cassy slowly moves towards the semiotic throughout the story; she is reluctant to do so at first, but when she gets to know Lyall, Lyall’s son Robert and her mother Goldie, and their wild living habits in the house on Albert Street, she slowly enters her wild side. When Cassy confronts her father, which shows her independence, she has finally entered the semiotic. In the end she has mastered her sprouting desires with the help of her wild dreams and the sexual Lyall, and finally returns to the *chora*, in a symbiosis with her mother.
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Introduction

. . . It was a dream with no pictures.

Everything came to her through other senses.

The sugary freshness of the pine trees was all around, but under that, half-hidden and confusing, was another, wilder smell.

Strong and animal. (Cross 73-74)

Such is the beginning of one of Cassy’s dreams in Wolf by Gillian Cross (1990), set up like a poem: a fantasy of hidden desires. Cassy feels the dream through her senses, smells the pine trees and, more importantly, the wild animal-like smell that she has suppressed in her life so far; something is about to change her person permanently. Cassy is here getting to know her more natural, animalistic and semiotic side that she has up till now barely known existed. This flowing dream of the senses and sexual desire shows her losing her way from the path of culture, entering the wild forest where she can come to terms with her sexuality. This essay will examine and connect Wolf to French feminism as well as eco- feminism, but first and foremost to Julia Kristeva’s ideas.

The semiotic and symbolic are terms that Kristeva used in exploring the way language works. The semiotic is the world of the mother, of warmth and flow, while the symbolic (a term she borrowed from Jacques Lacan) is a system that the child must enter in order to function properly in society with its rules and laws. The semiotic is on the edge, like woman and nature, not respected and always suppressed. Indeed it is much easier and more practical to be on the symbolic side which is recognized as reason and the right way to live. On the other hand, when suppressing all that is semiotic, a child will not be able to reach puberty and understand its sexual desires. Cassy can only become a fully
grown person by coming to terms with her semiotic primitive feelings, that is to say, getting to know her natural side. If one is not able to connect to the semiotic, life is deprived of love and play. Helga Kress, the Icelandic feminist says, when discussing Kristeva’s ideas, that the world of the mother is a life of enjoyment, touch, play, happiness and her warm body that the symbolic, or culture, has suppressed and forbidden to take place in society (“Likami” 233-4). When love, connected to the mother, is lacking in society, it shows in restlessness, loneliness and depression towards life (Kress “Dæmd” 249-50). Teenagers, at least girls, must go back to the semiotic to reach puberty, to know love again and familiarize themselves with the world of the mother. In Gillian Cross’s *Wolf*, Cassy, the heroine, must enter the semiotic to become a fully grown woman and to become a complete person as well. The trouble with Cassy is that she is so fully inside the symbolic and under symbolic law that entering the semiotic seems nearly impossible.

In the beginning of *Wolf*, Nan, Cassy’s grandmother, sends her to London to visit her mother, Goldie. She gives Cassy a bag with food and some yellow material in the bottom, to take with her. Cassy’s mother lives with her boyfriend Lyall and his son Robert in an abandoned house. The three of them are preparing a wolf-show for children in schools and soon Cassy gets involved in the project. Meanwhile she and Robert try to figure out what the yellow material is, and they eventually find out that it is an explosive that Cassy’s father, Mick, the IRA terrorist, must be looking for. Cassy does not trust Goldie to know what to do, so the two teenagers confide in Lyall, although Cassy does not like him at first. Lyall does not believe them and after the wolf-show Cassy sees no other way possible than to confront her father alone and hope that Robert and Lyall will save her. Cassy meets her father in her old house where he has tied up Nan, his mother, and Cassy is in grave danger. It is not Lyall or Robert that rescue Cassy but her mother, who
comes just in time and saves her daughter from her father, who shoots at both of them. In
the end Cassy admits she cares for her mother and is safely home with Nan.

The first chapter in this essay will show how Cassy follows symbolic law in
blindness, never questioning the authority she is under, and how she finds what is natural
and semiotic abominable. In the symbolic, life is linear, strict and cold and in that world,
she is deprived of love. When she starts living in the “forest-like” house on Albert Street
her animal side is set free - beginning with her wild dreams, which will be interpreted and
explained in the second chapter. In the third chapter the wildness of the house and the
influence it has on Cassy is explored. Although she finds the house and its inhabitants
animal-like and disgusting, it is the forbidden forest as well and it gradually begins to
attract her. Cassy wants to live a real life and she is afraid of all that is natural (and
therefore sexual). Within the structure of symbolic law she feels safe, but as she gets to
know the wildness of Lyall and Goldie she gives more into the semiotic and her primitive
side is provoked. The fourth and last chapter will show how the turn-around in the story’s
plot is a turnaround in Cassy’s development as well. In *Wolf*, Cassy gradually gives into
her wild desires, which leads to a symbiosis with her mother where she enters a life with
balance between the semiotic and symbolic: she is, in the end, a complete being.
1. The Semiotic and Symbolic: Cassy in Culture

Greg Garrard says in his book *Ecocriticism* that “feminity” is not, as many feminist theorists believe, “a natural or necessary consequence of being genetically “female”, but rather a set of culturally prescribed behaviours . . . . Whilst this strategy provides opportunities for women to escape repressive stereotypes, it also represents a marked prioritisation of the claims of culture over those of nature” (9). It is important to show that “feminity” is not less crucial in life than what is connected to man and the symbolic, or culture. The feminine side has always been on the margin and always placed below reason, the masculine side.

In *The Green Studies Reader*, Laurence Coupe discusses the ecofeminist Val Plumwood’s theory of dualism between female and male, nature and culture. Plumwood notes that history has always privileged male over female as it has also done with reason over nature (Coupe 119). Coupe points out that in Plumwood’s binary opposite list: “the former always maintained to be superior to the latter” (119). These binary opposites include “culture / nature, reason / nature, male / female, mind / body (nature), rationality / animality (nature), reason / emotion (nature), civilised / primitive (nature)” (Coupe 119-20). As can be seen with this list, nature, or the feminine, is always last but never first. It is what is not respected by culture, the dominant system, and is suppressed. The bodily is connected to femininity and the primitive as well as nature and emotions.

As with Plumwood, Kristeva shows that what is connected to woman, to the *chora*, is put aside and suppressed while the symbolic, the system of the male and of society, is the one that the speaking subject must become a part of to be able to function in society. Kristeva speaks of Plato’s *chora* when she is defining the semiotic (*la sémiotique*): “unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and
consequently maternally connoted” (Kristeva “From” 133). The chora is questionable, two-fold – and therefore not solid; it is rhythm. It is connected to the mother but not the father, the paternal (133). The semiotic is the chora as well: it is emotions, touch, warmth and it is speechless (Kress “Likami” 233).

The chora is connected to one of Freud’s main drives, the life drive “libido” or “Eros”, which constitutes for feelings like hunger, thirst and sex. These “energy” charges that move inside the body of a person in the semiotic stage are what Kristeva says makes up the word chora (“Revolution” 93). The drives are pre-Oedipal, and semiotic, as they come from the body of the mother. These are drives such as the anal and oral, both originating from the mother. The semiotic chora furthermore “is on the path of destruction, aggressivity and death” (“Revolution” 95). The semiotic is a phase in a child’s life where the drives rule its world. Kristeva explains that the semiotic activity is, a mark of the working of drives (appropriation / rejection, orality / anality, love / hate, life / death) and, from a diachronic point of view, stems from the archaisms of the semiotic body. Before recognizing itself as identical in a mirror and, consequently, as signifying, this body is dependent vis-á-vis the mother. At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic) . . . Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. (“Identity” 136)

Then, in the “mirror stage” the child separates itself from the mother, and the semiotic is transferred to the symbolic order and the child “confines his jouissance to the genital” (Kristeva “Revolution” 101).

The child has moved on into the symbolic, but still retains some elements of the semiotic inside itself. Leon S. Roudiez explains Kristeva’s notion of the symbolic in his
introduction to *Desire in Language*: “The symbolic process refers to the establishment of sign and syntax, paternal function, grammatical and social constraints, symbolic law . . . . The speaking subject is engendered as belonging to both the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic device, and that accounts for its eventual split nature” (7). That is to say, as Kristeva says, one should not suppress the semiotic completely: “In the speaking subject, fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier; they disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire, which acts within the place of the Other, on to a *jouissance* that divests the object and turns back towards the auto-erotic body” (“Revolution” 102-3). Thus with sexual desire, revealed in our fantasies, the semiotic lives on and is therefore not wholly suppressed; the fantasies remind us, “if we had ever forgotten, of the insistent presence of drive heterogeneity” (103). Kristeva goes on to say that “the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unit succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him” (“Revolution” 95). The person is made whole with the semiotic and gets to know his or her desires and longings. The semiotic stays important in an individual’s life although he has entered the symbolic:

> Whether in the realm of metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic. This is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an irruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of ‘natural’ language which binds together the social unit. (“Revolution” 113)

Indeed, the semiotic must flow into the symbolic for it to renew itself, become more natural. As a final entry into the symbolic the teenager has to return to the *chora*, to the mother and semiotic, to become a full and complete being. That is to say, the *chora* is reactivated in puberty (“Revolution” 104).
Wolf is a female bildungsroman as Cassy develops into a complete being in the end, but at first her “self” is fragile and she is stuck in the chains of her symbolic life. Cassy stares at her own mirror image: “Sensible brown eyes. Sensible short brown hair. You only had to look at that face to know she wouldn’t do anything wild” (7). She is all sensible, nothing wild, nothing she does is unexpected. Another mirror image emphasizes her fragile self and quest for more self knowledge (12). The mirror images can also be connected to how she is obsessed with her looks in society, striving to become as society wants her to be. Before modern Red Riding Hood is sent away towards the wild, from the culture she knows and has not been able to develop fully in, Nan mentions that this trip, and her undertaking of it without her is just in time, for she should grow up and become an adult (11). Cassy has to enter the semiotic as a teenager, get to know the drives again and then suppress them to return to the symbolic as a complete being.

The semiotic is a stage where laughter, Kristeva says, for the joy of itself, but not particular humour (as that is linked to language and therefore the symbolic), is developed; that is to say the semiotic chora produces laughter (“Place” 284). It is possible to see how the semiotic stays in one’s life as “a nimble sort of fun” remains, but not inside the body as before, but separate from it (“Place” 285). Laughter shows that a person has gone successfully from the semiotic to the symbolic and the chora: “Located elsewhere, distant, permissive, always already past: such is the chora that the mother is called upon to produce with her child so that a semiotic disposition might exist” (“Place” 286). Cassy, which is concerned with being a part of culture, as her mirror images show, does not laugh. She is in no contact with the semiotic, depriving her of the jouissance of life. Cassy’s semiotic mother, Goldie, is presented as a complete opposite that laughs heartily, even without a certain reason, just like in the semiotic stage: “[Cassy] tried to pull free, but Goldie just laughed and grabbed her other arm as well” (64).
The story starts in culture where Cassy is shown as a very sensible girl that does what the rules tell her. She is inside the paternal function, and her life is organized because she follows reason and the symbolic law: “they would go through the same pattern as last time” (5). Culture is the patriarchal system where everything is linear, measured and calculated as can be seen with the pattern and system Nan, Cassy’s grandmother, and Cassy live their life by. Interestingly, although culture is a man’s world, its representative in *Wolf* is a woman. Nan has manly characteristics and she is strict and not emotional: when she shows Cassy warmth, she is startled (12) as it is not her habit to do so. Emotions are connected to the semiotic and Nan lacking them, or not showing them, places her far away from the feminine. Nan is hard and stiff: “The terrifying Granny Phelan” (82), as Robert calls her, and the complete opposite of the natural loving Goldie, who is the symbol for both the mother and femininity in the story. There are long descriptions on the clothes Goldie is wearing, emphasizing her womanliness: “And there, in the magic forest, sat Goldie, cross-legged on the mattress. She wore a purple and gold muslin skirt draped over her knees and down to her ankles, and her hair hung down her back in a single, thick braid” (91). Here her body, clothes and hair are all present, physically, emphasizing her femininity, and as she is sitting in the “forest”, her “mother nature” is present as well. Even her room is natural and feminine. When Cassy enters Goldie’s room she is confused because she feels like she has walked into a vast forest (20). Cassy experiences the room as a new reality: nature. Goldie’s hair, which is often mentioned in the book, is a symbol of the woman, “her hair falling in a great cascade all round her” (100). As an opposite of these constant descriptions of Goldie is Cassy, who is only described in the beginning of the book in a very sensible way and so are her clothes: “Plain practical clothes . . . . Sensible, unobtrusive things that would never stand out in a crowd” (11).
Mick’s relationship with his mother, Nan, crystallizes the extreme ways of the symbolic as opposed to the natural motherly love of the semiotic. Mick and Nan have both rejected and betrayed their own kin, their own blood. Mick left his daughter Cassy to fight for the IRA, and Nan betrays her son Mick when she does not give him the explosive, and at the same time, by giving Cassy the explosive, she puts her only granddaughter in grave danger. In the symbolic, blood relations and the motherly do not seem to matter; Mick says to his mother, whom he has tied up in the bathtub: “I don’t go whining back for help when I hit trouble. Or treachery” (199). He aims the words with “terrible contempt” at his mother. Mick and Nan are furthermore a part of the symbolic in the way that they both organize their lives with mathematic precision, like the way Mick leaves everything in a room he has been in linear and straight (195) and Nan always keeps the room Cassy’s father stays in open except when he is in it, and has the breakfast ready right on time (7-8).

In the beginning Cassy does not question Nan’s authority because she represents the symbolic law, but she should, because Nan lies to her (4). Inside the symbolic there are closed doors Cassy is forbidden to open and she obeys Nan in blindness. Nan has a major influence on the way Cassy thinks. She for example panics when she has slept for too long (76), sleeping being a part of the drives, and then right away thinks what Nan would say: “No use moaning over last night’s mistake . . . . You can only start from where you are“ (76). This kind of short advice comes frequently from Nan, and Cassy follows all that she says with accuracy, because Nan is the symbolic law. Cassy says to Lyall that it is not her business that she was sent away (22) and Lyall, one of the representatives of the semiotic in the novel, jumps up and asks her: “But you’ve never wondered about it?” (22). Cassy in fact has not thought about it because Nan’s words are the law. Nan is not just the voice of symbolic law, but she is also cruel and selfish. When Robert criticizes the fact that Nan didn’t really look after Goldie, Cassy gets angry at first but then realizes that Nan did
several things for Goldie: “Except take her in” (103), which is indeed most important in taking care of someone. Cassy furthermore notes that her visits to her mother are not for herself, but so Nan can get rid of her (103). As a conclusion Nan is the perfect example of someone entirely inside the symbolic. Her complete power over Cassy shows how extreme Cassy’s life is inside culture, as she is not able to develop until she lets go and enters the semiotic again, puts on the mask of animality and follows her own body and instinct.
2. Semiotic Dreams, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf

As stated above, Kristeva holds that the symbolic is a system of meaning and reason: “The symbolic (le symbolique), as opposed to the semiotic, is this inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object . . . . Scientific discourse, for example, aspiring to the status of meta-language, tends to reduce as much as possible of the semiotic component” (“Identity” 134). Kristeva says that poetic language, on the other hand, is semiotic as it is rhythmic and does not respect grammatical rules, that is, does not follow reason (134). The mysterious flow and rhythm is the semiotic position and it is furthermore connected to Freud’s unconscious (Kristeva “Revolution” 97-98). Through art “In ’artistic‘ practices the semiotic - the precondition of the symbolic - is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic” (“Revolution” 103). This chapter will show how Cassy is able to enter the semiotic through her dreams that are portrayed in the text like poems. The dreams are far removed from the scientific language and rules that Nan represents. In the dreams, nature images are dominant but the dreams tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood as well, and in Bettelheim’s interpretation show the little girl coming to terms with her sexuality with the wolf (181) just like Cassy does. British philosopher and feminist Kate Soper argues that women, because of their biology and their “role in reproduction” are more bodily, natural and animal than the male (139). Both nature and women are seen by society as downgrading, bodily and are therefore “tamed” by the patriarchal. The forest in Cassy’s dreams is a place, outside the path of civilisation, where nature dominates and she is able to find her sexuality.

In culture, or society where the novel begins, Cassy does not dream. That indicates that in culture everything is blank, sensible, scientific and un-natural. On the other hand, when she is near nature, or the wild house, she dreams a vivid dream every night. The dreams are poems, they flow and do not follow grammar or rules. This shows that Cassy
is, for the first time, in tune with the semiotic, the drives. Cassy dreams her first vivid dream the first night in the wild house on Albert Street. As a whole, the dreams make up a second frame in the story or a second reality. The first dream is the start of Cassy’s set of dreams that represent her wild, suppressed side and her journey through her sexual development. Nature is very present in the dreams, and as shown with Plumwood’s dualism, nature and woman merge together into one against man, reason and spirit. They are bodily and illogical like the dreams. The dreams show woman’s relationship with nature and how both nature and woman are on the edge while culture dominates both.

In Cassy’s first dream, she is placed in a forest where the pines smell sweet and the earth is soft (27). There is no path in the dream indicating that Cassy is lost in her life. She is stuck as the twigs gather round her and the colour of the flowers is provoking; nature is beautiful but at the same time dangerous and sexual. Cassy is still in the symbolic and afraid of all that is natural (sexual). When she wakes up from this dream she can still smell the pine trees (29), making the dream, the semiotic rhythm, vivid and more present in her life. In the second dream Cassy is up against a tree, a clear phallic symbol, and the wolf whispers into her ear: “Where are you going? Can I show you the way? / The whispering voice caressed her ear . . . . We could play a little game” (50). The phallic is a symbol for jouissance as the child starts to transfer its energy to the genitals. The whispering and game-playing is very sexual. Cassy desires to play this sexual game with the wolf but she is still reluctant to give in to her drives, as this dream makes Cassy scream out: “No!” (51) and she is in a state of shock. Cassy’s fear of the sexual in her dreams is portrayed with her relationship with Lyall in the story as will be shown later in this chapter. This sexual fear is connected to the semiotic in the way that Cassy must confront her natural change and enter her drives, in this case the “libido”, to become a whole person. Yet Cassy does
not listen to her feelings and instinct and in blindness follows culture when she is awake:

“The best remedy for peculiar feelings was to be up and doing” (51).

In the third dream, after Cassy’s trip to the zoo where she see the wolfs and where Goldie tells her about her father, Cassy is more in contact with her wild, un-tame self. The dream following the trip to the zoo is all senses except there are no pictures. She feels the dream: it is very feminine and sensual but it is also primitive, animal and not inside reason: “The sugary freshness of the pine trees was / all around, but under that, half hidden and / confusing, was another, wilder smell. / Strong and animal” (74). She is in contact with the wild nature all around her and also with the sexual yet natural smell of the wolf. Now she is not afraid as before, although the wolf is “very close” and “Vividly real” (74). When the dream is nearly at an end her instinct has become higher as she feels there is some danger approaching her (75). The fourth dream shows Cassy running “faster, faster! Now she was alone, hurrying through the forest on a narrow, twisting path” (95). What is she running away from? Her sexual development? She tries to find the cottage, but at every turn there is no white wall or “a hint of smoke” (95). The cottage symbolizes civilization where she is safe from all that is sexual, semiotic and threatening. In the fifth dream Cassy sees “the cottage at last” but there is a shadow there too and she is unable to get closer to it (121). In the sixth dream she is at the door – finally, and knocking (141). In the seventh dream she is inside the cottage where she finally faces the sexual wolf, and there by her own “libido”, she has been avoiding so far. She is able to do so because she has, with her new life in Albert Street and her dreams, given into the semiotic:
The fire flickered

... Staining everything dull red and throwing
grotesque shadows across the face on the
pillow

... his huge eyes gleamed, drawing her
nearer and nearer, step by step, towards
the high, soft bed . . .

*Grandmother what big eyes you have* (164)

The bed is sexual, as it seems to be tempting Cassy towards it with its softness. The wolf’s big eyes are phallic as they draw her near. The grotesque shadows and red light are sexual images, for what is grotesque is bodily, flowing and connected to the death instinct (as it is blood, organs: the body) and therefore semiotic. She does not run away or close her eyes but confronts the sexual drive.

The dreams all show what is happening in Cassy’s life as she dreams them. The first seven show her, slowly, becoming more in tune with her sexual and wild side. The rhythm, their flow, irregularity and poetic element, as presented in the quotation above, suggests that while Cassy is dreaming she is fully inside the semiotic. The fractured and broken element of the poem/dream is the semiotic breaking up the symbolic language in Kristeva’s sense. Cassy does not dream when she is in culture but interestingly, while she is figuring out her own self inside the wild house, she dreams every night a poetic, semiotic dream. The dreams are furthermore a fantasy in Kristeva’s notion; Cassy is able to return to the “libido”, her bodily sexual needs, through the dreams but not in reality itself. She is in a balanced way both inside the semiotic and symbolic because her sexual
desires in her dreams (her fantasy) are finally given gratification which is not possible in reality. In the last dream Nan is telling her a story and then tells her to “go to sleep, like a good girl” (207). But Cassy no longer follows the symbolic in blindness and gazes into the dark composing a letter to her father: “Dear Wolf, Don’t vanish into the dark / forest again” (207). Through the fantasy, the dreams, she has confronted the drives she has been so afraid to face. The last dream shows that she has come to terms with her wilder, more animal side at last, as will furthermore and more fully be shown later on with Lyall, the wolf and her mother.

The dreams not only show Cassy’s development into the semiotic, through her “libido”, but likewise tell the story of Cassy as Little Red Riding Hood that enters the forbidden forest. The novel incorporates the fairy tale in two different ways, that is, within two frames. The first is the story itself happening in reality with Cassy travelling to her mother with a bag of food. The second frame is the fairy tale she participates in through the dreams, as has been illustrated above. “Little Red Riding Hood’s” literary form first appeared in print with Perrault’s “Little Red Riding Hood“ (Bettelheim 167) and in 1857 the fairy tale got the shape as we know it today with the Brothers Grimm version “Little Red Cap“ (167). Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim gives an interesting interpretation of it in his book The Uses of Enchantment where he says that the mother knows of Little Red Riding Hood curiosity to discover the secret of adults (171), that is to say, she is curious to see what is sexual. Indeed Little Red Riding Hood follows the pleasure principle, shown with her picking endless amount of flowers instead of following the path of reason (171) and furthermore her cap which is red, symbolically meaning “violent emotions, very much including sexual ones“ (173). Bettelheim says that when Red Cap has mastered the sexual feelings of the id by meeting the wolf, the child thinks she does not need to fear the wolf anymore (181). The wolf, Bettelheim says, is attractive to us, for his power over us shows
our fascination of him: “But the wolf is not just the male seducer, he also represents all the 
 asocial, animalistic tendencies within ourselves“ (172). The hunter is the wolf”s opposite, 
as he is connected to the super ego (the symbolic) but not the id (semiotic) as the wolf 
(177).

In Gillian Cross’s Wolf the fairy tale is reversed, as instead of going to her 
grandmother’s house from her mother, Cassy leaves her grandmother to go to her mother. 
The basket of food is a bag of food meant for herself and the explosive inside the bag is 
the wolf’s attraction, not Cassy herself. The city has become more dangerous than the 
forest as Cassy struggles to find her way through the jungle of houses and subways to her 
mother (15). Symbolically, Cassy enters another kind of “forest” in the wild house on 
Albert Street, where she can, like Little Red Riding Hood, find her sexuality. When she 
stops following what grandmother, the authority, tells her, she leaves the path of symbolic 
law and starts following her wild instincts. As will be shown in the next chapter, Cassy 
starts to come to terms with her sexuality as she goes further into the “forest”, just like 
Red Riding Hood, and in the end masters these new feelings and herself as well. But 
before she can do so she has to meet the dangerous, sexual wolf: Lyall.

Lyall, the wolf, is not a part of society, but inside nature, the chora and the 
semiotic. He is the wolf, the animal, without restrictions as he follows his drives 
completely without suppressing them. He is, in Bettelheim’s sense, following the id, the 
pleasure principle. Lyall’s first appearance in the novel asserts him as the dangerous, 
sexual wolf that Little Red Riding Hood should stay away from, emphasised with his body 
that is always present. The semiotic is presented as very sexual, aggressive, grotesque and 
smothering in Lyall’s character. The wolf is sitting in the “dark forest” as he greets Cassy: 
“Hello, Little Red Riding Hood” (22). Lyall takes control of Cassy at the very first when 
he grabs Nan’s letter and reads it mockingly with a “grotesque, shrill voice” and Cassy can
do nothing to stop him (23). Lyall is the hungry, fierce and sexual wolf as he grins, growls and bares his teeth (88). He even wants to “eat” Cassy, which is again very sexual: “Juicy meat! Sugar and spice! Curried Cassy” (88). Food, what is oral, is semiotic as it is connected to the “libido” the life drive that wants to fulfil all desires completely. “The gaze,” as defined by Lucy Irigaray, is the way men look at women sexually and turn them into sexual objects (Kress “Sentenced” 270). This sexual gaze is evident as Lyall stares sharply at Cassy with anything but clownish eyes (45). Cassy even talks of hating him (88) which shows her utter disgust and fear of the sexual, just as her dreams above have shown.
3. Entering the Semiotic Through the Wild House, Lyall and the Motherly

The environmental historian William Cronon states: “Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity” (qtd. in Garrard 69-70). Cassy recovers her true self in the wilderness of the house (which smells like a cave, p. 9), inside nature as it were, where her true self can be set free. The way Cassy is so fully and blindly inside the symbolic is easy to see inside the wild house where all the discomfort (what is natural) displeases her (23-24). The house is a mess, with pipes, wood and boxes in all corners and the inhabitants of the house sit on the floor because they do not have chairs (32). A house without chairs is indeed animal-like! Hence, Lyall, Goldie and Robert are like animals that live in a house that could just as well be the wilderness. Cassy is their opposite, because for her this wild way of living is uncomfortable and she can not cope with it. As an example of that, Cassy does not want to eat next to the trash and starts cleaning as soon as she can (31) and does not want to eat with her hands (32). Cassy is so fully inside the symbolic that she is not able to live naturally, that is, inside nature which is woman, chora and not acceptable within her ordered world. The only person Cassy can relate to is Robert who is organized as herself: “It was like living with a filing cabinet. Or a computer. Whatever they needed to know, Robert had a file to cover it” (118). But at the same time Robert has semiotic qualities and is wild and free as well. As a result of that Robert is not a part of culture, he for example thinks nothing of normal education: “‘School’s a waste of time’” (33). Robert can furthermore be seen as both Cassy’s nature mentor, as they become good friends and she trusts him, and the perfect example of how the cultural symbolic and natural semiotic can work together in a
balanced way. Robert is inside grammatical order and reason, the symbolic, but he has furthermore become a full being by not suppressing the semiotic completely as he eats with his fingers, accepts Lyall and Goldie’s aggressive and exaggerated semiotic nature, and does not participate fully in society.

At first Cassy does not want to mix the two systems together, her symbolic system and the semiotic, represented with the wild living habits in the house and the motherly (Goldie). She does not dare to enter the semiotic system, seen with her obsession for cleaning – keeping everything in grammatical order. When Robert asks if she enjoys cleaning the kitchen she answers: “’Of course not!’” (87) and then adds that the reason is that it is not possible to live in this chaos (87), she needs the linear structure of symbolic law. Cassy furthermore does not want to confront the animal (natural) in herself:

’Eat with our fingers?’ Cassy was horrified. ’But that’s-‘

‘Wild?’ Lyall said mockingly . . . . ’What’s the matter Cassy? Will civilization be destroyed if we don’t use a knife and fork? Shall we drop down on to all fours and tear the food with our teeth?’ (92)

Here Lyall says exactly what sums up Cassy’s fright; she does not dare - yet - to become a part of nature and possibly loose reason. Cassy is very obsessed with what is normal and as she calls it “real” or the normal way to behave in a structured society, like going to the library, to school and cleaning (114-15). What is connected to culture is what is real for Cassy, the wild side of her new life is on the other hand unreal. “’I’m not allowed to go to school! I have to be here, in this – this slum, with you and Goldie . . . . Not behaving like a real person at all’” (119). Cassy furthermore says she wants facts, not feelings or fairy tales (111). Fairy tales and feelings are both a part of the semiotic when facts are in the symbolic because they are reason.
Although Cassy is concerned with living a “real life” in culture with facts and reason she is very curious and obsessed with what is natural, although she is afraid of it. She thinks a lot about the wolves, and deep down Cassy understands nature, her animal instinct is even stronger than her mother’s. When Lyall is inside the wolves-cage Goldie does not worry, but Cassy “knew, with her rational mind, that there was no threat, but that did not silence the primitive voice crying in her head. Danger! Danger!” (72). Cassy wants to think with her mind (the symbolic) but her feelings, her instinct (the semiotic) takes over and is alert in her head, her body. Indeed, after the trip to the zoo, Cassy seems more interwoven with her instinct: she is getting nearer to her primitive, natural side. Later in the story when she enters her room in Albert Street, “[a] primitive sense, more basic than sight or smell, set the skin prickling all over her body” (151). She is sure someone has been in her room although nothing visible, or sensible, suggests that; it is her primitive side that senses something unusual. And finally Cassy questions culture, or Nan, and demands answers from her: “You’ve never told me anything about him. And it’s time you did” (73). Cassy is never wholly inside the symbolic like Nan because she does not have language fully in her power. Sometimes she is not able to finish her sentences, they are fractured and poetic: “‘Because-‘ Cassy didn’t know how she was going to end the sentence and she never found out” (88). Likewise, in the very beginning Cassy thinks to herself: “Sometimes Cassy wished being sensible wasn’t so important” (7). This can be interpreted as Cassy’s hidden desire to become more bodily and semiotic. Cassy is willing to break away from the symbolic, to leave the path of civilization. Yet, what will bring her closest to nature is her mother’s love which comes last of all in Cassy’s development into a complete being.

The mother is important in Kristeva’s notion of love while the paternal is unimportant: “Even though the mother is a prostitute, it doesn’t matter who the actual
father is since the child belongs solely to its mother (First love)” (“The Father” 148) and in the same article she says: “To love is to survive paternal meaning . . . This act of loving and its incumbent writing spring from the Death of the Father” (150). This shows that Kristeva connects love solely to the mother, the maternal and therefore the semiotic chora. If one becomes able to love, one is not wholly interwoven with paternal law and order. The desire for motherhood is maternal compulsion, a cycle of life and death where by giving birth, “the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself“ (“Identity” 238-39). Cassy does not welcome her mother’s love in the beginning of the book and pushes her away: “[Goldie] flung her arms wide, and Cassy shrank away from the hug” (41). And again when Goldie wants her to come with her and Lyall to the zoo, Cassy is irritated and tries to pull herself free from her mother’s embrace but Goldie does not give in and grabs her other arm, holding her tighter in the symbiosis (64). The motherly love Goldie is trying to give Cassy seems to suffocate her. Cassy even wants to fight her mother off, and the only thing stopping her is them being in public (64). This shows that Cassy is afraid to mature, because with maturing she becomes her mother in a way, and that is what she does not want to become.

Verena Andermatt Conley writes in her article, “Héléne Cixous: The Language of Flowers”, that Cixous rewrites nature as she connects it with women: “A phallocratic culture is founded on the exclusion of nature and of women” (148). Cixous says, like Plumwood above, that woman is always on nature’s side and woman is furthermore passive, which she shows in a binary opposite table:

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High:  Culture    Mind    Speech    Man
Low:   Nature    Body    Writing    Woman” (149).
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High culture privileges man and mind while nature and the body are below, forgotten. Language is the language of man that kills life, and Cixous encourages women to return to the bodily as it is more natural, or as Conley writes: “The feminine ‘subject’ by contrast is attuned to the language of things, to feeling, or pathos . . . . Cixous repeatedly emphasizes bodily communication . . . . Women communicate with the body, through vibrations that go from blood to blood, through musical vibrations” (151). Woman is not a creature of the spirit or the mind. She is feeling, love, emotions (pathos) and connected to what is bodily as will be shown with Goldie later on. Conley concludes:

Nature here is in movement. It flows as opposed to being cut off, congealed, retained, dammed up. Consequently, it does not allow for framing, arresting, or neat delimiting of a subject and an object at the level of language . . . . Nature is born under the sign of birth, fertility, song, vibration, proximity, and an absence of symbolic language that separates subject from object. Nature consists of flora and fauna. (152)

Nature is, as woman, flowing, never framed or limited. They live and are connected to birth and are not interwoven with the symbolic language but with movement, the bodily. Goldie, Cassy’s mother, is all these, nature, the motherly, the body.

What is natural is first and foremost the chora, and the mother, illustrated with Goldie in the novel. Goldie is everything Cassy is not. Goldie is the maternal, loving person of the semiotic that Cassy is afraid to become herself and stays away from like staying away from fire. Goldie is not just feminine and beautiful, she is also both mad and wild. Goldie never suppresses anything: “Upstairs, Goldie was screaming. Shrieking and swearing so loudly that her voice cracked in her throat” (97). Goldie never holds her emotions back but always lets them go as she is totally under the power of the drives. Goldie additionally, with her childish nature can not hide her emotions: “A moment before
she had been like a demon, thundering on the window . . . . Now she was standing very still, staring down” (99). Goldie is by far the character in the story that is fullest inside the *chora*, following her desires, that is, being animal and primitive. Goldie is not framed or limited but free and flowing: “Goldie was dancing on the pavement” (63).

Goldie expresses herself through body language, she is not inside symbolic speech but inside natural flow: “Her whole body strained upwards, gleaming silver-gilt in the moonlight, from the crown of her head to the hem of her nightdress. Waiting” (106). Here Goldie is waiting to hear from Mick. She is like an animal waiting for a signal, with her body towards the sky, like a wolf in the moonlight. Goldie furthermore expresses her joy and excitement with dancing: “She jumped to her feet and began to dance round the room with small, neat steps, clicking her fingers” (122). Goldie uses her body to express herself, not words, which are a part of the symbolic. This is in Cixous’s sense the vibrations the woman feels through her body with musicality and flow. Goldie is all bodily, she is touch and *chora*, as when she hugs her daughter when she comes to see her, “and suffered the strangling hug that Goldie always gave her” (22). Goldie understands the body language of the wolves: “That’s how wolves talk to each other. By the way they stand and how they hold their heads and tails” (68). The wolves are nature, animal, like herself.

Lyall – the wolf, like Goldie – is the semiotic in the story, which can be seen with his body language and emotions. Lyall’s physical appearance is very bodily, he speaks through his body and is therefore connected to the *chora*, the semiotic and the sexual. Lyall is always central in the leaflet for “MOONGAZER”, his body is very present, and the way one of the pictures is taken makes him a clear phallic symbol: “He seemed to tower up and up, into the tree and toward the clouds” (43). His body is phallic and sexual as he speaks with his body. Cassy is very frightened of Lyall at first and his body is “as tense as a hunting animal’s, in the moment before it springs” (22). Cassy can not take her
eyes of Lyall, showing her fascination of him, that is to say, her hidden desire for him. In the same chapter Lyall leans his body on Cassy and she, feeling his warmth, “shrank away” (24). Lyall’s body is too present with its sexual and semiotic aggressiveness. Later on, when Cassy sits between Lyall and Goldie in the car, “She edged as close to Goldie as she could, trying to get away from Lyall” (64), who teases her by making the car turn so that she flings up against his body (65). Lyall, with his destructive *chora*, in Kristeva’s sense, is daring and bold when he teases Cassy and plays on her hidden desires. Although Lyall is the aggressive wolf in the story he also has a more sensitive side. Lyall is emotional and kind when he apologizes to Cassy for yelling at her, putting his arm around her (60). Likewise, when Lyall tells Cassy about her mother not being able to forget about Mick, she even likes him and his face is “comically grotesque“ (61). This suggests that Lyall is not in power in his relationship with Goldie because he is insecure of her love for him. Lyall, in addition, makes Cassy shout out, loosen up her desires, be heard: “No! Louder, Cassy. LOUDER” (126). So indeed, although Lyall is the aggressive sexual wolf in the novel, he gains Cassy’s trust in the end, as she masters her wild sexual self.

Cassy is afraid of becoming a woman and therefore to become her own mother, the incarnation of all that is bodily and animal, which Cassy despises. Through Cassy’s cultural eyes, Goldie is a stupid, childish free-spirit that can not even look after herself, but Goldie stands up for herself and says: “I know you think I’m stupid. You and Granny Phelan think I’m an idiot. But I’m not. I know a lot more than you think” (67-68). Indeed she is not stupid; it is culture, Nan, which has told Cassy to think so simply because she is not sensible and does not have the symbolic reasoning Cassy strives to have. Cassy even oppresses her own mother, presumably because of her fear of becoming her. When Goldie plays like a child with Lyall, Cassy is embarrassed:
Goldie gave a delighted, outraged yelp, threw her newspapers at him and bounded across the room. Flinging herself after the newspapers, she landed on top of Lyall and began to tickle him fiercely, while he laughed and struggled . . . . they were behaving like a pair of children. She tried to ignore them, but that was impossible, because Lyall was screeching ‘Mercy! Mercy!’ at the top of his voice, and Goldie laughing hysterically.

It was stupid to let her get like that. Couldn’t Lyall see? (46 - 7)

Goldie is all that Cassy is not, and because Cassy is culture she finds Goldie’s sexual play with Lyall disgusting (because she can hardly look at them) and stupid. Goldie is animal, not spiritual, and of course these are all “Low” not “High” abilities in Cixous’s sense.

Goldie is not only semiotic in her physical appearance and body language but also in the love she has for her daughter. She is the motherly – Mother Nature – in the story. When Cassy arrives unexpectedly Goldie tells Lyall she had wished her daughter to come and is glad to see her (21). When Cassy screams, as she thinks she has seen a wolf when Lyall is only joking, Goldie shrieks and runs to her daughter: “‘Cassy, Cassy, darling! What’s happened?’” (162). Goldie’s natural mother instinct is alert and she is furious with Lyall: “‘You’ve terrified her, Lyall. Look at her!’ Putting an arm round Cassy’s waist . . . . But Goldie’s arm was surprisingly comforting, and she leaned against it for a moment before she sat down” (163). Here Cassy is giving more and more into the motherly love. Moreover, as the story goes on Cassy begins to be more loving towards her mother, like when her mother is in a kind of shock Cassy puts her arm around her waist (100). Here Cassy is, as she is no longer afraid to touch Goldie, body to body, in a maternal symbiosis with her mother. Yet Cassy has still some way to go in finding herself completely, through a closer connection with her mother and her own desires.
4. The Turning Point: Cassy Masters her Sexuality and Herself

Cassy has travelled through the forest of her suppressed desires, on her way to maturity, both through her life in the house on Albert Street and her semiotic dreams. But still Little Red Riding Hood’s journey is not over. Before she can have a balance between the two systems she has to face the wolf herself and complete the symbiosis with her mother. In the end she will return to the symbolic, to order and law, a fully grown woman as the final step in her development.

The turning point in the story is when Cassy, Robert, Goldie and Lyall perform the show together for the children in the school. The play itself is semiotic, for it is with art that the semiotic is set free and is not restrained by society, Cassy thinks herself: “And once she was inside the mask, everything was different” (179). She enters her unconscious it seems, her own imagination and fantasy: “Wolves. Wolves, wolves, wolves wolves . . . . Her head spun with them. How did you think about anything so complicated? How did you make sensible plans about something so dangerous and important and threatened?” (184). Exactly! It is impossible for Cassy to make sensible, symbolic plans about something that is so interwoven with instinct and flow. The fantasy of the play is more real as it is not her dreams, she is awake and aware of herself. She has put on the mask of the semiotic, grotesque and bodily, and can let go:

She couldn’t shut it out any longer. Couldn’t fight off her terror by pretending to be practical and calm and realistic. The darkness inside her head was real, swelling larger and larger, choking her as it blotted out her small, comfortable world. It was her own voice screaming. Even though her mouth was jammed shut . . . . The wilderness came up round her, savage and animal. The ancient forest closed in on her - Danger. (186)
Finally Cassy takes off the chains of culture and enters her natural side. This is crystallized with her scream inside her head which she finally lets out, physically. The wild is coming to her, like an animal, but she has to become more natural herself to confront it. As Lyall picks Cassy up she gives in to Lyall’s natural and sexual touch: “But gradually the rhythm of his strides began to calm her down and she let her face flop against his shoulder. It was warm and damp with sweat, but the warmth was curiously comforting” (189). Here Cassy is no longer afraid of Lyall’s sexual power but accepts it and her own “libido” at the same time. With this transition she is able to develop, that is, to reach puberty. She has not entered the semiotic fully because she still does not believe her mother will help her (193).

Cassy follows her instinct when she stands face to face with her father; she is no longer under the complete power of logic and reason – now she speaks with her emotions. Cassy is steady and knows what she is doing as she goes against her “plan” (193-4) and her primitive sense is alert when she enters her bedroom in Nan’s house (195). At this point in the story Cassy is strong and independent and shows that she is not afraid of her father when she enters her old house (193). She even confronts her father, although he is very dangerous, being the Craig Hill Bomber (124). There is a foreshadowing of Cassy confronting her father near the end of the story when Lyall tells them of a girl who kills her were-wolf father which has the effect on Cassy that she trembles (95) as she herself wants, subconsciously, to do the same. Cassy has her wolfish, dangerous father under her control when she accuses him of never being there for her, yelling, “ludicrously” (202). Cassy’s wild and natural side has taken over as she notices what is bodily, “The smell of his body was all around her, strong – and unfamiliar” (199). Cassy is not afraid in the face of death. She has become strong and independent, and finally more in tune to her nature.

The semiotic takes over all the power when Goldie, the motherly, comes to rescue her child instead of the men that Cassy has up till now been relying on: “Goldie was
standing on the balcony. The instant she saw Cassy, her face lit up, with delight and relief” (204). Goldie symbolically throws the photo of Cassy’s father and Nan over the balcony – and the glass breaks, with the explosive inside, and culture shatters all over the floor. Goldie grabs Cassy and saves her from her father that shoots at them:

The bullet tore across Cassy’s shoulder . . . .

Goldie sobbed as she hugged Cassy tighter and tighter.

‘I thought I was going to be too late! They were all so slow! I couldn’t bear it!’

Cassy let her head fall forwards, against Goldie’s shoulder” (205)

Goldie risks her own life for her daughter, while the absent father shoots at them. The love Goldie has for her daughter is furthermore shown in the way she, the childish carefree being, can not bear the others being slow, and thinks and acts faster than Lyall and the police in order to save her child. Cassy finally gives in to her mother’s love as she cuddles up to her mother in a maternal symbiosis: Cassy is no longer afraid to become her own mother and reach puberty.

A balance of the two systems has been made inside Cassy with her confrontation of her desires and acceptance of her mother, but at the same time not abandoning the system she knows and has always been a part of: the symbolic. In the end, Cassy and Robert are in the zoo together, and Cassy asks Robert why her mother should have come because of her, instead of simply giving her father the explosive, Robert answers: “‘Oh, come on! She is your mother, you know’” (205). He adds that when Goldie knew Cassy was in danger “she went berserk . . . . She was terrified he was going to kill you’” (205). And Cassy finally admits: “‘I care about her too. Much more than I thought I did’” (206). Robert then gives Cassy the best advice possible, showing how his life is in balance between the two systems: “‘You need to plan the rest of your life now? Give it a break, Cassy’” (206). In the end Cassy has overcome her fears about the wild semiotic, as well as
its sexual side. She furthermore accepts her mother’s love and loves her back but yet she thinks of being with Nan in the end. Cassy returns back to what she knows best, culture, having taken the best from both worlds with her in her development into a woman.
Conclusion

Woman is nature, nature is woman and both are put aside as “the other” and considered low when all that is reason, man and mind is placed at the top. The semiotic is not just considered low but all that is connected to the semiotic as well, that is, woman, the bodily, the *chora*, poetry, flow and animality. Although these abilities are looked down upon by society it is necessary not to suppress femininity so that one can live a life of love and enjoyment in some form. As Julia Kristeva says, the teenager must return to the motherly, the life of the drives, to understand its sexuality and then reach puberty to grow and develop normally. It is indeed vital to enter the symbolic system, but without the semiotic one cannot become a full being. The young protagonist of Gillian Cross’s novel *Wolf* must go through several stages before returning to the *chora*, to the semiotic, to find her true self and come fully to terms with her before suppressed desires. Culture - where Nan, the incarnation of reason and rules, is in charge - is a place where Cassy does not bloom. There everything concerning feelings is suppressed and her life follows mathematical lines. It is not until Cassy is left alone with Goldie, Lyall and Robert in the house on Albert Street, that she is able to let go and dig deep into her fantasy. With her Little Red Riding Hood dreams she can slowly find her way into the forest, face the sexual wolf she has not dared to see till now, and then after meeting him in bed, return safely home, richer for the experience. In real life she, at the same time, encounters Lyall, the wolf, and is able slowly to get used to his sexual, threatening, fierce nature, as his body and its warmth is comforting to her in the end. In the wild house she is at first very reluctant to become a part of the wildness of it and its inhabitants and constantly emphasizes that she does not want to live like a pig or eat like an animal and cleans and cleans, as a part of the symbolic, but without succeeding to remain there. In the wild house her senses and
instinct become alert and she gets more and more excited about nature (the wolves) and therefore her semiotic side. When Cassy faces her fears, and thereby her desires, she shows that she has entered the semiotic successfully. The symbiosis with her mother in the end shows that she has managed to find a balance between the two systems and become a woman.
Works Cited


