

## **On the uses of the folk-tale in education**

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### **Abstract**

More than thirty years of work as a child psychiatrist and analyst and weekly meetings with the teachers of psychotic children in my care, have led me to reflect upon the process of learning to read and the apparent lack of interest in books and reading amongst certain social groups. It is clearly the case that our consumer society favours information in the form of quick, screen-based images to the detriment of traditional reading.

**Key words:** child, play, fairy tales, thought, learning difficulties

More than thirty years of work as a child psychiatrist and analyst and weekly meetings with the teachers of psychotic children in my care, have led me to reflect upon the process of learning to read and the apparent lack of interest in books and reading amongst certain social groups. It is clearly the case that our consumer society favours information in the form of quick, screen-based images to the detriment of traditional reading.

Using the folk-tale in families, school and in the work place has led me to examine its content more closely: how it can be used as a tool for communication and how it can be used as an “organising experience”, bearing in mind the mental problems and suffering of many children in our beleaguered society.

Regular workshops held over a long period of time led to a book (1) which was deliberately written in non-specialist terms for the benefit of teachers, librarians and parents interested in the process of children’s cognitive development.

On the subject of the problem of lack of interest in reading in our society, we have drawn on some of our experience of the uses of the tale as a preparatory tool for fostering curiosity vis-à-vis reading and knowledge in general.

The contribution of psychoanalytical theory has brought about new perspectives on the facts that transcend its clinical origin. Psychoanalytical interpretations of historical facts, social facts, works of art, religions and novels are not new. Thanks to Freud and Bettelheim (2) this is also the case with interpretation of the traditional folk-tale.

Bettelheim gives a reading of the stories and proposes an “interpretation table” based on what we know of the structure of the unconscious.

This table, in my opinion, does not detract from the mystery and poetry of the tale. Bettelheim insists that one should not give an interpretation to the child. Parents should simply be able to choose the tale that best meets the child’s needs.

### **1. The structure of the folk-tale and its organizing function in thought**

Many authors have examined the content and plot of folk-tales. In his morphological analysis of Russian folk-tales, Vladimir Propp has shown that there are just 31 “functions” to be found in the folk-tale. Moreover, this is the case with the folk-tales from widely differing countries. For reasons of content and style, each function stems from the one that precedes it. No one function is exclusive of another. Each function belongs to the same invariable direction of the tale.

A large number of functions are juxtaposed as pairs:

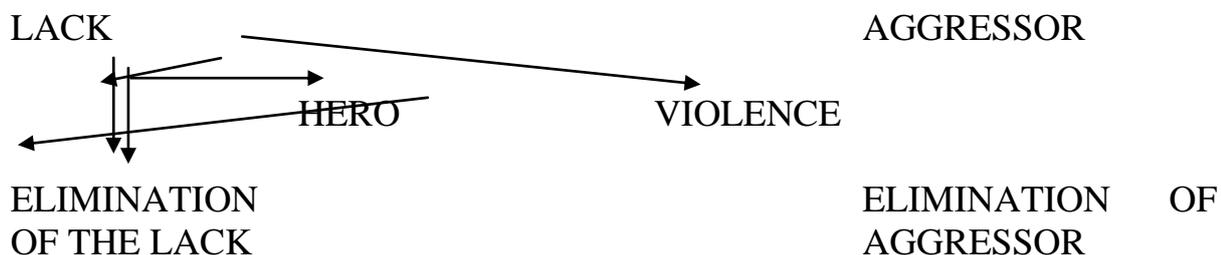
- interdiction/ violation of interdiction
- questioning / answering
- combat/ victory
- pursuit/ rescue etc.

In the course of a folk-tale there is conflict between a hero and an aggressor. The child is able to understand and assimilate this conflict. There are three basic junctures in the story. For example, in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood we find:

- 1) *A beginning in a simple family context*: the hero, Little Red Riding Hood, is given the task of taking butter and cornbread to her grandmother and is forbidden to dally on the way;
- 2) *An aggressor*: the cunning and ferocious wolf;
- 3) *A negative outcome*: being eaten by the wolf;
- 4) *A positive outcome*: The hunter cuts open the wolf’s stomach. Little Red Riding Hood, who is now safe, gets him to put a big stone in it. The wolf drowns (Grimm Brothers’ version).

The actions of the hero in response to the threat provide the child with an effective model for coping with extreme conflicts, especially internal, unconscious ones. The model contained in the tale is universally recognised as having its roots in folk wisdom. It has been handed down by word of mouth from time immemorial.

The traditional folk-tale, in its very structure, can be seen to be an authentic means of filtering violence. This is illustrated by the following simplified model:



The folk-tale has a soothing effect on the child’s mind. The effect is lasting and can be drawn upon repeatedly when situations of challenge, conflict, and anguish of the same pattern arise. This is what R. Kaës is referring to when he speaks of “ready to use” solutions to conflict. The semiotist Claude Brémont has studied the “organizing” potential of the folk-tale likening it to a Meccano set. The tale can be taken apart and re-assembled as in a construction game. We have ascertained that this

system works by leaving permanent markers in the mind of the child. The child hears the stories many times and then applies the structures to the understanding of forms in other contexts: comic strips, animated cartoons, video games and so on.

Nursery school teachers looking after “disorganized” children, whose behaviour is driven by archaic and anarchic impulses, can present the folk-tale in a playful and agreeable way. They are in fact presenting an “organizing” model.

## **II Uses of the folk-tale in the development of reading skills**

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in France there was no specific genre of literature specially written for children. Information was generally passed on by word of mouth. In fact before the Industrial Revolution (1850) children were attached to their parents at work and at home and at gatherings in the evenings. Transmission of knowledge took place without school or the written word. Children listened to stories, legends and songs with the adults at evening gatherings. In 1850 only six per cent of the population could read.

Nowadays some parents read to their children or tell them stories at bedtime. Like the teddy bear, the lullaby or the nursery rhyme, the bedtime story is a reassuring means to help manage the time for separation and falling asleep. It is impossible to say whether it is better to read or to tell the story without using a book. However, in the history of humanity oral transmission precedes the written word. I think it is a good thing if the message bearer telling the story feels at ease and participates in the story he has chosen. The folk-tale, combined with the creativity of the transmitter of the message, is the oral tradition *par excellence*.

All over the world, inscriptions on rocks and, more recently, in the signs of guilds (stonecutters and cabinet makers) provide a link between the phoneme and the signature. In a rural life, the passage from the oral to the visual marker was necessary to denote the ownership of the land (by marking the boundaries) and the ownership of sheep (by branding) at the time when they are moved to fresh pastures. This marking of ownership is found on tools, the headpieces of cupboards, the lintels of houses, the trousseaux of brides. These marks, sometimes called glyphs, also appear as signatures in notary deeds. They are signs (wheel, stars etc) which convey a symbolic meaning, comprehensible to the group, such as the cross referring to Christianity. In France, such signs can also be found in the almanacs sold by itinerants during the Second Empire.

The observation of children at the age of about twenty months shows a corresponding development in the perception of visual signs. They grip the pencil with determination leaving more or less rhythmical scrawl. It is the pleasure they derive from leaving their mark. When the child becomes able to lift up the pencil from the paper, that is to say, to “let go” of the mark he has made, by this gesture of interruption, he opens up a space for internalization, thus giving meaning to what he has produced spontaneously. He is then capable of “reading” what he has produced, and if encouraged to do so, he will comment on its form. This “fortuitous realism”

proceeds by analogy, by association and by projection. Young children have great aptitude for this sort of active, pre-symbolic, individualistic *bricolage* which will later become stymied and conformist at the time formal reading skills are acquired. Appollinaire in his *calligrammes* and later the Surrealists in their automatic writing and *cadavres exquis* tapped into in this source. We have arrived in the kingdom of the image with explanatory comment, that is to say, at the roots of the audiovisual, once exploited by preachers. In the Romanesque churches of the Pyrenees, only the chancel is decorated with figurative paintings. The priest, using a long stick, would illustrate his sermon with the images. On one side the good souls are in heaven. On the other side the bad souls are in hell.

In the nineteenth century fairs in France, the same technique was used in *complaints*, a particular genre of lament. Daniel Fabre (4) has studied one such lament as recited by the performer Quillan. She would use a drum and a board showing episodes of the story. During a recital she would use a stick to point things out and she would later sell the printed version of her lament to the country folk who were for the most part illiterate. The title: Lament of a hapless girl who killed her father, her mother and the baby at her breast.

At school learning to read takes place at the age of six in preparatory classes. For the child it is a period of unconscious repression of the Oedipus complex. This period is characterised by the shifting of sexual curiosity to curiosity concerning knowledge in general and the sublimation of various oral, anal, genital, visual and aural impulses. It is also a time for listening to folk-tales with their charming archaism. Some six-year-olds, in spite of having normal intelligence, do not manage to learn to read at this age, whereas some parents claim that their children acquired reading skills by themselves at nursery school without any particular stimulus. In fact during the preparatory classes many children are already able to read by Christmas. This confirms that in the final year of nursery school before the beginning of the preparatory classes everything is already in place. The children who are in difficulty are unable to understand how their classmates manage to read so easily. They feel inadequate and very soon become resigned to their failure and give up making an effort. Whilst the problem is mostly linked to the vastly differing stages of development that exist at this age, their “block” gives them the false impression that there is a magical rather than a causal dimension to learning. They become aggressive towards books and transfer their interest to the passive sphere of the electronic screen (TV, computer etc.), whereas reading requires active engagement in the creative production of others.

In our experience, if these children are identified early enough, they can derive benefit from three years of a folk-tale workshops. Already at nursery school, teachers soon recognise these children, who though of normal intelligence have problems of cognitive development. They are unstable, repressed and are unable to concentrate; their verbal skills and drawing ability are oddly at variance (the former is advanced while the latter is late); sexual identity has not been internalized; there is confusion over genetic ties and paternal and maternal lineage. These difficulties of cognitive

development are thought to be more frequent amongst underprivileged families or families that are too dysfunctional to enable the child to access scenarios where models can be internalized. The structure of the folk-tale can be a good tool to construct the foundations of the cognitive edifice necessary for development. Associative curiosity opens up on hearing of conflicts presented and resolved in folk-tales. Possible solutions become conceivable. An imaginary family with good and bad people can be constructed. Intellectual curiosity will follow the removal of inhibitions.

In the folk-tale workshops the book is present as a referent containing and guaranteeing the renewed contact with the invariables of the story. The story is told, acted out and illustrated.

The folk-tale arouses epistemological curiosity, but if the environment is not stimulating, improvement risks being merely ephemeral. Reading groups, role-play, going to a library can then play their part. They are complementary to the developments in awareness brought about by the folk-tale.

When the child learns to read for himself, he is no longer exclusively reliant on oral information from his parents and his environment to find possible solutions to resolve his personal conflicts. He becomes more self-reliant and organises his conscious and unconscious thoughts within the context of the collective unconscious of his age group.

### **III What does the book mean for the very young child?**

My experience of observation groups of mothers and babies with the medium of the book between them shows that the book is clearly an object of interest and envy. Books have several important characteristics which the infant will explore if he comes into contact with them. Here are some of them:

1) The book is a repository good and interesting things; it is like the child's mother's or father's head; it is a reservoir of data; the child puts the book on his head. It is a hat, of course. But it is also the child's way of showing the analogy he perceives between mental activity and the book which stores interesting ideas.

2) The book, in fact, is analogous to the child's experience of the body. It has to be solid. Opening the book one discovers an inside and an outside, a right-hand side and a left-hand side that come together in a central axis, the spine of the book. It can be opened, closed and folded. It has a sort of skin: the child is very sensitive to the texture of glossy paper and smooth cardboard. The book's "skin" is tattooed with signs and images.

3) The turning of the pages is a metaphor of the passing of time that can be found in the diachronic perspective of the story and the succession of the illustrations. Turning the pages makes the story go forwards or backwards. The child plays at controlling an unending representation of passing time. Some psychotic and autistic children lose themselves in stereotyped fashion for hours on end in the pleasure of mastering a movement and feeling the puff of air on their faces as it is displaced by the moving

pages. I once knew a child who tapped beneath the pages to bring the illustrated characters to life...

4) At 15 months the juxtaposition of image and text enable the child to discover that the image is derived from the story. He points his finger at the things he finds interesting, at first in the recognition of setting, characters and objects and later in relation to what he hears. It is at this point that he makes two important discoveries.

a) He discovers *the invariants of the structure*, which he delights in finding repeatedly, taking possession of them calling out: "Look!" and pointing his finger at them. He will derive pleasure internalizing them, searching for them, finding them again, in an elaborate version of the cotton reel game (*Fort/ Da – gone away/ there it is*) observed by Freud.

b) He then discovers *the arbitrariness of written forms*. The image is a mark, so is the letter. In order to solve the enigma he will classify, divide, scribble down and recognise the characters of the alphabet and eventually learn them for keeps. This is the active part of the preparatory phase of learning to read which is fostered by the story reader.

5) The book is a container for storing an unchanging story. If one wants to have such and such a story or such and such an image it is necessary to get one particular book and not another. Later on, reading will provide a means of being able to check on the reliability of the adult's word. The return to an identical story and, in the case of folk-tales, formulaic repetition, soothes the anguish of separation at bedtime when the "de-liaising" of thought and body takes place at the moment of going to sleep.

6) Thus the book is an "interesting" object, distinct from a toy. Like a toy it can be lost, forgotten, looked for, found, caressed, twisted, thrown away, attacked, bitten, smelt, swapped, given away, bought, stolen, copied etc. But the folk-tale book also conveys a coded message that is interesting because it inspires dreams and gives information on the conflicts of the characters, conflicts that are uncannily similar to the internal conflicts within the child himself.

The perception of the book as a symbolic reservoir-container is a significant "organizing point" in the child's development, comparable to that which normally occurs in the eighth month when the baby perceives that people have different faces and smiles or expresses anguish accordingly.

Some children will never arrive at the double function of the book: the "storage" function – the book stores food for thought - and the "transforming" function which makes the imaginary projections promoted by the folk-tale both possible and fruitful.

Today the book has competition from television and electronic games. It is therefore of crucial importance that the child's familiarity with books be fostered very early in the home, at the day care centre and at nursery school, with the aim of promoting reading and writing at a later stage. This is not the place to deal with the pros and cons of the "*stupéfiant image*" which the surrealist poet André Breton spoke of, but it is interesting to consider the experience of children's reading workshops, both as a leisure activity and as a complement to the folk-tale groups.

Our experience has shown that the screen-image in particular and, more generally, the *Prägnanz* of the visual image in our society, induces in the child (and to some extent the adult too) the phenomenon of passive “gluing”. The child undergoes the effects of the medium without any scope for reflection on internal experience. If one asks the child to talk about a cartoon or film seen on television, he is often only able to imitate sounds, mimicking the proceedings of the “electronic magic” bbbroom, splash, crash etc. It is impossible to ascertain who the aggressor is or who the object of the aggression is. The child is unable to describe the situation at the beginning of the action, the unfolding of the plot and the situation at the end. It is only when the child is brought into contact with folk-tales that he discovers a pattern of thinking that can be grasped, verbalised, analysed and exchanged within the group. He will be able to get out of the “zapping trap” of flitting from one confused image to the next and will be able to select really interesting situations that are food for thought. From being passively drip-fed, he will pass to a state of selective curiosity befitting the context of his own age-group and the environment in which he is growing up. Books and reading will then have their place. The curiosity of turning the pages of a book will be able to replace the passive use of the remote control.

Why then do we need these reading workshops and what do they involve? Here are some of the common characteristics often found in libraries, at school and in the home.

The aim is to propose the comprehension of a written text accompanied by images and to play with a story in order to encourage the habit of listening as well as curiosity about writing. Looking for information in books should be stimulating.

A space for reading activity soon becomes a space for discovery, communication and enjoyment.

Interesting texts should be chosen on the basis of the characters. There is no place for anything silly or fatuous. As in the folk-tale groups, one finds interest in binary opposites: boy/ girl, rich/ poor, inside the family/ outside the family. Humans must be cast as either good or bad. Animals are either friendly or dangerous. The neutral or indifferent category is only found much later on and is of no interest to small children.

The reading workshop must be a place of enjoyment. On principle, no interpretation is to be given to the child. It is by returning to the text and referring to it that its meaning is derived and the emotional experience is confirmed. The workshop can be seen as a game of going in and out of the illustrated text with the aims of developing the habit of listening, promoting curiosity about the book, what it contains graphically and what it is able to convey.

The potential to love reading and to enjoy writing is present in all human beings. We should be aware that nowadays the turbulence of human activity does not facilitate access to the pleasure of a book, either for adults or for children.

Love of reading and books and immersing oneself in them has a guaranteed soothing effect as opposed to the “remote control” effect of flitting from one thought to

another. Reading is an activity of the mind which must first be born and then nurtured and fed. We must avoid making it abhorrent to children.

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