

# The fairy tale as an observation instrument: the psychologist gets into the class

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## Abstract

Bringing fairly tale in the classroom, in a setting clearly discussed with the teacher providing for the reading of the text, the time of the conversation with children (including the proposal after each intervention to draw what has affected them more), the defined time for discussion with the teacher present during the work, to participate to what happened, allows us to do a deep observation of the dynamics pertaining to the group, particularly to identify children in need of listening, and reflect on the typical style of the teacher involved.

**Key words:** child, play, fairy tales, thought, school

In these years it happens more and more frequently to meet children extremely competent in electronic objects. It seems that the childish intuition, able to resolve problems passing for tests and errors, is really effective to quickly discover the operation of the new robotics. The least gifted adults "handle" them uselessly hoping to get analogous results in as short time as the children

Our children are furnished of sophisticated games (built for buyers without age), they are pleased of them, they hope they increase the pleasure of themselves in front of the most lacking companions. They are not wrong. We know that every epoch has its toys. We could not have anything to object it .

With difficulty, however, because if playing becomes equivalent in possessing, we should ask ourselves if it is really harmless. The matter concerns us because children do not earn, we are the ones who spend for their own good. If we "only" buy for them probably there's a problem.

I think it's risky to confirm the illusion that having is the same as being, leaving them to believe that the sense of their own identity depends on what they own, as if our Self could put on the computer as our feet the shoes. The objects can increase our vanity, but we must watch out if they serve to make an operation of cosmetic for the inadequacy that we brood inside. They can not really tell us who we are. They prepare only the hull of our identity, that we risk to maintain empty. I said that we could have nothing to object on the electronic furniture of the children (and of the adults) if under this opulence of objects there was also other, there was the sense of existing, equipped indeed for living.

We and our children who seek for buying a whole commercial centre do not know enough about ourselves. We do not know how to distinguish boredom from tiredness, anger from sorrow, jealousy from envy, anxiety from hunger, fear from uncertainty, a heartbeat from an attack of panic, love from possession, being alone from been abandoned. We are illiterate of the emotions, little equipped for living.

We must say it clearly: we were not born learned, we acquire the knowledge of the world of our feelings only if whoever is near us tells us about us, about himself,

about the others who are not here anymore. The knowledge passes through the naming, the story, the relationship that the mutual diversion makes interesting. The only electronic game and the appliance for excellence, the television, corrupt because they do not satisfy a basic need, that to receive stories from another in the flesh, who speaks keeping in mind the expression of our face. Up to 50 years ago we would not be surprised in knowing that in every where they spent time, adults and children together, listening to stories. It was normal as today turning on the TV, with the advantage of being able to join in conversation, to exist for the other's mind that fascinated us with what it had to tell us. Even the places were characterized, such as that fountain, that tree, those objects of the house that passed from one hand to another from one generation to the other saturated of history. It was normal to remember and to tell. For all this we must add the alive relationship that can be established telling a fairy tale to the games of our times

The oral tradition popular fairy tales are all that of our collective past has reached us. They are the patrimony of the group that has inherited them. They preserve beliefs, legends on the origins, on the traditions that articulated the passage of the seasons. They are the histories of the collective imagination, they talk to our unconsciousness, they make us similar to our similar for the natural enjoyment that they **give us.X** Without fairy tales we are more alone, more numbed, more poor despite the TV screens that cover our houses.

The oral tradition popular fairy tales find in the pre-primary and primary school children careful listeners , because they answer to an innate need to receive a story that satisfies the curiosity related to the whys of the life in the interval between the birth and the death and that represents the emotional stirring ups giving them a name (e.g.: fear of the abandonment, envy, jealousy, love, pain, fear for the growing up). It's very important to educate to the A B C of the emotions, that is, to recognize the emotions to give them a name, because only this acquisition makes them thinkable and sharable.

Children make a bond of alliance with the narrator that satiates their curiosity, that is a true sign of health. Melanie Klein spoke about this push to explore, to know, to give a meaning to the events of the life, in the terms of " epistemofilic pulsing." . How many educators and therapists have been witnesses of real evolutionary blocks caused by questions never asked the interlocutor or that have not received an answer? Children need to feed themselves of experiences that solicit the intellect and the imagination, that constitute a bond with the emotions. Literature is useful to this purpose unless it proposes consistent contents, unless it has high importance, that amuses stimulating the imagination The fairly tales have these characteristics, they suggest images and shapes on which to structure open eyes dreams , they are in tuning with the emotional difficulties of the child and they propose both permanent and temporary solutions . A great poet as Schiller, in an epoch that was sensitive to all this, declared with naturalness: "There is a deeper meaning in the fairly tales that were narrated me in my infancy than in the truth taught by the life." The fairly tales, through the re-elaborations had in the millennia, transmit at the same time clear and

veiled meanings, speaking simultaneously to many levels of the personality. The adult narrator, offering the listening of them, makes available a scenery of archaic contents that encourages the symbolic activity. Above all they give expression to the unsaid or removed desire, pointing out some ways of satisfaction that do not interfere in the equilibrium of the different psychic appeals. The possibility that unconscious imaginations reveal themselves to the child conscience frees from the tension to check and to deny these contents, eliminating then what can become an intellectual impediment. The child's mind needs to think about the hostile contents so often censored by the rules, by the in force habits of the environment to which he belongs to. The fear of contravening the expectations of the adults, who for example wish that they do not feel jealousy for a little brother or that there is no rivalry with their dad for the possession of their mother or that they are not afraid of "nonsense", force them to an inside silence, that resets the expressiveness. For this reason particularly timid and inhibited children need a "permission" to think undesired contents, children tormented by fears need to face the pain of the mind, the sorrow of feeling the absence in themselves of a structure to face what generates anxiety.

When a teacher or me read a fairly tale in a class of the elementary school we do not intend to pass some pedagogic message. The objective is not exactly to teach something. I stop reading and make questions only on that passage that amazes me and listen in want (with great interest) to the children's answers. All together we botch hypothesis on certain idiocies, like: why he has opened the gold apple without thinking about what he needed, or on certain difficult behaviours: why little sister has left that little roe deer go hunting, and also on certain cruelties: why the maid has inserted the hatpin in the ear, or on certain jealousies: his brothers have left him in the well. I repeat it, the intent is not to make rational, pedagogic what we read, but to name what is under it. That one who names it first is that one who knows it better than who needs to be told about it. The whole group class grows in knowledge and the least good children in scholastic performances are often the most precious revealers of the arduous understanding motivations .

But what to say of those children that fear the fairly tales? They need help and their parents too. A fairly tale that is not known should give the pleasure of the unpredictable one even if the children, as if they were important university professors that have studied Propp and the "Strutturalisti", know how to imagine developments and conclusions after the characters have been listed and after they have noticed the lack or the maltreatment. If the fairly tale didn't speak about anything that our unconscious knows they could not make inferences. Actually the fairly tale is really useful when it represents a conflict that too firmly occupies their minds, not leaving space to other, to the curiosity for instance, that is a really beautiful indicator of comfort. Children afraid in diffused way are not curious, they are afraid of getting exactly in what they fear. For this reason they prefer all that is familiar. Their parents too could have a generalized fear, but not knowing they have it. It is not a too unusual paradox. We know only that we can think on .Perceiving something of us does not necessarily mean to understand it. We need someone as a mirror, who reflects what we feel and gives it a name. Then we know

Many parents save to their children the authentic fairly tales, they pass softener video broadcast versions, passing also the implicit message that of certain things you must not only speak but even think about. It is in this way that we constitute a fragile structure, because that one who should contain the fears talking about them, has the same need to be contained. . It is in this way that they confirm the pseudo normal individual, the buyer for excellence, conformist in the behaviours, individualist for mentality, unintentionally incapable to play with the imagination and incapable to speak of the moods of the mind that have nothing to do with the objects they are ultra competent in.

Children accustomed to the good use of the words that connect the external world to the inside one, listen careful because they know that the fairly tale is a representation that concerns them. It means not only that endless variations of the same theme exist, to whatever terrestrial latitude, but even that the substance does not change! Children participate in the intermediary passages waiting for the final solution, that is not always beautiful.

If you read the Aosta Valley fairly tales, in the Trentino area, for example, you will often find the theme of the hunger. The hunger, the deep one, is never ended. None of us is easily satisfied by the other and the separation does not really go down our stomach. Little children like them very much, they are curious of the solution and they have nothing in contrary on the easy systems to get what they desire .

Tomorrow desirable moral man , able to stand and wait, work before pleasure, sharing instead of greed, has been a child not censored in the expression of its thought, has been curious to see as the others take into account the satisfaction. Fairly tales have many things to say on this part.

Today child, that is often near us (and that is inside us) often lives among other dissatisfied adults, in eternal crisis of reimbursement for the suffered pains, incapable of recognizing himself culpable of repairable guilts. It can happen that a child under these conditions identifies himself with the "bad" character of the history and that enjoys of the sadism the weakest character is treated with. Are there parents who prefer not to know it?

Unfortunately yes, so much to never give the reading of a fairly tale before going in bed and to prefer letting the children fall asleep in front of the television. The message that passes is that it is better to forget what afflicts us, better anesthetizing themselves in front of a program that hoping to find relief and enjoyment from an affectionate relationship in which there is space for the restlessness that does not let us well like the dark of the night

The wood of the fairly tale where we lose ourselves, but from which we also come out teaches them to think about a run in which frustrations are not skimped, but even a prize to whom does not escape away is insured.

Ours is an epoch in which frustrations and small sufferings are not well seen,. It is as if we do not tolerate anymore that "our majesty" must suffer the humiliation to know about our own littleness. It is an insult to speak about our incurable brittleness and of our mortality. On this premise it spreads the phenomenon of the bullish behaviour among the children, as if they were implicitly encouraged to preserve the bluff of

their narcissism through the ostentation of the strength of Lillipuz inhabitants. Parents that hide to themselves and the other ones a bullish soul, buy video games in which they deal with winning, nothing else than this. Who deals with their children fear of the dark ? The brittleness left uncultivated, without anybody trying to give them some provisional answers to the sense of not being able to effort it that pervades the human soul, can change time by time, can structure the so-called authoritarian personality that one practising the overcoming, that espouses the ideology of the scorn and the humiliation of the weak (what else but the impossibility of seeing themselves). The fairly tale takes care of, contains what the mind can not face telling about the anguish of the abandonment, of the bad mother, of the rivalry, of the omnipotence of the hero. If you ask a child to tell about a video game he will have really little to say. There is no story. We are our history. To know how to tell it means being enough structured to " withstand" and even enjoy, to know to have an identity. Knowing how to tell stories means to have a prototype of structure, unless we obviously know them.

Do you know which are the problems that more frequently the parents propose me? They speak about their children that can not sleep in their bed, that act the theft of a parent to the detriment of the other that passively moves to the little bed that does not really appertain him/her. The parents couple breaks itself in the substance, perhaps it was looking for a pretext to do not exist. The child grasping the weapon of his/her fear without name checks a parent that earns in change a tender and despotic partner with whom to melt. The other, the exiled one does not feel to have responsibility, legitimating so his/her being absent.

The second problem concerns the pains of the divorced families. Children are often broken in two pieces or are pulled without hesitations to take a stand in favour of a parent. They are tools of the grudge of their parents that detest each other.. It impresses the absence of the words to describe the discomfort, the senses of guilt, of the incapability to think about a reparation, to a change after having done the mourning for the precedent familiar situation.

When we read a fairly tale at school children speak and draw about all this. Spontaneously. The floodgate of their internal dam is broken and they identify themselves with the character representing them.

The offer of the fairly tale communicates the possibility to compact the psychic structure both because the unconscious contents give voice to the feared or censored ones of the child, both because it offers a possibility of identification with the "strong" structure of the adult narrator, able to hold / contain the restlessness of which the fantastic story is bearer. The adult goes on with the mother work that contains the anxieties of the child, through the shared experience of a listening that does not send them in splinters, but creates a space for the contents otherwise indigestible for the mind. In other words, children are afraid also of what the adults show to be afraid of through avoiding it. If the child is afraid (he is not helped to face his fear), the desire of knowledge, at the base of every learning, is compromised, in this case it prevails the imitation of fragments of knowledge of the others rather than the discovery in the first person of the same ones.

Children are also conquered by primitive feelings both of love and hate, on the

integration of which depends the development, and the popular fairly tales give a correct position to both because they do not elude the problematic nature of the life, they comfort the child on the sense of authenticity on what he feels, that must not necessarily relapse in the blame of the evaluation.

It is easily understandable that the fairly tales can do all this only if their narrator goes along with them, or, does not make any comments or however communications that do not go with the writing, otherwise the child doubts that the narrator is favourable (deprived of judgments) and does not affectively know if he can take a side without acting a fracture: fairly tale or adult-narrator.

The offer of the fairly tale places itself in a welcoming relationship, of containment and support, in comparison to the lived experience: in the contrary ,it can not do anything by itself. Its characters are not ambivalent as the real people, but clearly separated in goods and evils, this helps indirectly the child to orient himself in his feelings, both virtuous or more terrestrially soaked of hunger, of jealousy, of envy. Above all they offer the permission to feel them, and also a satisfaction of the same ones, allowing always the fantastic realization of the desire, A mature symbolization , the sublimation, are late (and not constant) acquisitions. The fairly tales are both moral or amoral, however they suggest a meaning to the temporary arc of the life that is given us, that we can summarize in this way : a strong and valid bond with another person is the element of maximum emotional safety; and in the meantime they do not delude, because they say that the anguish of separation from the mother can not be eluded. A famous psychoanalyst, Bettelheim<sup>1</sup>, to which life didn't save the extermination fields, stated that the fairly tales make the experience of the development attractive for the child. In their quality of works of art they fit to manifold keys of reading, above all, they reverberate the meaning that the reader attributes them.

They are many years I use to work in the classes in which the teachers ask for an intervention to understand the reason for which inadequate behaviours that cause scarce learning are reiterated.

The type of intervention that I propose is so articulated : 1) the reading of the fairly tale within three or five meetings, fit to stimulate the free interventions of the children; 2) the proposal to do at the end of every meeting a sketch on the aspect that has mostly struck them; 3) the meetings in parallel with the teacher to discuss what has been observed. I begin the job only if there is an application from the teachers interested in. I ask the teachers to assist, but not to intervene making order (in directive way) when there is a strong emotion that instigates cross over interventions , because I prefer to understand together with the children what and why something happens, above all I ask the teacher to do not make interventions that "explain" the text. Both the teachers and the children must understand that we are not making school as they have experienced up to that moment. I tell them it is as if I brought a biscuit to eat with a few number of bites, the same number of meetings we are going

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Bettelheim "il mondo incantato" Feltrinelli

to have. The job is introduced by a frustration: the limitation of the time, and of this I believe we have always to speak of, both to understand what is the predominant formality in the group of children relatively to the assumption of the limit, if it is passively lived, in a prosecuting way or approved as an element of reality from the moment that we do not possess the whole time. Welcomed the sorrow that this premise produces, I ask to put in account the pleasure of the hope to make never done thoughts, because this can be source of fun.

It is not necessary to do many meetings, three or five meetings are enough to see the typical formalities of the group, but above all they are an occasion to see how the relationship with an extraneous person will be developed, how much trust or how much suspiciousness there is, in how many of them there is an evident problem to establish a bond, or to load him of an excessive attachment, as it is lived to the light of an imminent separation. Everything this allows us to appraise the state of real autonomy of the children, their ability to be with someone without desperation or melting to.

The reported fairly tale at school is really useful to the observation of the class group both as it regards the interpersonal dynamic as intrapersonal.

The class groups are the result of two big variables that are overlapped: the educational style of the teacher and the frequency and the pregnancy of some development troubles

Very normative teachers induce a polarization in the group among those people that adjust themselves to the rigidity of the rules and the others, with a serpentine aggressiveness that takes the shape of an not exhausted rivalry, that is, the inside aggregation is almost void, from the moment that every child focuses toward the interpretation of the state of mind of the teacher for being able to face it defending himself with various styles: gratifying, camouflaging, opposing, Those of them with a good output are usually the same that pay respects to the authority, that blandish it through the obedience, the conformism and the authorized notification of the transgressors that would have preferred not to be noticed. In similar groups "mute" children, those so timid to prefer to be confused with the room furniture rather than to be noticed, are more numerous than elsewhere. The "transgressor" children have the tendency to express in acute way their opposition despite the experience done of the ostracism.

It flutters on all of them the binomial: passivity rebellion. They are children that have had a wanting experience of the freedom of expression, their sketches are stereotyped, rare are their critical or creative interventions. When in this group we bring the story of the fairly tale the children appear disorientated, they suffer for the lack of a clear prescription, they do not know what to say because they do not know what will be pleased and what not, because they have been trained to behave conforming to the categories admitted by the teacher.

Nevertheless, also they, after overcoming the stall of the first meeting, try the pleasure to say what they have in mind, with a particular connotation tied up to the suspicion, to the fear that something ugly happens in the story that is difficult to forget then. There is a paranoiac scar that characterizes similar groups, and in the

meantime, a style of dependence, that speaks of their experienced life lacking affectivity and acceptance. . It is as if the entrance in school with the daily attending of a cold teacher, authoritarian (and then frequently narcissist) had marked a fracture with his mother, with the need of protection, with the recognition of their vulnerability. This because the hardest interdiction concerns really expression of the human frailty, of the need. Children that in a similar context result "better" than the others in fairly tale are exactly those that the teacher stigmatizes as unrepentant undisciplined ones with scarce learning. In them a strange magic happens: they listen careful and they have to say the most original things, because they are freer from the coercion of the context. They are the children that present a disturbing behaviour during the lessons, but they are not "disturbed", because it is alive in them the hope of meeting an adult able to understand them, with which they serenely ally, desirous to free themselves from the state of tension induced by the context.

They are exactly these children that unexpectedly become "good" to be the indicators of a problem regarding the teacher, not them. They represent a true Copernican revolution and they open to the problem of what to do. In fact, approaching a teacher armoured of authoritarianism is not easy, to ask him a modulation in the behaviour is impossible, but the fairly tale can serve to open a breach, because it puts in discussion the inside categories of the good and the evil also in the teacher, above all if the most fragile character allows just him an identification with the relative necessity to be saved. Such a happy ending depends on the respectful formality of interview with the teacher by the narrator of the fairly tale, that discussing what observed during the job in the class, asks to reason together on the contents of the fairly tale, rousing the needs that come to the light in all the listeners inclusive adults.

There are teachers apparently authoritarian in the sense that shout a lot in an attempt to bring order in the classroom, but with scarce results. They jade themselves trying to appear very hard, they fight by putting a lot of passion, recruiting real verbal fights with children they identify as particularly reluctant to comply with the rules. These people would feel really relieved if the irreducible children were evicted from their class because the tension they accumulate frazzle them, making them feeling sick even at home.

They identify the rebellious child with their persecutor, annulling the difference of age. They feel attacked in their sense of identity, they react as if they had to do with an enemy that wants to humiliate and subdue them.

They react with all their strength...that is not enough. The true problem is their sense of inadequacy that originates from the perception they have of their vulnerability that is denied because considered otherwise not bankable , as if there were not other resources in the life to face the problem. They have become adult wearing a hard hull where they hide their childish and vulnerable Self, that has not found an help in a strong and protective parents figure, able to contain and to offer a valid model of identification.

This kind of teacher practices an attraction toward those children that show to have an analogous problem, that challenge the adult enjoying the matches in which they feel him stagger, because they project in him their own sense of weakness. This gives

them a temporary sense of relief, but it does not resolve their inside dynamics that heightens themselves with terrifying nightmares from which they feel crushed above all at night

The families that, after a painful history of quarrels with the teacher, move the child to another school, believe to have solved the problem, when in reality they have not just faced it not having individualized it. They unconsciously miss an occasion to understand the deep cause for the violent behaviour of their child.

This type of child that hopelessly denies the generational difference, that has a structure somehow omnipotent and narcissistic, seems to be always inside a competition in which he must shine for his abilities of a strong child. It is as if it had a muscle power to oppose to the whole rest of abilities in which he feels to be deficient, crushed by the sense of his vulnerability that he considers a threat to his life.

Inside a dynamics as that of which we are talking about, the child, is for instance, easily identifies himself with the negative heroes of the cartoons, in part because he feels himself condemned to assume his identity picking up the criticism of the teacher respect his negativity, in part because he feels himself protected imaginarily only from "scoundrels" that know their stuff on how to put the rival in his place Try to ask them why he likes this kind of heroes.

They will answer: because they are strong. Once an adopted baby, that had therefore more than a motive not to have internalized a valid figure of protection, told me that he preferred the devil to God because he considered him stronger, because "it is well known... good ones are less powerful than..!"

This kind of child is extremely thankful to receive a fairly tale in which there are some really bad monsters, because he can finally speak, for transposition, of himself, of his secret and of the sense of loneliness that involves.

The list of the type of teachers that generates in class dynamics of struggles, pushy actions, of what is in fashion to define Bullish behaviour, is longer, we should also consider those that are seriously depressed, rancorous and enfeebled by their pain. Under these conditions their mind does not have space for other. Children feel they are not thought and therefore contained, they live in class as unseen children and they consider themselves poorly interesting, for this incapable to arouse the interest of the adults lost in their great suffering It's as if they were "the lost children" of the island that there is not , of the flies driven crazy that crash against the glass, because there is not an adult in a position to help them to understand, to name the reason of their uneasiness.

The fairly tale is an experience of containment for them, both the text and the relationship with the adult narrator who goes really to them to speak of them, but it is also for the teacher, above all if he deals with the theme of the abandonment, of the separation, that are at the base of the depression. Giving a name to a state of the mind means to start thinking of it, not to suffer only in a prosecuting way its existence.

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