XX | Red Hair

'Red' hair ranges in colour from a light strawberry blonde to the bright orange of supermarket carrots, through copper, the red of paprika, on to darker reds associated with wine, and to a brown we call 'chestnut.' Mark Twain, who had red hair himself, wrote: 'When red-headed people are above a certain social grade their hair is auburn.' (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*).

'Auburn' is one of those words whose meaning has changed with usage. It is thought to have developed from the Latin *albus,* meaning white. Up to about 1420, auburn – spelled in various ways in French and English – was used for whitish blond hair. In the 1400s it was used for a darker, reddish-brown colour, and in modern times has been used as a more poetic way of describing red hair.

In the *Description Basics* (2025) I wrote about colour and it is obvious that red is a very significant colour for human beings – both in the real world and in the symbolism we attach to it. It is the colour of blood, but it also tells us when fruits are ripe. We associate it with love and with war and with sin. It is a warning sign and a sign of sexual attraction. All of these associations have affected how we view 'red' hair. We'll look at some of these attitudes towards red hair in detail in this chapter.

Some style guides will tell you that 'red-haired' and 'redhead' are perfectly acceptable terms for describing someone with red hair. But I think there are a couple of issues with the term 'redhead.' If you use it as a noun – to refer to 'a redhead' – then it is about on a par with 'blonde' and 'brunette.' You are reducing someone – usually female – to a single physical feature in a way that may be construed as objectification. A person is not their hair. Secondly, 'redhead' may originally have provided a vivid mental image, but it has long-since become a cliché, and in its most literal meaning it is inaccurate and somewhat demeaning. We don't refer to other hair colours in terms of 'black head' and 'white head' – those are reserved to types of blocked hair follicle, both unpleasant. And no one's head is actually red. I'm not saying don't use 'redhead,' just be aware that it's not a particularly elegant or accurate term. Many people, including those with red hair, are fine with 'redhead' but I'm going to prefer the term red-haired.

My thesaurus offers reddish, auburn, Titian, chestnut, carroty, ginger and sandy as alternative terms. *Reddish* is fine and you can use that as a modifier for blond or brown hair. *Auburn* I've mentioned above, and it is probably the best single-word term to use for red hair. *Chestnut* is a reddish-brown colour and so refers to one of the darker shades of hair. *Titian* refers to women with red hair painted by the artist of that name (see below) – have a look at images of his paintings and see if they are the sort of thing you want to evoke in your description. Not every reader in every genre is going to be familiar with the paintings, though some may know it as the name of a shade of red hair dye. If you are describing a character from the point of view of someone who is familiar with art, then Titian might be a word they would use. See 'Red hair in Art' below for more artists known for painting women with red hair.

'Carroty' or carrot-red or carrot-head are terms that have fallen out of use because they're not complimentary. You might still find them in children's or young adult stories, but in stories for adults they would only be used for comic effect or by someone who is being insulting or who still finds juvenile humour hilarious. If I wanted to describe that particularly bright orange hair colour, I would probably call it rusty or make a comparison to rusted metal. Or I might try to come up with a more original comparison to something orange-coloured.

Sandy and sand-coloured are probably best reserved for colours that are reddish-blond, since the sand most people are familiar with is a pale yellowish colour. 'Sandy' is sometimes used as a nickname for someone with red hair, especially in Scotland, and is also used as a diminutive form of 'Alexander.'

'Ginger' is a word that divides opinion. In the United Kingdom it has been used to describe reddish hair since at least the middle of the nineteenth century and it was used in the late eighteenth century to refer to the reddish-brown plumage of a fighting cock, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In the late nineteenth century, Ginger was in use as a nickname for someone with red hair. It has also been used as a diminutive form of Virginia – Ginger Rogers was born Virginia Katherine McMath. It's not clear when the word was first used as a noun to describe someone with red hair – as in 'a ginger' – but this usage has tended to be linked with discrimination and victimisation of red-haired people,

to the extent that the term 'gingerism' was coined. We'll explore attitudes towards people with red hair in more detail later.

If you search for book titles containing the word 'redhead' you won't be surprised to find a selection of romantic novels such as *The Rancher and the Redhead*. There are also many titles in the erotica genre. And there is a handful in the crime thriller section, including Erle Stanley Gardner's *The Case of the Restless Redhead*.

In her book *Red: A History of the Redhead*, Jacky Colliss Harvey describes her own experience growing up with red hair. Complete strangers, she says, commented on it and reached out to touch it. This made her hair feel like public property, rather than something that belonged to her. The same feeling arises if a red-haired person cuts or dyes their hair, with people criticising or becoming outraged, as if something belonging to everyone has been wilfully vandalised. She also observes that the hair becomes all people see, they don't see the person under it. People with 'Afro-textured' hair report similar experiences.

Red hair captures the attention because it is both 'red' and relatively rare. When we see something new or uncommon, the learning part of our brain wants to examine it and assess it. We see this in children when their fascination with something causes them to behave in a way that would be viewed as rude in an adult. Of course, there is another part of our brain that sees something new or different as a potential threat and this can lead to other behaviours that affect those with red hair.

Geographic Distribution

Red hair is most common in north-western Europe, especially Scandinavia, Iceland, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and England. It is also found in the Udmurt Republic in Russia's Volga Federal District. There is red hair in the Ashkenazi Jewish population, who make up 65-75% of Jews worldwide. Red hair was used as a way of identifying Jews during periods of persecution from the time of the Spanish Inquisition onwards. In north Africa, red hair is found in the Berber populations, especially the Riffian people of Morocco and the Kabyle people of Algeria. In Asia, red hair occurs in people of Afghan, Arab, Iranian, Mongolian, Turkic, Miao and Hmong descent. There is red hair in India and Pakistan. In China it is also found in the Uyghur people of the Xinjiang region.

There are people in Melanesia and Polynesia who have red hair. They also share this trait with Australian aborigines. Something like five to ten percent of the population of the Solomon Islands have light hair, ranging from a light blond to reddish blonde. They have dark skin, not the pale skin associated with red-haired people in northern and western Europe.

The Numbers

Red hair is the rarest hair colour globally, being present in only about 1% of the world's population. In Europe, around 4% of the population have red hair. It is estimated that perhaps 13% of Scottish people and 10% of Irish are red haired. And in Ireland it is thought that 40% or more of the population carry the gene. In the United States, 2% of the population have red hair – that's around six and a half million individuals.

Writing about people with red hair, Grant McCracken, in *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self* (1996), says that "there are just enough of them that they cannot be classified as freaks, but so few of them that we never really get used to them" meaning that they are "too numerous to be ignored and too rare to be accepted."

Red Hair in History

It is believed that red hair first appeared in humans in the grasslands of central Asia somewhere between 20,000 and 100,000 years ago.

Identifying red hair in art, language, and archaeology can be tricky. In paintings, colours can change over time and be affected by exposure to sunlight. In language, words cannot always be translated directly, so there is some confusion between terms that mean blonde, reddish-blonde, and red. And in archaeology, surviving samples of hair will have changed over time – the pigments responsible for dark hair are less stable than those for red and blonde hair. We need to bear these things in mind when exploring the history of red hair.

Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome

The first group of red-haired people we find in written history are the Thracians. Thrace was a region in Southeast Europe which is now divided into parts of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. The Ancient Greeks regarded the people of Thrace as barbarians and a number of them were taken to Greece as slaves. The Greeks also characterised these barbarians as having red hair, even though it is likely that only a small percentage of them had this trait. As they were regarded as the lowest form of people, Thracian slaves featured in Greek comedies – five of Aristophanes plays feature a slave called Xanthias, a name that is equivalent to nicknaming someone 'Red' or 'Goldy,' and these were portrayed on stage as having red or reddish-blonde hair. These lazy, dishonest, self-pitying and oversexed

characters are the original stage clowns – the ancestors of the red-haired, red-nosed clown figures we know today.

The Ancient Greek text the *Physiognomonica,* which as mentioned previously wasn't written by Aristotle, notes that red-haired people are of poor character, comparing them to the red-haired fox. It also suggests that those with very pale skin are cowards.

I'm not sure what is most surprising here – the fact that the Ancient Greeks created virtually all the stereotypical traits we associate with red hair or the fact that these preconceptions are still in place today.

The Celts, a people who shared a language and culture, probably originated in what is now central Europe and spread east and west. By the first century AD, most of their territories had become part of the Roman Empire, and their language and culture was restricted to Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Scotland and Brittany in western France.

The Ancient Romans conquered the Celts across large areas of Europe. They also destroyed Jerusalem in 70AD, killing many of the Jewish population and enslaving around 97,000 more. The Romans are said to have placed a premium on red-haired slaves. Boudica was a queen of the Iceni tribe in Britain who led an uprising against the Romans in 60AD – her forces were defeated, but she has remained a British heroine. The Roman historian, Cassius Dio, basing his account on earlier writings, described Boudica: "In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh; a great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips; around her neck was a large golden necklace; and she wore a tunic of divers colours over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch." Her hair colour is sometimes given as red in other translations.

Angles & Saxons

The Saxons were a Germanic people from what is now north-western Germany. The Angles were a Germanic people – from what is now southern Denmark and northern Germany. Both groups, and others, settled in Britain in the post-Roman period. Their kingdoms fell to Danish invaders in the ninth century. In the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the Danes were defeated when the Angles and Saxons united, the 'Anglo-Saxons' creating what we now know as England and the English. Red hair would have been found in a small number of Angles, Saxons, and Danes.

The Vikings

The origins of the word 'Viking' are uncertain, but the term was not in general use during the period we now refer to as the 'Viking Age' (793–1066 AD). The Scandinavians of that time, from what is now Denmark, Norway and Sweden, were referred to as 'Danes' or 'Norsemen.' The first raid by Norsemen on England took place in 793 AD on the island of Lindisfarne off the coast of Northumberland. The expansion of the Viking 'empire' saw them travel to, and settle in, the areas we now know as Iceland, Greenland, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the Faroe Isalnds, the Isle of Man, the Netherlands, Germany, Normandy, Italy, Estonia, the Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey. They also travelled as far as Newfoundland, being the first outsiders to reach what is now North America.

In his *The Story of the British Race* published in 1899, John Munro writes that the "... Danes were distinguished by their red hair and fiery temper..." Again, it's doubtful that every Viking had red hair, many probably had blond or reddish-brown hair.

Although the red hair found in Scotland, Ireland and England is often attributed to the invasion of the Danes, it is just as likely to have arrived with the Angles and Saxons.

The Middle Ages

The medieval period lasted from the 5th to the late 15th centuries in Europe. These are known as the 'middle' period because they fall between 'Antiquity' and the 'Modern' period, which begins with the Renaissance. This era has also been referred to as the Dark Ages, since it was felt to have seen economic, intellectual, and cultural decline. Modern historians do not use the term 'Dark Ages,' but it remains in popular use.

During this period, which saw a dramatic growth in the power and influence of the Catholic Church, attitudes towards people with red hair – especially men – tended to be related to those about Jews. Jews were characterized as having red hair. And as far as the Church was concerned, Jews were heathens and the betrayers of Christ. Judas Iscariot was portrayed in medieval art as a Jew with red hair. Now, I'm pretty sure that Jesus was also Jewish, but don't quote me.

As far as medieval women were concerned, red hair was associated with prostitution. And with angels. Both of which are found in the medieval version of Mary Magdalene. In the Bible, Mary Magdalena is presented as a woman of equal stature to the apostles but she was turned into a reformed prostitute when Pope Gregory I merged her with Mary of Bethany in 591 AD. Though medieval tales portray her as a bad girl made good because she repents her sins, the fact that she was turned into a fallen woman in the first place can only be read as an attempt by the church to

downgrade her place, and the place of all women, in Christianity. Although attempts have been made by the Catholic Church – in 1969 and 2016 – to restore her reputation, over a thousand years of bad press has solidified the image of the red-haired former prostitute in popular belief. And it has reinforced the association between red-haired women and promiscuous sexuality.

It should be remembered that during the medieval era, and earlier periods, women were meant to cover their hair in public. This tradition continues today in some situations, such as churches, and in some areas of the world. Jacky Colliss Harvey notes that this link between loosening of the hair and the sexuality of women is still found in the cliché of the male hero removing the glasses and releasing the hair of the dowdy secretary and suddenly exclaiming, 'Miss Peabody, you're beautiful!'

Elizabethan Era

In 1534, the English king Henry VIII broke with the Catholic church and set himself up as head of the Church of England. Henry VIII had red hair, but it wasn't hair colour that lay at the root of his disagreement with Rome. Henry VIII established his own church, but it was his daughter, Elizabeth I (1533–1603), who established the identity of the Church of England. She also changed the attitude of the English public towards red hair.

Her father had declared Elizabeth illegitimate when his marriage to her mother, Anne Boleyn ended. Elizabeth proudly wore the red hair she shared with him as proof that this was a lie. She made up her face with poisonous white lead – perhaps to hide the ruddiness of her cheeks – and carefully managed her image as the Virgin Queen. Think of the way Madonna and Lady Gaga have created their public personas and you can see Elizabeth doing the same thing – she is said to have owned eighty red wigs, probably dimming the shade to a more sandy red as she grew older. And the fashionable women of the time sought to copy her, dying their hair with henna, rhubarb juice, or oil of vitriol (sulphuric acid). Even some men died their beards red.

But while the image of red-haired women may have improved, the stereotype of the Jewish male was as strong as ever. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c.1599), after Rosalind believes she has been stood up by her lover, Orlando, she implies that even his hair marks him as untrustworthy because it is the 'dissembling colour,' but her friend Celia argues that it is 'something browner than Judas's.' On the Victorian stage, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed with Shylock wearing a red wig and there is some evidence that Shylock may have been portrayed with red hair and beard when the play was originally staged in 1605. Barabas, in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1589/90) is even more of a caricatured stereotype.

Red Hair in Art

Before we begin picking apart the meaning of red hair in paintings, we need to remind ourselves, as Jacky Colliss Harvey does, that "...artists simply enjoy depicting red hair." And that red provides a "...vibrant dash of colour..." that draws the eye. This is true of the Pre-Raphaelites and it is true of the comic book artists of the 1950s.

Western Christian art demonstrates the contradiction of popular images of red-haired women. Saints, angels, and even the Virgin Mary are often portrayed with red hair. But there is also the figure of Mary Magdalene, the 'reformed prostitute' – at least according to Pope Gregory I. The dual sides of this version of Mary Magdalene have provided artists with an excuse to portray naked women with fiery red hair.

The Renaissance painter Titian (Tiziano Vecelli or Vecellio) is known for painting red-haired women, including his *Madonna and Child* (or *Bache Madonna*) and the term 'Titian' is used to refer to a hair colour – though there seems to be some confusion over what shade of red it denotes. Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* depicts the Roman goddess with red hair.

The Pre-Raphaelites, from 1848, also favoured red-haired models. The painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for example, is known to have painted the dark-haired Jane Morris and Elizabeth Siddal and Fanny Cornforth, who were both red-haired. Rossetti married his muse, Elizabeth Siddal, and Jacky Colliss Harvey quotes a description of her by the artist's brother, William: *"A most beautiful creature with an air between dignity and sweetness with something that exceeded modest self-respect and partook of disdainful reserve; tall, finely-formed with a lofty neck and regular yet somewhat uncommon features, greenish-blue unsparkling eyes, large perfect eyelids, brilliant complexion and a lavish heavy wealth of coppery golden hair."*

It was the Pre-Raphaelites who coined the term 'stunner' to refer to women such as this.

The Impressionists in France, during the 1870s and 80s, were also painting and drawing red-haired women. There are portraits and nudes by Renoir and Edgar Degas, and they also feature in the paintings and posters created by Toulouse-Lautrec in the 1880s and 90s.

In American comic books after the Second World War, red-haired characters – both male and female – feature frequently in all genres. While these stories sometimes draw on the usual stereotypical associations, especially the one between red hair and a fiery temper, often the red hair is there just to have some colour the page or to distinguish one character from another. Famous red-

haired characters include *Archie* (revived recently in the *Riverdale* television series) and *Brenda Starr, Reporter.*

We have already seen that, in literature, Shakespeare used the association between Jews and red hair. Before him, Geoffrey Chaucer described The Miller in *The Canterbury Tales* as a drunken version of the red-haired barbarian. It is written in Old English and in verse, but if we pick out the details from it, we get a vivid description.

The Miller was a stout, broad-framed man with strong muscle and bones. Wherever he went he took the prize for wrestling. There was no door that he couldn't have off its hinges or break by running at it with his head. His beard was as broad as a spade and as red as any sow or fox. On top of his nose, he had a wart and on it stood a tuft of red bristles like those of a sow's ears. His nostrils were wide and black and his mouth as large as a furnace. He wore a sword and a buckler by his side and a white coat and blue hood.

Charles Dickens gives us two memorable red-headed characters, but neither of them present a positive image. In *David Copperfield* (1849/50) we have Uriah Heep:

The low arched door then opened, and the face came out. It was quite as cadaverous as it had looked in the window, though in the grain of it there was that tinge of red which is sometimes to be observed in the skins of red-haired people. It belonged to a red-haired person ... whose hair was cropped as close as the closest stubble; who had hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown, so unsheltered and unshaded, that I remember wondering how he went to sleep. He was high-shouldered and bony; dressed in decent black, with a white wisp of a neckcloth; buttoned up to the throat; and had a long, lank, skeleton hand, which particularly attracted my attention...

And in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), he created a grotesque caricature of a red-haired Jewish criminal – Fagin. Even when the story was first published in serial form, Dickens faced accusations of anti-Semitism and he made fewer references to Fagin being 'the Jew' in later chapters of the story. The description of Fagin – I'm not going to quote it: it is in chapter eight if you want to look it up – is only a couple of lines long and is not one of Dickens' best. Although the character of the villainous Fagin is an effective one, the fact that it repeated and even enhanced the stereotype makes it uncomfortable reading today.

Fashions change and with them opinions about red hair – at least red hair on the female head. Partly due to their depiction in art and partly due to the popularity of a few independent, Bohemian women, red hair became fashionable and even desirable during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. There was also a renewed interest in the arts and stories of the Celtic peoples, and a new more romantic image was created of them.

Elinor Glyn (1864-1943) was a novelist and screenwriter. Her romantic fiction, in which married people had affairs, was considered scandalous when first published. Unhappy in her own marriage, the red-haired, green-eyed Elinor Glyn had several affairs of her own. Glyn created the idea of 'it' – a 'magnetic force' that draws men to certain women and women to certain men. Now we may think of this in terms of sex appeal, but it originally encompassed physical and mental attributes. In 1905 she wrote the novel *Red Hair* and in 1928 it was turned into a silent Hollywood movie. The red-haired heroine was portrayed by Clara Bow, who Glyn first described as the 'It girl.' Apart from its one colour sequence, the film is now believed to be lost.

The interest in Celtic art and stories in Europe was a cultural one, but in North America, people of Celtic ancestry – particularly the Scottish and Irish – were reclaiming and celebrate their heritage as were many other groups of immigrants and their descendants.

Red Hair & Hot Temper

One of the oldest beliefs about people with red hair is that they have hot tempers. Perhaps this stems from the fact that the colour red has always been associated with anger and with war. The red hair of the Vikings only served to support this stereotype when they invaded England.

Jacky Colliss Harvey wonders whether the red hair identifies a person with a fiery temper, or whether red haired people are teased so much as children that anger is the result. She also says that if people with red hair are *expected* to be hot tempered, they may choose to take advantage of this and not attempt to control their anger.

It has been suggested that the genetic trait responsible for red hair may also play a part in adrenaline production and the body's ability to access it, but the evidence is not yet conclusive that there is a biological truth behind the stereotype.

Red Hair & Pain

There is scientific evidence that people with red hair respond to pain in a different way to those without it. A study by Liem et al. (2004) found that the anaesthetic requirement of red-haired women was "...significantly greater than in dark-haired women." Some anaesthetists suggest that

twenty percent more may be required. Other studies have suggested that women with red hair are more sensitive to pain caused by heat and cold, but with pain caused by electricity, their tolerance is the same as that for dark-haired women. These studies used female subjects only as it had been shown in previous studies that women were less tolerant to pain than male subjects.

Jacky Colliss Harvey notes that people with red hair are better able to handle the 'heat' of very spicy food.

There is no evidence to support the belief that people with red hair bleed from cuts or injuries more than people with other hair colours. This myth probably arose from the belief that the redness of hair was directly associated with the redness of blood. Nor is it true that red-haired people bruise more easily – though the discolouration of a bruise will stand out more vividly against very pale skin.

Ginger vs. Redhead - Gender & Red Hair

When we look at the stereotypical views of people with red hair, there is a distinct difference between the image of red-haired females and that of red-haired males. In her Master of Arts project on redheadedness, Morgan Lee Thornburg writes, "the 'Ginger' was portrayed as a frizzy-haired, freckle-faced kid with reddish-orange hair; the 'Redhead' was a woman with long, dark red hair and an hourglass figure." Girls may be 'ginger' in their pre-teen years, but eventually they become 'auburn' or they are 'a redhead.' Boys remain 'ginger' their whole lives.

Stereotypes of Red-Haired Females

In considering the stereotypes, we can see that there are three separate ones for females. Red-haired women can be competent and professional, as noted in a 1986 study by Clayson & Maughan, and seen in the character of Dana Scully, played by Gillian Anderson, in *The X-Files.* Or she can be zany and clownish, following a tradition that began in Ancient Greek theatre, and famously portrayed by Lucille Ball. Finally, there is the 'Love Goddess,' as portrayed by Rita Hayworth in the 1941 film *The Strawberry Blonde* and parodied by Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988).

Even as children, red-haired females tend to come off better than males. Anne Shirley, in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, is a plucky and precocious heroine who can serve as a model for the type. When we are first introduced to her, she is wearing faded brown sailor hat "...and beneath the hat, extending down her back, were two braids of very thick, decidedly red hair. Her face was small, white and thin, also much freckled." We also see her being victimised because she has freckles and 'hair as red as carrots,' such that she hopes she might be brunette when she grows up.

After Anne came Little Orphan Annie, who appeared first in a 1924 comic strip created by Harold Gray, and then Pippy Longstocking (1945) by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. There have been a number of red-haired girl heroines since, including several in Disney animated movies.

Where did the 'Love Goddess' stereotype come from and is there any truth in the idea that red-haired women are more sexually adventurous? We've already seen that women in many cultures, past and present, have been expected to cover their hair. In such circumstances, just a few visible wisps of red hair draw more attention than would other colours – a fact utilised by a number of artists. And if unbound hair is regarded as being erotic, then unbound red hair might be regarded as even more so. The association of red hair with barbarians, slaves, and prostitutes in the ancient world may also be a factor here.

In terms of scientific research, we are in uncharted territories. Self-reporting via surveys is one way to measure sexual attitudes and experience, but the nature of the population surveyed and the interpretation of the statistics can lead to questionable generalisations. Many published 'scientific' surveys are based on as few as a hundred participants and the population surveyed often consists of university undergraduates since they are a readily accessible to researchers at universities. Even larger scale studies such as those of Alfred Kinsey and Shere Hite have been the subject of controversy.

One researcher who specifically mentioned red hair in relation to sex was Werner Habermehl. His name is bandied about in a number of articles about red hair, but specific references to his written work are lacking. I do know that in 1978 Klaus Eichner and Habermehl published *Der RALF Report: Das Sexualverhalten der Deutschen* (*The RALF Report: The Sexual Behaviour of the Germans*) and in 1993 Habermehl published *Sexualverhalten der Deutschen: Aktuelle Daten - Intime Wahrheiten* (*Sexual Behaviour of Germans: Current Data - Intimate Truths*). As far as I'm aware, these have only ever been published in German, but Habermehl's comments on red-haired women were widely reported in the English language press. He said that his data showed red-haired women are more sexually active, have sex more often, and have more partners. He also suggested that women who dyed their hair red did so because they wanted to attract a sexual partner. The validity of his survey data or his opinions don't matter to us greatly here, what is important is that Habermehl seems to be seeking to prove an existing stereotype about red-haired women.

Leaving aside Habermehl's work, I have to say that there is no real evidence to support this theory or stereotype. But, as Jacky Colliss Harvey points out, if there is an expectation for red-haired women to be more confident when it comes to sex, that can have a liberating effect and my become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Stereotypes of Red-Haired Males

For men, there are also three stereotypes. The violent red-haired barbarian of the Viking is still around and has also morphed into the working-class Irish brawler made famous by James Cagney. The red-haired clown is found here too in the nerdy, frizzy-haired Napoleon Dynamite (Jon Heder) and in Ron Weasley (Rupert Grint) who provides comic relief in the Harry Potter stories. And then there is the less masculine red-haired male, sometimes regarded as wimpish, and described as unsuccessful and somewhat effeminate in the Clayson & Maughan study. As an example of this latter type of red-haired male, Jacky Colliss Harvey quotes a description of the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Here is a description of the young Swinburne by his own cousin, Lord Redesdale:

"What a fragile little creature he seemed as he stood there between his father and mother ... His limbs were small and delicate; and his sloping shoulders looked far too weak to carry his great head, the size of which was exaggerated by the tousled mass of red hair standing almost at right angles to it. Hero-worshippers talk of his hair as having been a 'golden aureole.' At that time there was nothing golden about it. Red, violent, aggressive red it was, unmistakeable, unpoetical carrots... His features were small and beautiful... His skin was very white — not unhealthy but a transparent tinted white, such as one sees in the petals of some roses..."

Swinburne's distinctive red hair is featured in paintings of him by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Bell Scott.

It is not clear where this third stereotype of the red-haired male originated. It is almost as if he is being berated for not being an overly masculine flame-haired barbarian. There is also the fact that women are expected to be pale and fragile, while men are not. Red hair also draws attention, which can be regarded as a positive thing from a female point of view, but male haircuts – as we have seen – are expected to be more conservative. And then there is the unfortunate association between 'ginger' and homosexually that we find in Cockney rhyming slang, where 'ginger beer' is shortened to ginger and means queer.

The poor red-haired male receives harsher treatment than his female equivalent, at least in commonly held opinions. And while women can be auburn or strawberry blonde, men tend to get stuck with red or ginger.

Red-haired characters by Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens have already been referred to. To pick another example, *The History of Mr. Polly* (1910) by H.G. Wells gives us a positive description of a female character with red hair and a less complimentary one of a male:

"Mr. Garvace was a short stout man, with that air of modest pride that so often goes with corpulence, choleric and decisive in manner, and with hands that looked like bunches of fingers. He was red-haired and ruddy, and after the custom of such complexions, hairs sprang from the tip of his nose. When he wished to bring the power of the human eye to bear upon an assistant, he projected his chest, knitted one brow and partially closed the left eyelid."

Mr. Garvace seems to be a slightly more genteel version of Chaucer's Miller. In contrast, we see the hero meeting the 'beautiful maiden' Christabel:

"A handsome red-haired girl wearing a short dress of blue linen was sitting astride the wall, panting, considerably disarranged by her climbing ... She certainly looked quite adorable on the wall. She had a fine neck and pointed chin that was particularly admirable from below, and pretty eyes and fine eyebrows are never so pretty as when they look down upon one. But no calculation of that sort, thank Heaven, was going on beneath her ruddy shock of hair ... She flushed under her freckles with the quick bright flush those pretty red-haired people have."

In Search of the Red-Haired Hero

What does all of this mean for writers creating red-haired characters? Our first rule should always be to avoid clichés and stereotypes – unless we are seeking to disprove, subvert, or mock them. It is okay to portray characters who hold stereotyped opinions, but we must be clear – at the very least in our own minds – that we do not believe them ourselves.

How can we challenge and replace these damaging stereotypes? One character at a time, one story at a time. Other writers have already shown the way.

In 1894, French author Jules Renard published *Poil de Carotte* – literally 'carrot hair' but usually translated as *Carrot Top* or *Carrot Head*. The hero, François, is an unloved red-haired child whose experiences are based on those of the author. There have been several film adaptations in France.

In comics, I have already mentioned Archie Andrews and Brenda Starr. In the Marvel and DC Comics universes, there are numerous red-haired heroes – and anti-heroes and villains. I'm not going to try and list them here – there are dozens of 'top red-haired heroes' pieces all over the internet. There is an extensive list of red-haired heroes, both male and female, including those in Japanese manga at: tropedia.fandom.com/ wiki/Redheaded_Hero

Perhaps the best-known red-haired hero of all is Tintin, created in 1929 by the Belgian writer and artist Georges Remi who used the pen name Hergé.

But it's going to take a lot more red-haired heroes – men and women whose hair just happens to be red without it being accompanied by a stereotyped personality trait – before the balance has been redressed. Remember, there are 7.75 billion people in the world and one or two percent of them are looking for stories that feature people who look like them. I'd do the math, but all those zeroes confuse me.

Sidekicks & Girlfriends

Although you can find red-haired heroes if you look, it is often the case that the red-haired male in a story is the hero's sidekick and the red-haired female is the hero's girlfriend. These don't quite make the list of 'Clichés to be Avoided' – but they come close. Remember that Harry Potter had Ron. And flying ace Biggles had 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite, whose real first name is never revealed. And whole articles have been written about how many heroes have red-headed girlfriends – check out the TVTropes.org website for 'Heroes Want Redheads' if you want to know more.

The Redhead as 'Other'

When we look at skin colour, we saw that 'white' is often judged to be the neutral or baseline colour – that it is the norm against which everything else is judged. People with red hair – in northern Europe and North America – tend to have the palest skin colour. Skin that doesn't tan and is often freckled. It is possible that this has led to them being treated as something significantly different. In her 2018 PhD thesis, *From Redhead to Ginger: Othering Whiteness in New Media,* Donica O'Malley explores the reasons behind negative attitudes towards red hair and suggests that red-haired people are victimised for being *too white.*

But prejudice against red-haired people cannot be defined as a form of racism, as some people have suggested, because it does not meet one key criteria. Yes, visible biological features are used to differentiate the red-haired, and pseudo-scientific theories are used to 'prove' their difference, but red-haired people are still white. And because they are white, they are not *systematically* discriminated against institutionally or politically in the way that other 'races' are. Because they still benefit from being white, O'Malley says that red-haired people are subject to a form of *pseudo*-racism. And the reason for this pseudo-racism, she suggests, is that red-haired people are *'excessively white'* – "gingerness is at the extreme end of whiteness."

The fact that red-haired people are a victimised minority *within* a powerful majority makes it more difficult to tackle the issues they face. Young people with red hair have been bullied in school for decades, and there are reported cases of young people taking their own lives as a result. And there are cases of red-haired people being violently attacked, chosen as victims solely on account of the colour of their hair. But lawmakers have been reluctant to classify negative behaviours directed against red-haired people as hate crimes – despite the fact that crimes against white homosexuals and white 'Goths' can both classified as such in the UK.

Red-haired people are also at a disadvantage when it comes to defending themselves. If they are targeted by a bully and fight back, they risk being classified as a typical hot-headed 'redhead' and a troublemaker. In stories for children and young adults, the bully is sometimes portrayed as a red-haired boy. Here he is treated as a fiery-tempered barbarian. But his own red hair and the treatment he has received because of it may have encouraged this behaviour – 'gingers' are expected to have violent tempers – and also he has been shown that it is 'normal' to pick on those who are different and are weaker.

O'Malley writes, "The qualities ascribed to the ginger, namely, weakness, nerdiness, and disgustingness, are those same qualities some white men fear they represent, but with which they do not want to be associated. As such, these qualities are projected onto the ginger's representation of 'excessive whiteness' and thus safely distanced from 'normative whiteness'."

In other words, white people distance themselves from qualities they perceive as negative by making them attributes of red-haired people. They externalise these qualities that they fear they have themselves – and then blame red-haired people for having them. This helps to explain why stereotypes of red-haired males and females are different. Red-haired females are fiery (or independent), sexual, intelligent, and unconventional (or 'kooky' or clownish) – all things that white females are not 'supposed' to be. Red-haired males are effeminate, weak, artistic, emotional, or clownish – again all qualities that white males are not 'supposed' to be. If some people have these qualities, let's blame it on those who are 'excessively white.'

Consequences of Stereotypes

I'm not suggesting that white people with red hair suffer from prejudice in the same way that black people do in western culture. But attitudes to red hair do affect people's lives. We've already seen how assumptions based on hair colour can influence decision-making and result in different levels of opportunity. And we all know the devastating impact that bullying can have on young lives – and that the consequences can be with them for their whole lives.

Although I have suggested above that red-haired women come off better than men in these stereotypes, Donica O'Malley makes it clear that it is better to think of "...redheaded men and women as being subjected to different kinds of feminization or emasculation, wherein men are portrayed as weak, and women as only having value with regards to their sexuality, and thus both groups are Othered."

Being treated as someone or something that is 'other' – something that is not 'normal' or not acceptable – is difficult to deal with. It doesn't matter how strongly you reject the stereotype, the constant drip-drip-drip of its existence works its way into your thoughts. Without even being aware of it, you internalise it and it becomes part of your own thought processes. Even in rejecting it, you risk denying something that is important to you. A significant number of people with red hair deny that their hair is red. Because they don't conform to the stereotype – or one of the versions of it – they can't have red hair. Denial of something that is genuinely part of you also has negative effects. Dying your hair may cover up the red, but it doesn't make it go away.

Red hair isn't something that people should be made to feel ashamed of, it is something to be accepted and celebrated. As writers we can work towards that in the characters we create and describe.

A 'Red-Headed Stepchild'

In the United States, the phrase 'red-headed stepchild' is used to signify someone or something that is neglected or unwanted. Stepchildren are at risk of being treated less well than a parent's biological children – we have tons of stories of evil stepmothers and violent stepfathers to show us this. A red-haired child born to dark haired parents brings a suggestion of infidelity on the part of the mother and the father fearing that the child is not his, leading him to neglect it. A 'red-headed stepchild' brings together these two aspects to give an image of something doubly unwanted. The phrase is sometimes extended to 'beat them like a red-headed stepchild.' Obviously, this refers to physical mistreatment of an unloved child. In modern usage, this typically refers to showing no mercy when beating an opponent in sports or some other competition.

One theory is that the phrase may have originated in the early 1800s when Irish emigrants arrived in North America and to reflect anti-Irish sentiment of the time. Another theory is that it relates to 'mixed-race' children born to black slaves who had relationships with, or were raped by, white men.

Given that the phrase is related to the mistreatment of children, prejudice against red-haired people, and (possibly) prejudice against the Irish or African Americans, it is safe to label it as derogatory. As such, you would only use it if writing from the viewpoint of a character whose education and experience lead them to believe that such a phrase was okay.

The Science of Red hair

On average, a person with red hair has about 90,000 hairs on their head. This compares to around 110,000 for people with dark hair and 150,000 for those with blonde hair.

Hair is made of keratin, as are our fingernails. The keratin in red hair contains significantly more sulphur – due to the 'red' pigment pheomelanin – and this is what makes it more difficult to perm.

The gene responsible for red hair is a version of MC1R (melanocortin 1 receptor). The version of MC1R found in people without red hair converts the red pigment *pheomelanin* into the brown pigment *eumelanin* (which is responsible for both brown and blonde hair). The version of MC1R in red haired people does not carry out this conversion and so the red pigment causes the red hair. Other genes determine how much pheomelanin remains in dark hair (causing chestnut shades) and whether red hair appears as a strawberry blonde, bright orangey shade, or auburn. The operation of these other genes is not yet fully understood.

I'm very deliberately using the word 'version' here to refer to variations in the gene responsible. Other sources use the term 'mutation' – this is technically correct since all variations in human genes are the result of mutations, but in the case of red hair the term has sometimes been used to suggest that a red-haired person is some form of 'genetic mutant' who is in some way inferior to non-red-haired people.

The genetic trait responsible for red hair was identified in 1995, by Professor Jonathan Rees at the University of Edinburgh.

About 26% of the Solomon Islands population carry the gene for light hair, with five to ten percent of people actually having blonde or red hair. This is a different gene to the one that causes blond and

red hair in northern European populations and is associated with dark skin rather than very pale skin, suggesting that red-blonde hair evolved simultaneously in two different ways. In this chapter I am referring almost exclusively to red hair as it is found in northern and western Europe.

The genetic traits responsible for hair colour are also thought to be responsible for a number of other biological differences between people with red hair and those with other colours. Jacky Colliss Harvey lists adrenal function; responses to stress; the fight/flight response; immune response; response to pain; the body's use and regulation of energy; and sexual function and motivation. These biological differences – if they exist – may, to some extent, be responsible for some of the cultural beliefs about people with red hair.

The pigment pheomelanin that colours hair red is also responsible for the colouration of other body parts, including the nipples and sexual organs of men and women. This colouration, combined with visible flushing of the skin, can appear much more noticeable in comparison to the pale skin of red-haired people.

Do People with Red hair Smell Different?

In Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* (1985), the main character goes to great lengths to capture the scent of red-headed women. The idea that people with red hair smell differently has been around since at least 1886, when Augustin Galopin published his book *Le Parfum de la Femme* and reportedly wrote that red-haired women had a distinct scent reminiscent of ambergris and violet. Ambergris has a sweet, earthy scent and has been used in many perfumes. Galopin also noted that artificial perfumes did not last as long on the skin of red-haired women, causing them to use too much of it an attempt to make the scent last longer.

I looked around to try and find some evidence to support this belief, but ended up in one of those internet spirals that keep leading you back to where you started. Everyone refers to Galopin and to *The Redhead Encyclopedia* (1996) by Stephen Douglas. Many articles suggest that Douglas confirms the theory, but as far as I can see he is only reporting that it exists. He also says that the reason why perfume fades more quickly on the skin of red-haired people is that theirs lacks the amount of skin oil necessary for it to 'take hold.'

Jacky Colliss Harvey suggests that the outer layer of skin of red-haired people is 'more acidic' and that this affects the way performs and colognes/aftershaves smell. Her source is Susan Irvine's *The Perfume Guide*, published in 2000 by Haldane Mason Ltd., but I haven't been able to find any corroborating source.

From what I've seen, there is a lot of speculation and personal opinion by the those who are attracted to red-haired people – and those who are prejudiced against them – and so I will say that I have not seen anything that persuades me that the theory is correct. However, given that the pale skin of red-haired people is somewhat different to those with more melanin in their skin, and that red hair is in some ways chemically different to other hair colours, it is *possible* that there may be subtle differences in their natural scents. But it is equally possible that these differences mean that people with red hair choose different soaps, cosmetics, and hair products and that these may also smell differently. And in a 2015 article for *Cosmopolitan*, Emma Barker wrote that red-haired women "...will always smell like sunscreen in the summer."

Another rabbit-hole you can end up going down here is the smell-related subject of pheromones. Although we are not consciously aware of detecting them, our noses are thought to detect them in a similar way to scents. Could this mean that red-haired men and women produce different pheromones? Or that the hair found in pheromone-producing areas – principally the armpits and genitals – affects them in some way? I wrote about the sense of smell in *Description Basics,* and my research showed that the subject of human pheromones is not fully understood. Research has identified some male and female pheromones that seem to be involved in sexual attraction, but we don't know the exact extent to which pheromones affect human behaviour. As far as I'm aware, there has been no research into the specific pheromonal differences between people with different hair colours – though a number of non-scientific articles online suggest that blonde and red-haired women are 'better' at producing hormones that men find sexually attractive, presumably seeking to confirm that blondes have more fun and that red-haired women are sex goddesses.

Inheritance of Red Hair

When a gene is recessive, a person must have two copies of the recessive gene in order for the trait to be expressed (or 'seen'). Since red hair is a recessive genetic characteristic, both parents must carry the gene if they are to have a red-haired child. The possible combinations are as follows:

- If both parents have red hair, all their children will probably have red hair.
- If one parent has red hair and the other is a carrier, there is a 50% chance that any of their children will have red hair. That is, each child born has a 50:50 chance of having red hair, not that 50% of their children will have red hair.

- If neither parent has red hair, but both are carriers of the gene, there is a 25% chance that any of their children will have red hair.
- If one parent is a carrier and the other parent is not, none of their children will have red hair but a child may inherit the gene and be a carrier.
- If neither parent carries the gene, none of their children will have red hair or be carriers of the gene.

Interestingly, it is possible for dizygotic (non-identical) twins to be born with different hair colours, so that one may have red hair and the other not. This suggests that inheritance of the trait is based on more than one genetic factor, though estimates vary on how many there may be.

The Myth of Red Hair Disappearing
This is just another version of the 'disappearing blonde' myth. The fact that red hair is the result of a *recessive* genetic trait has led some people to fear that red hair will eventually disappear. But this is based on a misunderstanding. The number of people carrying the gene – people with red hair and those with other hair colours who carry the gene – remains relatively stable in large populations. Red hair could only 'disappear' if the population of humans became very small or if it proved to have a disadvantage for the survival of individuals. Neither of these situations is likely to occur.

Red-Haired Villains – Judas, Lilith & Vampires

Judas Iscariot
Judas Iscariot (probably meaning Judah of Kerioth) was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. The gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John all say that Judas betrayed Jesus, but they give different motives for his action. Matthew states that Judas did it for thirty pieces of silver, but Luke and John suggest he was possessed by Satan. To identify Jesus so that he could be arrested, Judas is said to have betrayed him with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. Whatever his motives, the name of Judas has become synonymous with betrayal.

Since the Middle Ages, Judas has also been used to personify the Jewish people, with his role as the betrayer of Christ being used to justify Christian antisemitism. During this period, Judas was often depicted as having red hair and wearing yellow, a colour used to identify traitors, and these colours were also used by later artists.

In his book *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin* (1928), Montague Summers notes that Judas Iscariot had red hair and links him to folk stories from Serbia, Bulgaria, and Rumania – "...there are certain red-polled [haired] vampires who are called 'Children of Judas,' and that these, the foulest of the foul, kill their victim with one bite or kiss which drains the blood as it were at a single draught. The poisoned flesh of the victim is wounded with the Devil's stigmata, three hideous scars shaped thus, XXX, signifying the thirty pieces of silver, the price of blood."

The association of red hair with the betrayer of Jesus and with the 'foulest' vampires shows just how deeply negative feelings about red hair can run.

Lilith
When God created Adam, he decided that it was not good for him to live alone and so created Lilith from the same earth he had used to create Adam. But theirs was not, it appears, a marriage made in heaven. The two argued. In particular, they disagreed on who should be on top during sex. Lilith refused to take the submissive position, since they had been created as equals. 'I will not lie beneath you,' she said. Adam refused to accept her argument and so Lilith left him. Adam prayed to his Creator, telling him that Lilith had gone away. God sent three angels to bring her back – saying that if she did not agree to return, one hundred of her children must die every day.

The angels found Lilith on or close to the Red Sea. 'God says you should return to Adam,' they said. But she refused. The angels threatened to drown her, but still she refused. 'Leave me!' she said. And she threatened to use her ability to cause sickness and death in children. Again, the angels told her she should return and again she refused. But she promised the three angels that any child who wore an amulet inscribed with one of the angels' names would be protected from her power. The angels told her that if she did not return, one hundred of her children must die every day – and she had to agree that this would be so. As a result of her promise, a hundred demons die every day and children are protected by the names of the angels and so recover from any illness during their early days.

In the earliest version of this story, there is obviously some detail missing and you can't help feeling that something was lost when it was first written down. But the basic 'facts' are there. Lilith refused to be Adam's girl, she defied angels and God, and so God made Eve from Adam's 'spare rib' so he wouldn't be alone. And since she owed her existence to Adam, was a part of him, she couldn't defy him in the way Lilith had. But, of course, we know Eve defied God and 'betrayed' Adam in her own way. More on that little scenario later.

The Origins of Lilith

Humans first wrote things down – in cuneiform – in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) around 3,200 BC. One of the oldest surviving stories from that period is 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld,' possibly written sometime before 2,600 BC. In this poem there is a reference to a demon living in a tree, *ki-sikil-líl-lá*. The *líl* within this name suggests that this was a demon associated with stormy winds. In a later Akkadian version of the story, the demon becomes *lilītu*. These demons are said to be women without husbands who go about seeking to seduce unsuspecting males.

Another evil figure of this period was Lamashtu (or Lamaštu), a Mesopotamian goddess believed to be responsible for miscarriages and the cot deaths of babies. She is described as having the head of a lion, a donkey's teeth, long blood-stained talons, and the clawed feet of a bird. She is depicted suckling a piglet and a dog at her bare breasts and holding a snake in each hand.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the liliths are mentioned once – Isaiah 34:14 – 'Lilith will settle there and find herself a resting place.' Various versions of the text translate 'Lilith' as night creatures, night birds, night demons, night monsters, or screech owls. Not all academics believe that there are direct links between these liliths and the Mesopotamian demons and Lamashtu, but for our purposes I think it is enough to note the similarities between them.

In ancient Greek mythology, the *lamia* are demons or monsters that have much in common with the liliths. An early story tells that Lamia was a beautiful Libyan queen who had an affair with the god Zeus. Upon discovering this, his wife Hera punished Lamia by taking her children. Driven insane by this, Lamia became a vengeful creature who stole children and devoured them. Lamia was depicted with the upper body of a naked human female and her lower body was that of a snake.

In Arabic culture, there is the story of a jinn (evil spirit) called Qarinah who was rejected by Adam and so mated with Iblis (the devil) instead. She gave birth to demons. In order to take her revenge on Adam, Qarinah would cause impotence in men, miscarriages in women, and illnesses in children. The evil spirits Qarinah and Lilith were merged in early Islam.

The version of Lilith that most people are familiar with – the one at the beginning of this section – comes from an attempt to reconcile an apparent contradiction in the Book of Genesis. In the first chapter, God creates the universe and the Earth. And then from the dust he creates man and woman in his own image. Then in chapter two, the man – named Adam – is alone and so God takes one of Adam's ribs and creates Eve to be his 'help meet.' What happened to the woman created alongside Adam in chapter one?

In an early Hebrew interpretation of the Book of Genesis (Genesis Rabbah 22:7 and 18:4), it is said that God created a 'second Eve' after the 'first Eve' returned to the dust. The first Eve does not have a name beyond that, and no reason is given for her disappearance.

The familiar story that names Lilith as the first 'wife' of Adam appears for the first time (as far as we know) in a text called the *Alphabet of ben Sirach*, an anonymous text written sometime between about 700 and 1000 AD. It has been described as 'satire' because of its tone and references to masturbation, incest, and flatulence. The story from this text is the one summarised earlier. More or less.

There is another reference to Lilith in the Zohar in the section concerning Jacob's Journey (1:147b-148b): "Her hair is long and red like the rose, her cheeks are white and red..." Elsewhere in the Zohar she is described as the female counterpart of Leviathan and said to have a serpent body.

Lilith, Vampires, Witches & Succubi

Having been born before Adam and Eve sinned and were made mortal, Lilith is thought to be immortal. People seeking the origins of the undead vampire often refer to Lilith as being the first, since in Judeo-Christian culture you cannot go any further back than the creation of mankind in the Garden of Eden. In mythology more generally, the Mesopotamian demons and goddess are as far as you can go back in terms of our written history. Vampires, it seems, have been with us since the beginning of time.

Lilith is also said to be the first of the succubi. A succubus is a female demon or supernatural creature who seduces men in their dreams, typically engaging in sexual activity with the sleeping man. The name 'succubus' comes from the Latin *succuba*, meaning lover or concubine, and *succubare,* to lie under or succumb to. This is a reference to the male being in the 'unnatural' sexual position under the female demon. It is a succubus who is responsible for 'nocturnal emissions' – better known today as wet dreams. The semen obtained by succubi from this unnatural sex is used to produce more demons. The succubus is said to be jealous of the children fathered naturally by their male victims, and so they cause wives to have miscarriages, or they strangle or suck the blood of the children who are born. This reference to blood-sucking links the succubus to the vampire. Belief in the succubus has been connected to sleep paralysis in adults and to cot death and illness in infants.

The myth of Lilith takes her from Adam's reluctant first wife to a demoness who sleeps with the devil. The combination of evil and sexuality in her story make her the perfect image of a pagan witch, at a time when patriarchal religious authorities were trying to blacken the reputation of female

healers and storytellers who were seen as a threat to male authority. Just as Lilith, Adam's apparent equal, needed to be demonised, so too did the pagan or heathen witches. The fact that witches were accused of doing what Lilith did – sleeping with demons or the devil – is not a coincidence. This is how men used to subjugate women. Incidentally, the terms 'pagan' and 'heathen' originally referred to people who had not yet been *physically* reached by Christian or Jewish religion, that is people in distant places or (perhaps) living in the heath. Only later did they come to mean deliberately resistant to these religions.

Lilith in Art and Literature

It is probably not surprising that Lilith as a character has fascinated artists and writers, and her (possible) place in the Genesis story also guarantees her airtime. Here I will just mention a few of the more interesting references to her – the paintings in particular are worth checking out online if you aren't familiar with them. The age of some of the paintings makes it difficult to be certain whether the figures depicted actually have red hair, or reddish-blonde, or blonde, or brown, but these have all been included in discussions about red hair, and most of them are mentioned in Marion Roach's *The Roots of Desire: The Myth, Meaning, and Sexual Power of Red Hair* (2005).

Hugo van der Goes painted *The Fall of Man* – the left panel of the *Vienna Diptych* – in the second half of the fifteenth century. The serpent tempting Adam and Eve is a lizard-like creature with a human face, standing on two legs because it was only after the temptation that God cursed the serpent to slither in the dirt. Is the creature a red-haired female? It is beardless and the hair – unbound at the back and plaited up into two horn-like protuberances on top – is certainly lighter than the brown hair of Adam and Eve.

The Fall of Man by Titian was painted around 1550 and shows a cherub-like creature with a human face and horns. There is a separate serpent with its own head, though both are half-hidden by the trunk of a tree in such a way that they could be part of a single entity. Again, the hair of the creature seems lighter than the brown of Adam and Eve's, but it does not look to be the red for which Titian would become famous. The painting is thought to have inspired paintings of similar scenes by Raphael and Rubens and an engraving by Albrecht Dürer.

The Renaissance painter Michelangelo (1475-1564) painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512. It is a big ceiling. The central section depicts nine scenes from the Book of Genesis, including *The Fall and Expulsion from Paradise*. In the first part of the painting (*The Temptation*) Adam, an angel, and the serpent – with its female upper body – all seem to have red or red-gold hair and Eve is brunette. In the second part, where Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, Adam's hair is darker and Eve's now seems to be red. Was there some deliberate symbolism in this hair colouring? Some writers think so.

Lilith also features in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust: A Tragedy* (1808). Mephistopheles introduces her as Adam's first wife and warns Faust that her beautiful hair is dangerous – she winds it tight around men and never lets them go. She is also referred to as the 'pretty witch.' In the painting *Faust and Lilith* (1831) by Richard Westall, Lilith is portrayed with red-gold hair.

John Keats' narrative poem 'Lamia' (1820) gives us a much more sympathetic version of the female demon from Greek mythology. Having helped the god Hermes, Lamia who was cursed and made a serpent, is restored to her human form. She falls in love with a young man and the two decide to marry. But this is ultimately a tragedy and the happiness of the couple is destroyed when Lamia's true identity is revealed by a 'wise man.' The theme of the poem is that cold philosophy (science and facts) can destroy that which is natural and beautiful.

The Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) painted *Lady Lilith* in 1867. It shows her combing her long red hair and looking at her reflection in a hand mirror. The model was Fanny Cornforth. Rossetti also retold Lilith's story in the poem 'Eden Bower' (1869), in which Lilith consorts with the devil who is in the form of a serpent. She persuades him to change her into the form of a serpent so that she can go into the Garden of Eden and tempt Eve to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. In doing this, Rossetti effectively explains the images in Hugo van der Goes and Michelangelo's paintings which showed the serpent as being female. It is also, for its time, a very erotic poem – Rossetti was perhaps the first poet ever to use the term 'love-snake.'

Perhaps the most sensual depiction of Lilith occurs in John Collier's painting *Lilith* (1887). It shows a beautiful woman with long red hair and a giant snake wrapped around her body with its head on her shoulder.

In Lilith we have two forms of redness brought together – the red that is the devil and the representation of Hell, and the redness that is the sexual and erotic. Little wonder that she fascinated artists and writers – and continues to do so. Search for 'Lilith' on any online bookstore and you'll find hundreds of fiction titles – especially romance, erotica, and fantasy.

The Original Liberated Woman

Lilith was the first woman who refused to submit to a man and lie beneath him. She knew she was Adam's equal and that her body didn't belong to him. She was the first woman to 'divorce' her husband – or flee from an arranged marriage. She was a single mother. And she engaged in sex for her own purposes, not to provide heirs for her husband. She was, in a patriarchal society, a very dangerous woman. Her story had to be told in a way that demonstrated she was a monster.

Marion Roach writes that, in contemporary feminist society, Lilith has been remade as a goddess – "...she is a symbol of women's unity, freedom of choice, and sexuality ... Lilith is sexual freedom personified."

Early beliefs that women with red hair are liars, witches, and evil may be connected with Lilith. And if these beliefs didn't originate with her in ancient Mesopotamia, they did become associated with her in the medieval period.

Marion Roach: "In all, she is an icon in the history of the world of red hair, the oldest female cornerstone on which to build an argument for the evil and sexually charged identity of the red-haired woman."

There is every chance that neither Lilith nor Judas had red hair. But as with Fagin and a host of other villainous characters, artists and storytellers have given them red hair as a way of making them stand out. Of making them represent 'the other' – that which is not 'us.' Lilith represents everything that pure, white-skinned women are not supposed to be – she is independent and she is sexual. Judas represents one-side of what white-skinned men fear they are – immoral betrayers. And both of them are so close to us that they can do damage with a kiss.

Writing Red-Haired Villains

Should you avoid creating villains with red hair? My answer to this is a qualified 'no.' Some people argue that if you create a villain who belongs to some kind of social minority, you are showing contempt for that community. As I have already said, as a middle-aged, white, English male I am not offended when Hollywood movies use British actors to be the villains – they are often the best character in the movie! The problem occurs if you *only* portray people from that community as villains – because then you are stereotyping them. And obviously, you're doing the wrong thing if you use, say, red hair to create the villain as the outsider or 'freakish' other, playing on the stereotype associated with men with red hair.

Ian Fleming often used negative stereotypes to reinforce the repulsiveness of his villains – it was common among genre writers of his day and even more so in earlier writers such as Sax Rohmer and Sapper. Have a look at the first chapter of *From Russia with Love* – there is an extended description of the Soviet assassin Donovan 'Red' Grant whose perfect body and 'red-gold curls' repulse his masseuse. And in *Goldfinger*, the villain has 'flaming red hair.' He is described in chapter three. I'm not seeking to criticise Fleming as a writer – there is much to admire in the plotting and writing of the James Bond novels, but the dated attitudes and xenophobia have no place in fiction today.

As with all stereotypes, there are two sides to the issue – how and why people create and believe these stereotypes, and the impact it has on the person being stereotyped. As writers, we always need to be aware of the implications of the choices we make.

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