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Identity and Education
in the Case of Children's Literature

Abstract: Children's literature plays a significant and meaningful role in defining the youngsters' personal identity and in instilling national traditional values – as each child gets in touch quite early with his or her national literature, with its specific characters and set of values. Despite the fact that the role of children's books in this respect is difficult to demonstrate and assess, therefore substantive further studies are needed in this area, an extensive part of the current research indicates a significant connection between children's literature and the child's sense of personal, social and national identity. This article aims at presenting the perspectives of some important authors in the field and at connecting them to the context of Romanian children's literature.

Keywords: identity, children's literature, Romania, traditions, education.

The acculturation process of children is obviously a complex and extensive one, extending over a long period of time and being influenced by a great number of factors. However, studies show that being in contact with the literature dedicated to their age plays an important role into the child's development. This happens as the children's way of experimenting the world around also includes the stories they are exposed to, as they will interiorize the narrative, its characters, its moral lesson. In this way, one story at a time, children gradually shape their own identity – which represents in fact a sum of identities, the national one being just one of them. For example, Romanian children are told and read bedtime stories about Praslea cel Voinic (The Mighty Praslea, the often neglected youngest son of an emperor, the main character in a great number of Romanian folk stories), Ileana Cosanzeana (the beautiful blonde princess that justifies most battles and brave endeavours of the characters in the stories), Zmeul cel Rau (The Mean Dragon – the ugly and mean character, the wrong-doer in most Romanian stories) and other important characters of the national folklore. These characters have of course counter-parts in other peoples' folklore and traditions, they share common traits and characteristics, they often go through similar adventures with a general common triumph of the good towards the end of the story, but they are

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all different, at the same time. In that very difference may lie the shaping of national identity. Watkins stated:

> the stories we tell our children, the narratives we give them to make sense of cultural experience constitute a kind of mapping, maps of meaning that enable our children to make sense of the world. They contribute to children's sense of identity, an identity that is simultaneously personal and social. (Watkins 1992, 183)

Obviously, the concept of identity changed through time and reflected the dominant epistemological position of the era: the older views regarded identity as a consistent self, unaltered and unified, whereas the postmodern perspective is that of a more ephemeral self, subject to changes from the inside and especially from the outside.

John Locke was among the first to discuss the idea of identity, claiming that mind was like a white paper on which experience is imprinted and that the development of children's identity and education heavily depended on the environment. Hence the importance of a sensitive educator, able to teach the child good physical and mental habits, as well as the practice of reasoning. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Locke discussed a new theory of mind and the origins of knowledge. Interestingly enough, as the images of Romanian story heroes were just mentioned above, he reflected on the importance of illustrations for children: each story or description of an object should be accompanied by an image or the teaching process will not be successful, he claimed. This is an important constituent of children's literature, especially in the visual world of today, and illustrations for children have become an enormous market and attraction of the book world. Images play an important role in the reception of a children's book and are important in helping shape the identity. Further referring to Romanian folktales, the illustrations of these characters manage, due to the talent of the artists, to reflect their description in the stories, forming an image in the child's mind: for example, the witches and dragons of Romania look a bit different from those of the Anglo-Saxon world and so do the main heroes compared to those from the Scandinavian folk-tales. One may wonder to what extent has this influenced, if the case, the shaping of identity in the case of Romanian children – and the question remains open to further research.

Returning to Locke, he considered reading as being vital for understanding the world and he advised that children should be taught to read as soon as they learn to speak. However strict and puritan in his general discourse, Locke recommend playing and having fun as a way of enhancing the pleasure of learning. He believed that reading should be or become pleasurable for children and an entertaining way of spending time. Locke even recommended some very kinesthetic educational methods, much appreciated today in contemporary schools: learning the alphabet by using toys instead of letters,

using the dice, learning the letters through play or motion. He pointed out that toys and enjoyable activities make the children believe they are playing when in fact they are learning to read, for example. In this respect, Locke is a precursor of the holistic teaching methods of today, like learning through play or the communicative approach. He is also a forerunner of the theory of multiple intelligences, as he believed in innate talents and predispositions of the child, advising parents to watch their children attentively so as to discover their aptitudes and "to nurture their children's own interests rather than force them to participate in activities which they dislike" (Locke 1964, 37). Locke's ideas that images and ideologies of children's literature, as well as children's education based on certain principles shape their identity are still valid today.

Authors like Coates state that the young identify with the heroes in the children's literature and they shape their identity in relation to these characters and to the identities they may discover there:

> Because children do use their literature for sites of identification […] authors and critics focus on identity with a qualifying adjective – gender identity, national identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, class identity. Adults have long believed that it is crucial for children "to see themselves in the book" so that their particular identity structures are validated and affirmed. Black girls need stories about black girls, gay boys need to read about gay boys, and so on, so that they do not have to adopt alienating and oppressive subject positions or feel invisible as they read. Identity in a global, highly and multiply literate culture, however, cannot be essentialized quite so completely. People draw their identifications, and hence craft their identities, from a range of models, often taking the values of the dominant culture as an important component of their identity structure, even when that culture could be viewed as historically or culturally oppressive. (Coates 2004, 111)

Anderson stated that nations are essentially imagined communities produced by the imagination of the people believing they belong to a certain group and a construct of the media which uses images to perpetuate stereotypes and to create a public of citizens – mass audience. Print capitalism enabled the circulation and understanding of books, thus creating the first nation-states of Europe. "Nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts […] these particular cultural artefacts have aroused […] deep attachments" (Anderson 2006, 48).

Other authors, like Bhaba, claim that our identity is never truly separated from the identity of "the other", due to the ambivalence of the nation-space terms. For example, the nation may change its boundaries constantly, the society may be inclusive or exclusive, migration can take the severe form of mass migration and this forever changes the culture, the nations, hence the difficulty of defining or acknowledging "the otherness". Just like Anderson, Bhaba believes that "in fact, a nation emerges as a form of social and textual affiliation" (Bhabha 1990, 292). It is in this sensitive and dynamic world

context that the identities of the young are being shaped, and perhaps tolerance and fairness need to become a crucial part of the children's education, reading and upbringing. The literature for the young can definitely play an important role in this respect and so do the ways it is employed for the greater good.

The psychology of the child indicates that the first years of a child's development are crucial in what regards mental functions, language learning and also psychosocial learning. Education plays the crucial part in this – the educational environment the child is exposed to (Bowman, Donovan and Burns 2001, 137). Authors like Raburu state that:

> Children develop self-identity, who they believe themselves to be, and begin to form relationships through play and peer relations which contribute to their emotional, social and cognitive development. Theories of self generally agree that an early childhood program can foster children's self- esteem and build the foundation for future relationships with others. From interviews and observations, 4 to 6 year olds portray their internal lives of self, construct their personal identity, and how these may affect the learning process. (Raburu 2015, 1)

Important critics of children's literature, such as Perry Nodelman in *The hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Karin Lesnik-Oberstein in her critical literary work *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* and like-minded theorists like Jacqueline Rose *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* create a particular theoretical framework and perspective regarding the young learner as a sociocultural construction, the fertile soil for good quality literature and at the same time, the generator of meaning and valuable considerations on "childhood". The sociocultural approach to the development of children is much influenced by the paradigmatic research of Vygotsky's developmental psychology. A main concept of Lev Vygotsky's work is self-regulation and the way it develops in children. A first stage of the child's development is called object-regulation, the objects being those in the immediate vicinity, such as toys or books. The next stage is the other-regulation, meaning that others, for example parents take control of the children activities, guiding them in their play or learning. Later on, the child develops and starts to take responsibilities, until the point of self-regulation or independent strategic functioning. Vygotsky claimed that "learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" and he emphasized the role of language in cognitive development. (Rieber&Carton 1978, 40)

For Vygotsky, the cognitive development results from an internalization of language, literature being language in written form and playing a crucial role, as well. Furthermore, the adults surrounding a child are, according to Vygotsky, an important source of cognitive development: they can offer a proper model and a good example. Adults transmit their culture's tools of

intellectual adaptation that children internalize – and what better way to do this than through the use of children's literature? The sociocultural theory translates in cycles of assisted performance when learning is a work of collaboration and a building process. That is why working and learning in groups is so helpful, as learners may try to solve problems in little groups on their own, with the educator's intervention only when absolutely necessary. (Rieber&Carton 1978, 42)

Vygotsky stated that language and thought initially develop independently of each other and merge later on. He emphasized that all mental functions have external, or social, origins. Children must use language to communicate with others before they can focus inward on their own thoughts. Children also must communicate externally and use language for a long period of time before they can make the transition from external to internal speech. This transition period occurs between 3 and 7 years of age and involves talking to oneself. After some time, this self-talk becomes second nature to children, and they can act without verbalizing. When this occurs, children have internalized their egocentric speech in the form of inner speech, which later becomes their own thoughts, explains Santrock. (Santrock 2011, 91)

Vygotsky argued that children who use private speech are more socially competent than those who do not, as it represents an early transition in becoming more socially communicative. For Vygotsky, this takes place when young children talk to themselves – using language to govern their behavior and guide themselves. Vygotsky further argued that young children use language to plan, guide and monitor their own behavior. It is precisely this use of language for self-regulation what he calls private speech. For example, young children talk aloud to themselves about such things as their toys and the tasks they are trying to complete. Thus, when working on a puzzle, a child might say: "This piece doesn't go; maybe I'll try that one." A few minutes later the child might say: "This is hard." (Vygotsky 1962, 128)

Another titan of child's psychology is Jean Piaget whose work on child's psychology is fundamental to understanding the development of young learners. As Harry Beilin said:

> No one affected developmental psychology more than Jean Piaget. From his earliest publications in the 1920s to the time of his death, the influence he exercised was extraordinary. His theory [...] has no rival in developmental psychology in scope and depth. [...] The number of experiments conducted by Piaget and his colleagues has never been tabulated, but it is unrivaled in the history of developmental psychology. (Beilin 1992, 86)

While aiming to research the formation of concepts and intellectual operations, "to lay bare the operational mechanisms of thought", Piaget distanced himself from the psychological methods of his time, more precisely the individual monograph and the testing method and suggested a more adequate one, in his view: the clinical method.

In a few words, the method to follow in the study of children's representation of the world is this: observe the child naturally, note the child's utterances and questions, and then, inspired by these questions interview other children directly; finally, return to pure observation in order to verify the results of the previous interviewing. The method is thus a sort of shuttle between pure observation and interviewing, interviewing intended to increase the volume of data and direct observation intended to situate them in their spontaneous mental context. Thus, we avoid two problems: The results of observation only are too poor to allow an advanced analysis. The results of interviewing only are too much influenced by the questions and unintentional suggestions, to allow an interpretation safe from any objection. On the other hand, the two methods combined will result in something solid, comparable to the clinical method in psychiatry. (Piaget 1926, 79)

Piaget greatly influenced the area of developmental psychology, despite his detractors. The field owes him the idea of children's cognitive development and valuable discoveries and concepts, such as assimilation and accommodation, egocentrism, conservation, hypothetical reasoning and deductive reasoning and so on. As Santrock argues,

[…] along with William James and John Dewey, Piaget contributed to the current vision of children as active, constructive thinkers. Piaget was a genius when it came to observing children. His careful observations showed us inventive ways to discover how children act on and adapt to their world. His work revealed some important things to look for in cognitive development, such as the shift from preoperational to concrete operational thinking, and showed us how children need to make their experiences fit their schemas (cognitive frameworks) while simultaneously adapting their schemas to experiencing the real life. (Santrock 2011, 96)

Piaget discusses four processes relevant to the way children know and understand the world: through schemas, assimilation and accommodation, organization and equilibration. Schemas refer to what develops in the brain of a child while trying to construct and understand the world – in other words, mental representations organizing the knowledge. Piaget argued that a very young child would be characterized by behavioral schemas (simple physical activities like grasping, watching) while later on mental schemas (cognitive activities such as strategies for problem solving, classification of objects) develop.

Koki points out that generally speaking, people have a basic, intrinsic need to share stories, which from time immemorial have helped organizing experiences, record major events and marked celebrations of heroic figures, "pointing out patterns of human experience and behavior" (Koki 1998, 3). Stories and storytelling have been a major part of the oral culture of all people around the globe from ancient times and has played an important role in preserving the identity of tribes, people and countries. Being such a natural part of human evolution, stories are as significant in language and literacy

development as in the development and maintaining of identity. By sharing stories to children, it appears "the potential for new connections that link them together inside a new tale" (Maldarez 2010, 7). Children are often helped to perceive the world around them by stories in various forms: bed-time stories read by parents, old stories told by the elderly in their family, stories shared with the ones around them and their friends. Stories have, therefore, interrelated social and evaluative functions from a very early age onwards. (Dyson & Genishi 1994, 16). Besides offering a natural, comfortable environment for language acquisition, stories constitute a remarkable source of experience for all children, helping them learn about the world and develop their own identity. Professor John McRae stated there is nothing more important in educating a child than

> […] developing in young children the enjoyment of reading. Reading is their own window on the world: it is more individual and personal than any computer game or TV programme. Reading stimulates imagination, empathy, and awareness. Reading gives them the early opportunity to develop the most significant elements of language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness, whatever the language in which they are reading. [...] Is there any parent or teacher who would actively deny their children the joy of reading books[...]? […] the whole wonderful world of reading opens up… and should never end. (McRae 2014, 7)

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