

Back to "Cinderella": fairytales in the Bibliotherapeutic Dialogue

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Abstract

Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic method in the field of Art therapy, which suggests focusing the therapeutic dialogue on a literary text, either written or read. This text functions within the therapeutic dialogue as a "third voice", in addition to the voices of the patient and the therapist, and takes part in the dialogue as an autonomous interlocutor. The idea of such a "third voice" is based on the assumption that a literary text has therapeutic qualities of its own, which can be applied in therapeutic processes and can contribute to their progress.

Key words: child, play, fairy tales, bibliotherapy, art therapy

A. What is Bibliotherapy?

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The idea that literature has a healing potential is as old as literature itself. Inscription on the gates of the ancient libraries at Thebes and Alexandria read: "Healing for the Soul". We also know of the famous debate between Plato and Aristotle about literature, in which Plato practically expels the poets from his ideal state, while Aristotle implicitly defends them by developing the concept of "catharsis", which actually refers to the healing influence of tragedy on its audience. We know also that throughout history literature has been a means of socialization by storytelling, especially in oral cultures.

Still, the use of literature in therapy is relatively new. The first experiment in it was conducted around 1960, in the United States and although it has been practiced since in various contexts, it is still struggling for a specific definition.

B. Bibliotherapy: a Dialogue in Three Voices

Every session in Psychotherapy includes two participants: the therapist and the patient. Moreover, this is a very intimate dialogue, and no one except the two participants is allowed to enter the room. All the "alien" voices heard (or thought) throughout the dialogue, can exist or come into being only through these two voices. In the case of Bibliotherapy there is a "third voice" added to the dialogue, the autonomous voice of the literary text.

This autonomous status of the text is therapeutically significant, since the literary text can be viewed as a metaphorical representation of the patient, one that exists independently outside the two participants, and is equally accessible to both of them.

C. Children's literature and Fairytales as Therapeutic Texts

Among all kinds of literary texts that are used as the "third voice" in bibliotherapy, fairytales have a special place. They play an especially important role in the process of socialization, a function that carries major therapeutic implications.

Fairytales were originally intended for people of all the ages; but nowadays they are associated mainly with children's. Listening to literary texts in our early childhood, either oral tales or written texts read aloud, constitutes one of our first experiences, and leave a powerful impression on our further development. A text encountered in childhood carries with it a "childhood image", including the child's identity and the set of relationships with his or her environment, mainly with the significant adults, who mediate between him or her and the text.

The process that I shall later describe centers on the experience of re-encounter with a childhood text. Such a re-encounter makes it possible to observe simultaneously two "readings", one of them being the reconstructed reading situation in childhood and the other being the re-encounter with this very text in adulthood.

The revival of the dialogue between the two worlds by means of reading and re-reading facilitates a kind of return to the childhood experience through the text, and this is one of the therapeutic possibilities inherent in the reading process in general.

Moreover, when a fairytale is involved in a therapeutic dialogue, it enacts not only the patient's personal identity themes and his or her childhood's memories, but also the central themes that construct the psycho-cultural substratum of the society, wherein that tale has developed. Use of the fairytale should therefore be regarded as bringing into the clinic not only the personal subconscious, but also an entire socio-cultural substratum. This common substratum, however, does not erase the individual differences between various readers-listeners who respond to it.

Thus, rereading a fairy tale that we have heard as children suggests an opportunity to return to significant parts of our childhood memories, both personal and "collective", concerning the situation of our first encounter with it. This possibility is therapeutically valuable, since it enables us to hold a dialogue with our past from an adult viewpoint.

In the present paper I shall focus on such a process through the well-known fairytale, *Cinderella*

D. What does Cinderella offer to its Readers?

"It seems that *Cinderella* is the best known of all fairy-tales", says Thompson (1977:12). In Europe alone more than 500 versions are known.

The plot, numbered as A510 in the Arne-Thompson motifs index, tells about a girl who is abused by her stepmother and stepsisters. In most versions her name is

associated with cinder, and refers to her lowly state at home. The poor girl is helped by a supernatural power, often associated with her dead mother, with animals or with a fairy. This enables her to attend the royal ball, where the prince falls in love with her. Cinderella's flight from the ball and the prince's quest for her are vital components in all the versions. The loss of the slipper is sometimes substituted by another object, through which Cinderella is finally recognized, but this is always an object pointing to a necessary relation with Cinderella, namely an identifying object. According to this plot-scheme it could be said that the story represents the ultimate promise to every child that even if he or she has begun his or her life at the bottom of the jadder, he or she will be redeemed and exalted. It is a kind of collective promise, associated with the general function of children's literature, the promise that everything will turn out well.

Apart from this generalization, which is not special to the Cinderella tale (although it is fully realized in it), note should be taken of the specific plot of Cinderella, beyond its multiple versions. According to the plot-scheme suggested by Thompson, it rests on the following points:

Orphanhood and humiliation: Cinderella is a motherless child whose father is .1 absent too, she is abused and humiliated by her stepmother and stepsisters, and is deprived of the status that befits her according to her qualities.

Supernatural aid: The poor girl comes to the royal ball with the help of a .2 supernatural power, and there, she being beautifully dressed, the prince falls in love with her.

Flight: The magic power, which is limited in time, forces Cinderella to leave .3 the ball abruptly, and the prince seeks her.

The object test: Cinderella's real identity is revealed through a test by means of .4 an object, which points to the link between her lovely appearance in the ball and her poor present situation. The most frequent object is a golden slipper, in any event the test always entails a match between the object and Cinderella.

Redemption: At the end of the story, after Cinderella passes the test, she .5 marries the prince and is redeemed from her distress.

To each of these points a basic theme can be attached, dealing with its dominant subject. The first point deals with loneliness, banishment, abandonment and injustice; the second with metamorphosis and magic; the third conditionality, with retreat and shame; the fourth with being tested, and the last one with redemption.

With this scheme the central themes suggested by the tale, beyond its manifold versions can be indicated. Accordingly the tale seems to generate more than a single theme to which the reader can respond.

The experimental bibliotherapeutic process that I describe here, illustrates the process of reading and rereading this fairy tale by several women students of Bibliotherapy at the University of Haifa.

E. The process

The process has four stages:

Reconstructing the plot of *Cinderella* by writing it down. This stage permits .a each student to refresh her contact with the tale by writing her specific memorized version of it.

Listening to the version told by one of the student. The listeners are asked to .b write down any details that are different from their own version. This stage lets the participants compare their own version with those of the others. It also illuminates significant individual themes as presented in the next stage.

The participants are asked to identify and focus on one theme that was .c particularly significant in their childhood.

Jim Henson's T.V. version is shown to the participants, and they are asked to .d respond to the film by integrating their childhood's emotional focus with their actual reaction as an adult. This integration and the comparison between childhood and adulthood allow every participant to examine her emotional response to *Cinderella* on the time-axis from childhood to adulthood.

The following examples concentrate on the two last stages described above, and are organized according to the main themes of the fairy tale as shown.

F. Examples

As we have seen, the scheme of *Cinderella*'s thematics is organized according to the plot's parts as mentioned. Each example, thus, present one theme, which was dominant in the specific response.

Orit: Loneliness, rejection, abandonment, deprivation .1

The first emotional theme of *Cinderella*'s plot is concerns loneliness, rejection, abandonment and deprivation. Orit's response refers to this theme:

What I mainly remember from my childhood is the fact that no one in the world recognizes Cinderella's existence. I remember a total disregard surrounding her: whenever she tried to say anything, she was rejected and humiliated. Again and again she finds herself wholly insignificant.

In this description Orit expresses an extreme feeling of rejection. Her Cinderella is demeaned and humiliated, and those around her erased her existence by avoiding her. This experience of "non being" was deeply connected with Orit's childhood, when she constantly felt that "*nobody cares*"

my parents ignored me entirely, and throughout my entire childhood I constantly tried to remind them that I did exist, but it was all in vain.

For Orit Cinderella is neglected because she does not deserve another attitude.

Moreover, she thinks that in order to "be existent" in your parents' world you must "*prove yourself*", and if you do not succeed you are "*a failure*".

Her Parents' disregard for her can be explained by their preoccupation with the loss of their own childhood as holocaust refugees. This experience taught her that if you want "*to be existent*" you must to make an effort, and as a child you have no chance to be successful, so you are doomed to a total despair.

In Jim Hanson's version Cinderella is an active person who tackles her own destiny. Orit, who felt very helpless as a child, adopts Cinderella's active character of this version, and even relies on her as a source of hope:

Watching the movie I felt that Cinderella was not helpless as I was as a little girl, because she has a loving father who cares for her.

This interpretation is totally wrong, since in this version Cinderella is about to be forced to marry her father because of the ring, she escapes this fate by turning into a "creature" covered with feathers retaining only her human eyes and voice.

When the gap between Orit's interpretation and the movie's "truth" was discussed in the group, she achieved the insight that her parents' helplessness as children and incompetence as parents had trapped her throughout her entire life, until adulthood, in a situation of looking for parental figures, to substitute her real parents. The latter had sadly failed in imparting to her a sense of "being" as a child. But this insight is of course only a starting point for a long-term therapy

Aviva: miracle and metamorphosis .2

The most fascinating part in the plot of Cinderella was the moment of her transformation from a very poor girl to a magnificent princess.

For Aviva the moment of change and the possibility of change was the main point in the fairytale, but at the same time she experienced the change as something very fragile:

Whenever the clock chimed "midnight" I became anxious. I could not bear the idea that Cinderella would not have time to flee, and everybody would see her in her old dirty clothes. What a disgrace!"

Although Aviva knew that in the end Cinderella will not have to flee and she would be recognized as a princess, whenever she heard the story as a child, she could not stand the moment of the clock climbing midnight.

As a child Aviva grew up in a very poor family, she went to a school where most of her friends were from much wealthier families than hers. She never invited her friends to her home and made great efforts to hide her poverty. Her dresses were handed down from an older cousin, and being very creative Aviva could always make them look like new. Still she lived in constant fear that her secret would be revealed.

In a way, Aviva always felt that she had to protect herself from the "chimes of the clock", yet she endeavored to preserve her image as a "princess", longing for the good fairy who would do it for her "like a magician".

In the movie, Cinderella, with the help of the animals, somehow controls the metamorphosis. Although she has to vanish at midnight, it seems that the moment of her disappearance is by her own choice, and the one who suffers is the prince, who loses his sweetheart. At the third ball, in the flight she even chooses to "lose" her golden slipper, which will finally identify her as the beautiful princess.

That's why this version was so appealing for Aviva. Watching the movie she was prepared to feel the tension of the secret, but it was much easier to do so when she

was certain that Cinderella fully controlled the situation, and nobody was able to reveal her secret before she wanted it.

Moreover, her secret is that no matter how she looks, whether as a creature or as a princess, she always has a self-image of the princess who has to turn into a "creature" by her own choice, in order to avoid marriage to her father. In Aviva's words -

In the movie Cinderella in the movie, a strong woman who controls her life, is exactly what I wanted to be as a little girl who thought that being poor was something shameful. Even when I was able, thanks to my own resourcefulness, to look like a princess, I always feared the arrival of "midnight", which would reveal that behind the beautiful dress there was a rag, no matter that I myself, not a fairy, brought the change about...

When Aviva grew up she became an artist and wrought "magic" in her work: she produced quilts, turning rags into works of art.

Ruth: The test of the slipper and the happy ending .3

The last example concerns themes that belong to the end of the tale, and in a way it serves as its climax: the test of the slipper, which reveals who is the real princess. The main issue for Ruth as a little girl was the experience of the exact fit of the slipper, and the discovery of the truth, which satisfied her sense of justice, by rewarding Cinderella, who had suffered so much.

Ruth grew up in a very difficult situation: since her mother died when she was four, and her father, who could not take care of her, took her to her aunt, who had two children of her own. As a little girl Ruth always waited for the "happy ending" of her life's "plot". As a girl she read the story herself, and what fascinated her was that - *the slipper exactly fitted her foot, and that's why the prince married her. For this perfect happy ending I was ready to suffer with Cinderella all the way long.*

Growing up with her aunt's family gave Ruth throughout her childhood the feeling of being "adopted", of not being a real member of the family. When her mother died nobody talked to her about it. Throughout her entire childhood she awaited for a happy ending that would give her a sense of belonging, the same feeling that Cinderella gets through the perfect fit of the slipper on her foot.

When Cinderella's step sisters try on the slipper, it seems for a moment that their evil device will work; but at last Cinderella tries on the slipper, and despite her "inhuman" appearance, it fits exactly. In an instant she becomes the beautiful princess. Watching this scene in the movie as an adult caused Ruth a great rapture and satisfaction, since she saw that it was not the passive character waiting for the change that brought it about; instead, it was due to -

Cinderella's consistent efforts to preserve her true self and her connections, in spite of the total confusion caused by the death of her mother and the decree that she must marry her father [because of her dead mother's ring that fitted her finger, in Jim Hanson's version].

So as an adult, Ruth keeps in mind the fairy tale that gave her hope. Now however the hope of a perfect fit has turned into an optimistic attitude to life, since she knows that the "happy ending" partly depends on her. But nor does she lose confidence that somewhere the shoe that exactly fits her foot will be found.

G. Conclusion

Fairytales, like other literary texts, both written and oral, function in the bibliotherapeutic dialogue as the "third voice", through which the therapeutic process takes place. In this paper I tried to examine the case of the *Cinderella* tale as such a "third voice" in a bibliotherapeutically oriented process.

We saw how the responses to the text by different readers raised the potential themes of the *Cinderella* plot on the one hand, and shed light on every individual reader on the other. This double effect establishes a dialogue, which illuminates the interaction of one's personality and biography with the collective substratum of the fairy tale. This interaction makes possible a fruitful dialogue between the childhood and adulthood phases of the individual through the special theme chosen by him or her. This dialogue might start a process of working through, and perhaps even a "correction" of early childhood experiences, by illuminating them from the perspective of adulthood, yet without discarding the vitality and authenticity of the first encounter.

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