

## Therapeutic Fairytales or the Way to Find (Again) our Smile by ... “the tomcat’s eyes”

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### Abstract:

*The hermeneutics of fairytales, understood as a new way to get their deep significances and therapeutic effects on children by the process of psychic conflicts awareness, represents a frequent topic in the current researches, a real source of inspiration for those delivering literature for children or for those using fairytales for therapeutic purposes, either in case the children with special problems, or in individual or group psychotherapy of adults. Based on the experience in teaching fairytales at the specialization Pedagogy of Elementary and Preschool Education, and at two of the activities of the reading group, Books Mirrors, of the Department of Science of Education within the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology of the West University from Timișoara, this article is a reflection on the therapeutic size of fairytales and of the didactic implications arisen.*

**Keywords:** imaginary, imagination, metaphor, unconsciousness, therapeutic fairytales, logotherapy, identity construction

*One upon a time...*

Many years ago, we had neighbours two students who were living with their grandfather, already quite old. Every time I met him, we used to chat for a while, he answered me reverently, with a good-natured smile, always asking me if students “today” learn anything at all. One morning, I asked him how he spent his time, what he was doing up to the time his grandchildren come home from college. He answered in a good vibe tone: “I read stories every day”. “Do you reread your childhood stories?”, I wondered, knowing him to be a cultivated man, with many and various readings. “Yes, but I get them differently now”, my neighbour told me, looking at me serenely – *significance* of which I would only

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understand much later. In years, when I started teaching literature for children at the West University, I noticed the special interest my students had for stories, that each of them had a story from their childhood awaking emotions in them, they identified, telling it as their own life story.

*The imaginary – the shadow meeting place*

The current interest for fairytales continues a long literary tradition, seeing that almost all the great writers of the world, from Goethe, to contemporary authors, inspired in their works from the universal thesaurus of the folkloric fairytales or were seduced by the idea to create themselves *stories for children* of all ages, therefore contributing to the thematic and artistic diversity of the genre. Considering fairytales superior to other genres, the Romantics are the first to have underlined the modern features of such literary genre: getting away from reality by beginning phrases transposing us in a magical universe, as well as referring and coming back to reality by breaking the illusion operated by the ending phrases, the ambivalence of the characters, going against banality and standardization of everyday, begun by the reign of *figures and numbers*, Novalis used to impose to poetry and love.“ Additionally, due to the world we live in, with many ecological threats and standardization, with a life rhythm pushing us further and further away from nature, harmony and interiorizing, in the western freedom of the last two decades, the interest for fairytale seems to have become therapeutic. Therefore, we explain the success of Michael Ende’s books or of the Harry Potter series, which come back to traditional moral ideas, not didactically, but committed, by combining witchcraftery with the state of the art technique” (Ana StancaTabarasi, 2006, p.51).

The fantastic, miraculous and magic are the features of the universe of fairytales. Pedagogically speaking, Jean Piaget has already shown that the borders of the children’s universe are vague, uncertain, oscillating between the real and the imaginary, between animated and unanimated, among people, animals and supernatural characters, due to such reason, fairytales represent a cross-border vehicle in time and space, in a world speaking a special language, addressing not only to the reason, but also to intuition, Onirism, imagination, a world of fiction by which the child starts understanding the family relations or discovering the world around them. the profound symbolism of fairytales regards first of all the dimension of the human affectivity, the unconsciousness, where many hopes,

dreams, with fears and anxiety come from. Fairytales have greatly answered all the human hopes and fears: tenderness, love, longing, fear of the dark, abandon, mourning, envy, evil, cruelty. "All children have felt such fears, ever since the world existed. They live them day by day and, little by little, learn how to deal with them and to overstep them, understanding that life can be loved beyond them" (Dr. Alain Brochard, 2016, p.2). Starting with oral tradition and up to the modern era, adults and children have discovered the world and with the help of fairytales, of narration, in general. In its own way, the little school age child related to the world of the adults, to family and to the people around them by fairytales and are easily identified with the characters in the stories told by adults. By the fairytales told by adults or read by themselves later on, the evil of the world is bearable more easily, as the good, even long-term, has always defeated the evil, familial tensions find easier their settlement, and interior conflicts fade away or disappear by the richness of reflection topics offered by the fantastic narration, so similar but also different from the real world. Not least, the pleasure felt by the child "breathlessly" following the development of the events from the fairytales makes them sensitive to the music of the language of a "fairy tale" world, where dragons, griffins or monsters starts being similar to the favourite toy, they can handle, dismantle or even make it disappear, like the hero they identify themselves with, most of the times. This is how they explain the fact that in the last two-three decades, along philologists, more attracted to the intertextuality of fairytales, specialists in pedagogy, psychologists and psychiatrists, philosophers and anthropologists, individually or in interdisciplinary teams, have studied the beneficial effects of fairytales on the cognitive, social or behavioural development of children and not only.

Fairytales hermeneutics, understood as a new method to understand their deep significances and therapeutic effects on children by the raising awareness process of psychic conflicts, represents a frequent topic in the current researches, a true source of inspiration for those teaching literature for children or for those using fairy tale for therapeutic purpose, either in the case of children with special needs, or in individual or group psychotherapy for adults. The work having generated this new approach of fairytales seems to have been the book of the American psychologist B. Bettelheim, *Psychoanalysis of Fairy Tales* (1978), translated in many languages. According to the trend initiated by S. Freud and continued by many contemporary or post-Freudian psychoanalysis experts, the

central idea of the analysis of fairy tales in B. Bettelheim's vision, is that, in a precise moment in his or her life, the "patient" will find in the fairytales he or she fed his or her imaginary, *his own solutions*. "The therapeutic effect consists of a process of reconstruction, of imagination, not transposition. Therefore, there is no need for a child to be made attentive on the similitude of his or her situation to that in the fairytale, on the contrary, we noticed a need to put down such defence processes, in order to allow things to act in the shadow, without over-explaining the truth"(B.Bettelheim, 1976, p. 49).Even if he was reproached a certain anachronic vision on fairytales and their educative value, by the fact that, up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they addressed to adults, "Bettelheim's merit is to have popularized their pedagogical and therapeutic values, having shown the way how fairytales help the child *give a meaning to life*, by directing acceptable representations of the anxieties containing them"(Catherine Picard, 2017, p.7).

Sheldon Cashdan, psychology professor at the Massachusetts University, Amherst, continues the road opened by Bettelheim by an inedited book, by his "deep and fun style": *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales* (2009), translated in Romanian and printed by the Trei Printing House. Using the "seven sins of childhood", as unifying topic of fairytales, Cashdan shows the "way fairytales help children face envy, greed, vanity and other annoying tendencies" (2009, p.11).The Trei Printing House has also published in Romanian two books belonging to one of the most famous authors in the field of therapeutic stories, George W. Burns, clinician psychologist, manager of Milton Erikson Institute of Western Australia, trainer and conference speaker and associate professor: *101 Healing Stories for Children and Teens* (2011) and *Healign with Stories* (2016). Burns' books are based on cases retold by some of the best contemporary psychotherapists, who describe fairytales role as a change vehicle, the way metaphor can "short-circuit"the psychic resorts of adults or children suffering from depressions, anxiety, panic attacks etc.

Humanitas Printing House published in 2008 *How to Heal with a Story*, book signed by Paola Santagostino. Not only listening or reading stories is a self-knowledge and healing instrument, the idea of the book is centred on *creating stories*, therapeutic act one can get out in the light ideas from his or her unconsciousness generating solutions to problems impossible to settle reasonably. The unconsciousness, this mysterious baggage of the human being, can hide as many monsters as heroes. As we know it, the topic of any

fairytale is the fight between good and evil, where heroes are presented in clear tones, no grey nuances, or at least, this is the way they are perceived at a first reading. The protagonist- Făt-Frumos, Prince Charming, Snow White, Harap-Alb – represents the ideal image of the author, in the case of that inventing a story, the aware self. The one opposing the good character is as well part of the author, representing, in Jung's term, the *shadow*, aspects they are less aware or they do not desire / cannot admit. The author, the one writing / creating a story, child or adult, gets separated by fiction from the unwanted elements of their personality, elements they may notice, detached, later and get beyond them in real life.

Without being so didactic in his analyses, Sheldon Cashdan tells us the same thing: "An evidence that the dwarfs actually represent a part of Snow White is shown by the objects in their household. Not only the table is covered by a *white* tablecloth, but the beds are also covered by *snow-white* blankets. It is as if Snow White had arrived, in the little house, to a manifestation of herself" (Sheldon Cashdon, 2009, p.80). even more, we know that Snow White does not take into account the advice of the dwarfs – maternal models, symbols of the good mother. "Do not talk to strangers!", they tell the child, "Do not let anyone unknown enter the house!", that is, the type of things mothers tell their children when left home by themselves. As most of the children, she ignores their advice every time she lets her step mother enter the house, therefore undergoing terrible danger, from the same reason she fed her queen mother's criminal intent: vanity. The cord for the corset she wants needs to make her look better. "One of the ways fairytales amplify the psychological impact is that localizing the "sin" from the story both in the person of the witch, and in that of the main character. For a fairytale to have a durable effect on the young readers, the hero and the heroine need to undergo the same feelings like the witch: they need to be tempted by the same temptations. Otherwise, the "sin" from the story may be interpreted as alien to the child, something only the witch is suffering from. Feeding the reader's identification with Snow White and showing her preoccupation for her looks, *Snow White* leads the reader face his or her own inclinations towards vanity" (Sheldon Cashdon, 2009, p.82-83).

The books described above, especially Sheldon Cashdan's book, *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales* were object of several debates with my students, within one of the activities of the reading group of the Department of Sciences of Education. My

students' interest for the psychological approach of fairytales with therapeutic valences was seen by original comments and a deep understanding of the multiple possibilities to capitalize the fairytale in educative activities. Most of the students said they were very surprised at the beginning of the reading of the "courage and inedited" of the analyses from a psychological and psychoanalytical perspective, in order to understand, while reading on, the actuality of the fairytales, the capacity of the fantastic to generate the understanding of reality and the overriding of psychic conflicts. Below, for such purpose, only one of my students' conclusions: "Hope lightened us today, discussing about why and how "the witch must die". The author, Sheldon Casgdan, has the epiphany of the initiated one, who warns that the language of any fairytale contains multiple meanings, the hermeneutics of stories talks about the labyrinth of reality, giving the read an unexpected Ariadne's thread. Every man has a witchcraft (fear, envy, hate, laziness, greed, vanity etc.) which needs to die. *The Books Mirrors* look at us once more the way we look at the world" (Iulia Sârbu, student in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year, PIPP).

*Therapeutic Fairytale – Language Development and Identity (Re)Construction*

In Romania as well, more and more psychologists and psychotherapists use therapeutic fairytales for children and teens in order to improve, together with their parents and teachers, some of their light behaviours or disorders. Laura Jacan, psychologist-psychotherapist within the Adorcopiii – Comunitatea Familiilor Adoptive Association (<http://adorcopiii.ro>) says that the role of therapeutic stories is to put the child in touch with his or her own problems, by identifying him or her with certain characters and by transposing the solution from the story in his or her own situation, which process does not occur in the very first moment, but after interiorizing and processing. By the magic of metaphor from the world full of colours and imagination of the stories, the child will know what to take out of it, without feeling criticised, corrected or summoned to change. Revealing and mediator of psychic life, by simplifying the situations, the fairytale allows access to the unconscious primary processes, having the capacity of "transition space" between inner and outer reality, a life creating space which "communicates, suggests, but does not name" (Winnicott, 1971, p.6). For all the children, but especially for those inner world of which is not sufficiently structured or "suffering from important symbolizing difficulties", the fairytale acts on the preconsciousness, a bridge between the

unconsciousness and the consciousness, allowing the subject to think and dream, to find imaginary answers to the questions asked, related to his or her origins or future (Catherine Picard, 2017, p.2). Like any literary-artistic work, fairytale is the expression of human imagination, of the creation and representation capacity. Psychology proved, related to disharmonic, psychotic, faulty children that they often suffer from an imagination fault and from figurability which can be reinstated in movement by the fairytale specific fantastic narration: "Fairytale is the representation and narration of the processes of psychic reality; the material operating with includes dream, phantasms, familial novel, representation of psychotic and neurotic mechanisms for defence, conflicts related to the understanding of gender differences, of painful passing rites of birth, childhood and adult age, up to the death of parents and children" (R.Kaës, 1999, p.3).

The passing rites are presented in all the fairytales. Symbolically crossing the forest, as sacred space, metaphor of the unknown and of the dangers hidden, the evidence the main characters are subject of, condition of the initiation and acquirement, usually, at the end of the fairytale, of the kingdom or hand of the emperor's girl represents the compulsory steps of any initiation. In many fairytales – *The Story of the Pig*, *Jacques and the Beanstalk*, *Little Thumb* – even the weakest or less endowed with exceptional qualities can succeed, and their success will inspire successes in the real world of those having been informed on such space of fiction. Cognitive psychology and neurosciences showed that imagination, considered as opposed to the reason for a long time, does not only limit to the capacity to create images, on the contrary, it is a faculty of the mental allowing it to issue reasoning and reflections on the world. This mysterious power of the human nature "is a human faculty acting every moment of our lives, starting on the moment the brain becomes active. Due to imagination, the people were able to create language, to appoint and describe the world (...) Imagination can be defined like an intermediary faculty between feeling and thinking, statute allowing us to connect objects and consciousness" (Orane Bischof, apud Yves Chazeau, 2009, p.3).

The access to imagination makes possible the meaning construction and the freedom of language, topics which generated a series of psycholinguistics studies and logotherapy methods, having the purpose to develop the thinking of children suffering from language and communication problems. Some studies underlined the higher efficiency of these

methods at the level of the group of children which, as related to relations and affections, show a higher mobility in the game of interactions. Within group logotherapy, “children may experiment a *passive statute* or an *active statute*. Therefore, an inhibited child shall not be all the time front and centre. On the other hand, a very confident child may face the need to respect others’ space (...) More, at cognitive and social level, the group allows the children to think together with the others, to exchange ideas which can be approved, nuanced or contested”(Sandrine PrazPetteloud, 2008, p. 155).

The narrative structure of fairytales follows a coherent organizing of the content, by placing the action in time and space, by describing a conflict between imaginary characters, a rigorous chronology of the development of events and finding solutions to settle conflicts. By listening and then telling a fairytale, the child interiorizes this structure, faces communicational situations and syntactic structures – verbal times, types of phrases –more and more complex, memorize words, phrases and new expressions, discovers the pleasure to listen to stories, developing as well the representation and imagination capacity, by detachment from reality, symbolization of space and time, verbalizing emotions. Meanwhile, the fairytale stimulates “the child’s decentration, creating a game of perspectives which can make him or her get in other’s shoes and find something of themselves in another being”( Elena OtiliaVladislav, 2015, p.25). Most psychotherapists recommend the child to be encouraged to create his or her own fairytale, to allow them to see symbolic elements which describe the child’s difficulties, conflicts and the latent potential to settle them.

### **Conclusions:**

Without setting up to be a psychologist or therapist, the activity to teach fairytales at the literature classes in the academic education, the philologist professor cannot ignore the therapeutic size of fairytales and their role in the development of children. The main feature making a story be therapeutic is that it transmits behavioural models and values, by symbolically representing the self-fulfilment, an archetypal content with obvious effects at the level of the unconsciousness. MirceaEliadewas talking about the *myth of initiation* developed by the narrative structure of stories, Bettelheim analyses the *maturation* process, making stories, while newer studies prefer the Jungian concept of *individuation*, when related to the essence of fairytales(PompiliuAlexandru, 2016, p.154).



Karl Gustav Jung “describes individuation as the individual process by which the individual creates him or herself and gets distinguished. It is a *participation*–Plato style– of the self to the Self archetype (...) “a mystery we shall never find, a suite of successive deaths binding the person in *limit* situations leading at the end towards a *self fulfilment*” (C.G. Jung, 2001, p. 115). Anthropologically speaking, we need to deal with a cultural process of *identity reconstruction*, for each and every fairytale, like legends and myths, belongs to the cultural patrimony of a continent, of a country, of a region or era. Either it’s about adults, children, in general, or children with special problems, the fairytale is a cultural mediator and a catalyser of the human being becoming in the world, always looking for the meaning of their existence, with the others.

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