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Ways of coping with conflict situations with the help of stories for children*

According to the general concept, stories for children are a world of ideals and illusions where anything can happen. This statement is just as false as the one stating that stories for children have nothing to do with reality, the heroes, places, and conflicts in them are mere creations of imagination and fantasy. We have all met the 7-headed dragon, although sometimes it is called a boss or our worse personality. We have also tried to glance over the glass mountain, which meant finding a solution for certain problems. Stories for children always tell us something important about the individual, his/her options, choices, mistakes, and the corrections of these mistakes. Therefore they are not about everything being fine, but that everything can be made fine.

In this paper I will discuss works of children's literature regarding their messages, linguistic features, and contents. Firstly, I will discuss the characteristics of the old, classic children's tales and contemporary ones, and discuss the changes in the topics, grammatical and literary quality, as well as the current target audience. Next, using a specific story, I would like to illustrate the special features of contemporary stories for children and their presumed role in conflict resolution. Examining the text I will also discuss the differences in grammatical and literary quality, the presence and the effects of the fantasy world and imagery.

1. Altered function in children's literature: Classical and contemporary stories

Regarding the message of stories for children, the initial function of children's literature had a pedagogical aspect: teaching that is right. In the stories the good always prevailed, and the bad was always rightfully punished. This moral norm or scheme kept the balance of the world's so called correct way of functioning. Until the 20th century stories for children were defined by their pedagogical usability, carrying out some kind of a pedagogical-didactic mission the goal of which was teaching while entertaining. At the turn of the century a new approach started to emerge that regarded children's literature as a form of art-mediation. In accordance with this view children's literature is supposed to provide aesthetic experience for children, and not teach directly, as it would then lose its artistic value. Compliance with this condition defines children's literature as a vehicle

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to raise readers, as well as a tool of literary education. Thus it is a body of texts that will get the children to the point where they choose a book freely, preparing them to become adult readers.

New stories with different topics and messages started to emerge in children's literature in the beginning of the 21st century. This turning point divided story consumers into two well-defined groups. There is a strongly conservative adult group who make selections on a normative, pedagogical-didactic basis focusing on the literary works' ideals and ideological aspects rather than the esthetics. To them a real children's literary piece or a story is one that teaches and entertains at the same time. The artistic-aesthetic children's literature is quite the opposite: its main goal is entertainment, art-mediation, playing with words, and trying to get the underlying message across, pushing the teaching aspect into the background.¹ Stories for children are originally meant to teach the rules and opportunities with the help of which a human can fight supernatural creatures, objects, life, and their most inner selves. These stories show girls and women how to behave and make choices. The men's tasks (quests) are both physical and mental trials, which teach them how to get a woman, liberate her even over the glass mountain, where everything is so fragile. All heroes work hard for their success, and to achieve it they have to complete tasks along the way during which they can get hurt or even fail. The essence is that the hero must push forward and he has to win even against himself.²

On the other hand, contemporary children's literary topics depict well-known situations in life, showing how micro-worlds that are run by the defining schemes of children function. As examples there are the books by Erika Bartos, like *Anna, Peti, Gergő* or her *Berry and Dolly* series, or the fairy tales by Judit Berg, her *Panka and Csiribiri* series, or the *Maszat* series. These books became relevant guides to children in their everyday problems. These newer stories deal with smaller and larger existential and family problems and conflicts which had been previously neglected, as well as the resolution to these issues. Such topics are offending others, sibling rivalry, divorce, solitude, and death. The enrichment of topics and content that have appeared in children's literature in the last decade certainly has a connection with the shift in the target audience and the change in society. In the contemporary stories being vague and expression via symbolism are presented in an unusually honest way and within a grammatically well-constructed literary frame.³ The shift in the target audience applies to the receivers (the children) as well as the transmitters (the parents). Today's children's literature targets those intellectually selective parents who are looking for literary entertainment while reading to their children. With their slightly absurd or grotesque usage of language and imagery, "these books address registers that also provide internalization techniques from the view point of fine arts and literature meant for adults".⁴

¹ Lovász 2015: 9–10.

² Boldizsár 2004: 14–15.

³ Lovász 2015: 14–15.

⁴ Lovász 2015: 17. For example: Schein 2015.

2. “...and the problems vanish bit by bit, one after the other” – The Angry Anger of Little Piou (*Kiscsipisz*)

As a result of changes in the social, sociological, psychological, and pedagogical child image, contemporary stories, such as *The Angry Anger of Little Piou*, are adapted to the needs of today's children. Solutions are presented in them focusing on problems that are different from those presented in the old, classic, so to say traditional stories. The heroes of these new stories are capable of executing the tasks that fall on them, acting responsibly, overcoming their fears, and saving the world created in the story, for the story.⁵ In the contemporary stories the presence of humor is important, and it may be absurd, grotesque, or even vulgar. The role of games is more valued as well. The greatest addition to these stories is the subtle and meticulous playfulness with words. The whirling puns, play on words, and meticulous constructions encourage the reader to embrace the subtle references in the text as much as possible.⁶ In order to process reading in a pleasurable manner, *slow reading* is required. This is a very important practical and reading-pedagogical contribution of these new literary works, which results in a change in reading habits and methods, by giving a chance to snuggle up, discuss the story, deepen the conversation with the child, discover problems, and contemplate the conflict resolution strategies.⁷

The Angry Anger of Little Piou was published in the *Kisgombos Children's Story Collection* in 2017. The volume contains six individual short stories. The stories were initially published in French targeting the youngest audience: as the stories are short, even a one-and-a-half or two-year-old child might be willing to listen to them. At the same time, the texts have the significant advantage of being polished in style, and their vocabulary not only promotes the language development of the youngest of readers, but also fulfills the linguistic needs of the audience in the kindergarten age-group. At first the stories seem very simple: they articulate basic emotions and concepts which are well-known to little ones, such as fear, bad mood, excitement, attention to each other, selflessness, or love, thus making them more palpable, familiar, and understandable. However, all of these texts hold a deeper meaning within, making these stories meaningful for children and parents alike.

Using expressive language and imagery, the story illustrates the set of everyday emotions and their resolutions that fit specifically its target group. It depicts what preschoolers and kindergarteners potentially live through every single day, due to their age characteristics: they are unable to voice their feelings, therefore they feel like they constantly hit a wall, thus having internal tension. Little Piou and Big Piou, the two main characters in the story, live happily in their *funny cotton-nook*, between the bird meadow

⁵ Lovász 2015: 20.

⁶ For example: János Lackfi's *Dombontúli mesék* (*Tales from over the Mountains*) series. The two main characters of the Plaster Muesli and Strawberry Cake story are Csigalassú Biztibácsi (Uncle „Snailslow Forsure”), who is responsible for the security of the Dombontúli Lakópark (Over the Mountains Residential Park), and Akác (Acacia), the little elephant. The vocabulary of the story, the font, size and shape of the letters, the wrapping, as well as the illustrations, allow for an action-packed and interactive storytelling.

⁷ Lovász 2015: 22–23.

and the small creek. They watch the sunrise in the morning and the sunset in the evening, and the rest of the day they play *sprig-skipping*, *worm-whirling*, or *silent strolling*. One morning, after waking up, and taking off to watch the sunrise, Little Piou starts to feel that a terrible anger is beginning to “grow and grow *inside him*, and then he starts to cry and yell. Little Piou kicks and flails, but Big Piou does not understand why. All of a sudden Big Piou notices that there is a terrible, awful, horrific *coil of troubles* around Little Piou’s heart. Later on we find out that this coil of troubles contains several knots. Each of these *problem knots* within the soul have a meaning, which might be a favorite song, which one associates with feeling good, a favorite toy, or laughing together, and going even deeper they might be associated with any internal problems, unprocessed memory, or dealing with conflicts.

Big Piou first starts to hum a song, to which the first knot slowly gets untied, and Little Piou stops stomping. Big Piou tries to untie the second knot, too, pulling it hard, cutting his finger in the process. Eventually the knot gets untied, and inside of it they find *the long-lost-tiny-teddy-bear*. Little Piou hugs the teddy bear, and stops screaming. Big Piou patiently unties the third knot, too, and the problems vanish bit by bit, one after the other. Little Piou doesn’t even cry any more. The last knot is the hardest to untie, Big Piou tries to pull it with *all his heart*, but the knot doesn’t let loose. Finally they both pull on it, in opposite directions, and as a result, *boom*, they knock their heads together, and start to laugh out loud. Because of their laughter, the last knot gets untied as well, as if by itself, and the coil vanishes entirely. To untie the knots the solution is patience, love, laughter, and playing together. The story nicely illustrates the levels, showing how the coil of troubles slowly dissolves, one by one, and also presents how to overcome these problems and troubles.

In the story, where we must acknowledge the translator’s clever and polished language choices, the words beautifully reflect the world in which it is displayed: the characters live in a *cotton-nook*, and spend their days *by sprig-skipping, worm-whirling, and silent-strolling*. The story’s subject of conflict is depicted perfectly by the term *coil of troubles*. Big Piou tries to untie the knots one by one in order to ease the unspecified tension in Little Piou’s soul. He does so by pulling with *all his might and all his heart*. The principle of “we create the world with our words” appears in this story: it depicts the world of imagery in which the story is set by using colorful language, and the tones, rhythm and playfulness of the words. Critics dealing with contemporary children’s literature (Ágnes Hansági, Andrea Lőrincz, Gábor Tamás Molnár) have already called attention to the fact that there are more and more texts written for children that intentionally no longer choose to tone down the language just because its target audience is made up of children, instead, they utilize the complexities of the language to create a contemporary, living language universe.⁸ On the other hand, there are still children’s books today which, considering the target audience, use reduced vocabulary, everyday language, to help overcome reading difficulties, and most of all, to try to facilitate understanding. This is achieved by using simple sentences, and a limited vocabulary. One example for this is the highly popular *Berry and Dotty* series. These texts

⁸ Hansági 2018: 86.

meant for children miss their mark, according to Ágnes Hansági, because “by eliminating the special characteristics of the written texts used in the written culture, they are unable to bring the reading culture closer to the children by using the tools of language reduction. By eradicating the complexity of the written language, teaching how to read can merely be postponed, not executed.”⁹ In addition, if we agree that children’s literature is meant to teach children and prepare them for adult reading via transmission of art, then reading texts, which have rich linguistic features and a world of imagery, is essential at an early age.

3. Summary

The highest value of stories for children is that they teach us that there is a way out of all crises. I believe that this is a common characteristic of classical and contemporary stories, and is a fundamental message to children and adults alike. According to contemporary children’s literature critics stories for children are the “all age” kind, meaning that all ages can find themselves and their internal voices in these stories. A dividend of reading together is that the adult and the child are not only addressed together, but also individually.

Any situation is ideal to tell stories, not only in the evening, before bedtime. In a traffic jam, while traveling by car or the underground, at times of sickness, or while we are waiting in the patients’ lounge. Many times it is not even the plot that is important but that the “story-sound” that invokes a pleasant experience in us, which will assist in resolving even the most unbearable situations. Paying close attention to the stories that the children ask for is especially important. These stories are important for them for some reason; in that place and time these stories are the best to reflect on their internal processes, a conflict or trauma they lived through. The story helps the children to be able to process (tell, play) their internal tension or the issue at hand, by talking it over several times. Let’s tell them the same story, even if they ask for it for the hundredth time.

According to Ildikó Boldizsár the therapeutic value of stories for children lies in the fact that “all stories show the way to balance (health), by saying that one is not to suffer from the imbalance; instead, we should try to restore balance, even through suffering.”¹⁰

⁹ Hansági 2018: 86.

¹⁰ Boldizsár 2004: 21.

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