

MINISTERUL EDUCATIEI, CERCETARII, TINERETULUI SI SPORTULUI
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(ABSTRACT)

COORDONATOR STIINTIFIC,
PROF. UNIV. DR. **ION BUZASI**

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ALBA IULIA
2011

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**MYTH AND INTERTEXT IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE.
MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND IN NARRATIVE PROSE**

(ABSTRACT)

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KEY WORDS

Children's literature, Postmodernism, intertext, mythology, story, fairy-tale, novel, folk tales, didactics, reader, child, role-play, general text, eternal time, Christian moral, bildungsroman, frame-story technique, fictional pact, archetype, grandparents, political correctness, child universe, totem, never-ending story, modern fairy-tale.

ABSTRACT

This doctorate thesis is called *Myth and Intertext in Children's Literature. Mythological Background in Narrative Prose* for two reasons: the graduate and masters degrees had Postmodernism as subject, therefore the faces of the intertext were continuously revealed, and the second reason is the belief that there is a hypotextual mythological background, an archetypal structure, without which any literature could not have existed. Children's literature makes no exception, and the goal is to reconstruct the myth which the tale, the story and the novel is written from. The intertext will build a bridge between the old and the new paving the way to a *never-ending story*.

We proposed six chapters: the first is a terminological clarification; the second is a vision on the child and childhood the next focuses on the intertext as part of *Postmodernism* and *Poststructuralism*. Next three deal with the narrative prose with its three great species: the story, the fairy-tale and the novel.

The first chapter had to be didactical because you cannot build without a solid foundation. It is called *Children's literature- a terminological clarification* and it will try to see if *children's literature* is *for/with or about* children. We must state from the start that children's literature existed since the existence of the child. And this is because many of the novels –especially adventure novels- have been associated with children's literature, but have not been written for them.

There is a dual vision on this type of literature: synchronical and dyachronical. The child will be followed in space and time to see not only what makes them similar but also different. Folk tales are the first known way of re-telling the past, of making sense of some events that would be otherwise un-understandable. This has two sources of inspiration: myths and legends.

Ion Buzasi believes that the beginning of this type of literature starts from here: "Children's literature begins with folk tales, with the fairy-tale – the most beloved literary

species of children's literature – continues with the legend, the fabliaux, then with the literary creations – folk and artistical, - with vary tales and novels.”

Vistian Goia gives another definition and sees it as a “major literature's *Cinderella*.” It can be interpreted as a beauty hidden behind cinder, but also as a prejudiced heiress. The entire definition is holistic: “children's literature includes all the literary works that are accessible to the little readers, regardless if they have or not been written for them. It constitutes a field in literary creation and can be appreciated through its aesthetical criteria. ”

Consequently children's literature can be defined as the *literature of the eternal* (because it can be read at every age) and *universal* (because it covers a wide area) *child*.

The literature for the little ones did not suddenly appear. *The early children's literature tradition* is a short literary history, its space and time revolution. The only legitimate children's literature author in the Antiquity is Aesop. In the British literary landscape of the Middle Ages appear Ælfric and Bede who wrote books of instruction. Their works synchronized with the constitution of the first schools. The best period for the books of instruction remains the Renaissance. The end of the 17th century comes as a gift for the little readers because until “Charles Perrault (1628-1703) publishes his fairytales collection, starting with *The Little Red Riding Hood*, that brought its popularity, there has not been a professional writer who specially composed for children.”

Both a reading and writing theories are necessary. That is why we chose as a subtitle *The act of reading and its effects on the child*. The starting point is the very truth that any author has to accept: when published the written text ceases to belong to him, the reader is the one who gives it a meaning. If adults read in order to relax, children read to learn, which leads them to para- or sub-literature. The child is not tired after a day at work; he has the energy to read *anything*. But even this anything must be formative because the child is a continuous sponge.

In the second chapter, *A Vision on the Infantile World* , the child is studied from three perspectives: social, religious and psycho-pedagogical. And this is due to the fact that the little human being is raised according to precise religious customs and traditions (see the *christening*) and later its education depends upon a teacher. Until the 19th century, when there is a shift in canon, the childhood is perceived as discontinuous from adulthood. Both in the antiquity and feudal societies children were caught in a rigid structure, because, they inherit their parents' social position. This is only to point out the child's early predestination.

We can take the Greek Antiquity into consideration as the age of masters and students. Education was intended only for boys, the girls remained at home and learned how to become

good wives and mothers. From Middle Ages to The Augustan Age the child had been studied from two perspectives: on one side the child was an impure, corrupt and perverted being, on the other side an innocent and essentially good being. The role model is the Holy Family and for the child the little Jesus. The child will always create paradoxes and dilemmas and one is the positioning between angel and demon. We will need a sociological approach of the problem. Because the little being is always evolving, its universe will do the same.

The last perspective, that will close the present chapter, is the religious one. Jesus names children the symbols of Christianity. This is why a proto shape of children's literature has messianic roots. Jesus addressed His public as He would address children, having as *modus dicendi* the parables.

The intertext is an actual and recent concept used by postmodernists. To understand the concepts meaning we need to explain other two trends in the chapter *Postmodernism - Poststructuralism - Intertextuality*.

If postmodernity is a cultural and social dominant of the 20th century, *Postmodernism* (or *PoMo*) is an artistical, philosophical and literary movement that had to appear theoretically as a result of Modernism. Structuralism is found in the saussurian thinking. Saussure is known for the linguistical dichotomy *langue/parole*. The poststructuralists, a radical group in the movement, challenge the verb *to be*, replacing it with *to write, to read, to interpret*. From here on, any text will auto-generate itself, evolving to what they call *the general text*.

This leads to the intertextual context that is the act of an author to evoke another in his work. The texts do not only communicate but also autogenerate: «In the social sciences it means phenomena are studied without regard to their historical, social, political, or economic context. Post-modernists respond to this criticism with the concept of intertextuality. Post-modernists argue that every text is related to every other text, and this makes for "intertextuality". »

The last three chapters will focus on the narrative with its three species: the story, the fairy-tale and the novel.

The fairy-tale has three types of sources: folk, art and modern literature. The folk tale will take into account the eternal or the forgotten time in *Youth Everlasting and Life without End*.

This theme firstly appeared in the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh, *the one who has seen all or the searcher of immortality*; in the biblical *Book of Isaiah*, whose journey lasted 32 years but who still returned home untouched by time; in Japanese mythology there is

Urashima Taro, a fisherman who visits the land of the Sea King and spends four hundred years there. The Celtic mythology thrives in such examples because there are two heroes who visit the People of the *Sidhe* in *Tir na nOg: Bran and Oisín (The Voyage of Bran, son of Febal and Oisín in the land of Youth)*. Washington Irving tells the fascinating story of a man, *Rip Van Winkle*, who falls asleep in the forest before the War of Independence and wakes up only after.

The Romanian fairy *Tinerete fara batranete si viata fara de moarte/ Youth Everlasting and Life without End* has a special position among these representations because it is the only story in which the hero is waited and slapped by Death at the end of time itself. Moreover it is totally unknown among European folk culture. *Youth Everlasting and Life without End* is a *bildungsroman*, a story about growing and searching for one's identity in the world, or it is what Noica calls a *coming into being fairytale (fintare)*, an ontological story.

The fairy tale belongs to the etiological tales: “myths, legends, sagas and mythological fairy tales.” Mihai Eminescu borrows some folk elements but he also imitates them, positioning them on a Christian structure, in his widely known tale *Fat-Frumos din lacrima*. We called it a tale of tears and suffering because the child's coming into being is due to prayer, suffering and abnegation. The second cry scene is when Prince-Charming leaves to battle with the opposing forces and Ileana has “two big tears into her eyes”. Ileana cries when Prince-Charming leaves for his third voyage too. We must admit that all the feminine figures that he is involved with cry: from birth to marriage he is surrounded only with pain and suffering. He only brings happiness to men: his father and his sworn brother for whom he kills his enemies and brings him his bride.

Children's fantasy must meet two requirements: a. talking animals, fairies, magical objects that transport people in space and time, talismans that fulfill your wishes, potions that make you grow and shrink; b. one of the characters must be human so that the reader can identify with him/her.

In the fifth chapter, *The Story*, there are three subchapters: *Mythical Faces Mirrored in the Sea of Stories: Faust and Oedipus; Central Faces of Childhood: grandmother and grandfather in File din cartea naturii and Tolerance in a politically (in)correct world*.

The Little Mermaid and *Lion King* are based on two myths: *Faust and Oedipus*. *The Little Mermaid* is the perfect story for the small reader because it has a mysterious location (the sea), fabulous characters (the mermaids) and a love story. In most children's books there is the Disney version, the happy ending of Ariel adding to its success. There is, nevertheless, a mythological pattern on which the story is based: Faust, the demonic pact and the

androgynous myth. Due to the little mermaid's belief that the prince is her better half, she exchanges her voice to the Sea-Witch for legs. In spite of this she does not manage to win the prince's heart and she would have lost her soul had it not been for her personal sacrifice. Consequently, the little sea creature becomes a daughter of the air. The story has a Christian moral, which states that one's sins are forgiven only if there is a personal sacrifice.

In 1994 Walt Disney Company launched the animated film version of the Lion King, inspired by *A Tale of Two Brothers*, written by Alex Simmons. Why is this text for children? Because, it is centered on a family of lions, the mother, Sarabi, the father Mustafa and the cub Simba who has three friends: Pumba, Timon and Nala. There is a journey into the unknown, a formation journey of the little Simba, who is orphaned, journey which ends well.

The second subchapter regards *two childhood portraits grandmother and grandfather in File din cartea naturii*. In Ion Agârbiceanu's stories we deal with a trinity: grandparents, parents and children. The parents stand in the middle, they have a socially active role, fulfilling obligation in both confronts, their parents and children. The ages are circular, as the Sphinx's question: "Which creature in the morning goes on four legs, at mid-day on two, and in the evening upon three, and the more legs it has, the weaker it be?" The answer is the man in different stages of his life. The passing of time is possible only in nature that plays a central part in his works. The author of many stories and novels is underestimated when he is excluded from the major literary history. Nevertheless Iorga sees him as a: "heir of Slavici in this region."

Postmodernism appears in stories like *The Little Red Riding Hood* by the Grimm Brothers and James Finn Gardner variant, which has political correctness as reading key. *Political correctness* stands at the crossroads of Bradbury postmodernism and Lyotard's linguistic legitimacy. Any language game or irony is a "failure of communication that arises when everyday realities are dressed up in tasteful terms".

In this same spirit, an American author, with a childish heart and a developed sense of humor, thought of becoming an author-reader of the children's stories. His name is James Finn Gardner and his book is called *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* meaning that the reading key is *political correctness*. This is a lesson for the young reader: he must obey his mother. The only truth that remains is that this is a story for a child that is still learning. He is untouched by social prejudices and intolerance.

The childhood in the novel has four parts: *Adventures during Childhood* with Ion Creanga, *Childhood Memories* and Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; The totemic animal, the archetypal ancestor in *Fram, ursul polar* by Cezar Petrescu and *White Fang* by

Jack London; *The Imaginary Worlds Universe* in *Enciclopedia zmeilor*, *The Neverending Story* and *Haroon and the Sea of Stories* as a art fairytale and *Homo Ludens – role play* in Daniel Pennac's *Domnilor copii*.

The Adventures during Childhood is a comparison between to novels for children *Childhood Memories* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* that are part of the first exercises to write about the child's universe. Both Nica and Tom are exponents of children who play, at an age that playing can be a life lesson.

There are many resemblances between the two novels, and one is this very fact of being the first. They can be found among the first literary exercises in both spaces. *Childhood Memories* were published between 1881 and 1882 being considered “the first novel of the traditional childhood in Romanian literature; it is a complex work, hard to define in a certain genre and species.”

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer had been published five years before, 1876, and the critics weren't positive. But in 1884 Twain publishes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, novel that later Hemingway appointed as the foundation of American Literature: “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called 'Huckleberry Finn.' [...] it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.”

In a world of real dangers, the experiences of these two children can be seen as life lessons; ergo both literary works can be studied as *bildungsroman/ novels of formation*. Neither of the boys wants to go to school for fear of being beaten. During hot days both children want to go bathing. Both live in a world surrounded by superstitions that dictate a way of living, but they also show that the traditional society is conscious of life every little symbolical aspect.

The Totemic Animal grounded itself in a world deeply influenced by mythos, world in which we place our two novels: *Fram, ursul polar* by Cezar Petrescu and *White Fang* by Jack London. The spaces in which the two were composed are totally different but the connection between them is the animal as a totem, protective being that acts as an archetypal ancestor. Another resemblance is that both heroes, Fram and White Fang cannot find their own place. They are ruptured from the natural environment, the wilderness, adapt to civilization and are then forced back into the wild just to return again to civilization at the end. The action is therefore circular: tame vs. wild, man vs. animal, civilization vs. wilderness. The totem can dictate a group of traits that govern an archetypal world from a social and religious point of view.

Both *Fram, ursul polar* by Cezar Petrescu and *White Fang* by Jack London begin with a few chapters that have the role to frame the story. *White Fang* starts with an edgy race between men and wolves. Two men are taking the body of Lord Alfred, a man from the outside who froze to death to McGurry. The initial days in the cubs' lives depends upon their mothers' love and warmth. As times goes by both are introduces to an ancestral feeling: fear due to the absence of the mother. When they enter civilization they are given an identity because people name them. Consequently the two animals become the protectors of the human beings, their totems. White Fang, the dog-wolf protects Weedon Scott and Fram saves and protects Otto and Egon.

Postmodernism appears also in *Enciclopedia Zmeilor* that is the only children's book that Cartarescu has ever written. Both *Levantul* and *Enciclopedia Zmeilor* refer to the same type of irony and fictionality, but what sets them apart is the aesthetical value. If the first is well received by the critics the second is denied by its own author. Manolescu includes it in the children's fiction area whereas Ion Bogdan Lefter is skeptical.

In the first part the *zmei* (fantastical evil creatures in Romanian folk tales) universe is described and therefore it is called *The Universe* or "the biological, economical, social, cultural, linguistical and behavioral reality of different species of zmei." This has eleven chapters. The second part is an *epical cycle from their literature*, but if it is read with a careful eye the reader realizes that the stories are connected because the characters transgress the storied creating an intertextual bridge. Or we can see the novel as a frame story with the frame being the *Preface* itself. This part has only ten stories which we will conventionally call *zurbe*. The seventh story, *The Tale of Ding-Ding, the web designer*, has clear metatextual resonance, not that the metatextual hints weren't felt in all the work.

The Designed Reader of the Never-ending Story is *Bastian Balthasar Bux* and it refers to Michael Ende's *Never-ending Story*. The novel crosses meta-trans-inter-textual boundaries because it questions the relation author-narrator-character, layering the textual reality-fictionality. And it does this to the point when you, as a reader, fall under the impression you have entered the text. The postmodern reader becomes just a piece of the intertextual puzzle of the autogenerated text, in which the reader becomes the writer.

The intermingling of reality and fiction leads to the confusion of humans with fictional characters. Bastian is the one who must save this fictional world, *Fantasia*, and to do this he makes the transition between human being and character. The designed reader is made to believe, as he progressively reads the novel, that he is the one who can give a new name, thus

becoming a new Adam. The Creator appears *in medias res* in the embodiment of *The Old Man of Wandering Mountain*, who re-reads and re-writes the story for Bastian.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories, by Salman Rushdie, is a modern fairy-tale due to multiple elements: a. the initial formulas, which place the reader into a suspended time; b. the repeating number *eleven*: Soraya leaves at eleven o'clock sharp, moment in which all the clocks are broken. From this moment on Haroun cannot concentrate more than eleven minutes; c. the battle between Good and Evil. Good is represented by The Gups and Evil by the Chups. Being abstract concepts, the author plays with them throughout the novel, but he lets Good win in the end; d. The Hero and his helpers- Haroun is helped by: Butt, Iff and Mali; f. There are also a prince and a princess, Bolo and Butcheat, but they are parodies of the real fairy-tales characters; g. Haroun direct enemy is Khattam-Shud, the prince of silence, the enemy of speech.

We closed our journey with *Homo Ludens – role play* in Daniel Pennac's *Messieurs les enfants /Domnilor copii*. This is because these children wake up in the middle of an upside down world, in which the parent-child role is exchanged. Piaget places the game in a world acceptance ritual. The transgression from childhood to adulthood is to pass from *play for fun* and *play the social game*. As we grow older we do not choose our parts we are forced into them. Every experience of the child helps him grow into an adult. And the adult part is just a premature taste of what life would eventually become. *Messieurs les enfants /Domnilor copii* is also a didactic novel and the role-play make the exact exchange from infancy to maturity.

The short study of the *stories, fairytales* and *novels* show that a literary work has multiple reading keys and that the readers are not robots that fulfill a mere reading task they are complex, capable and meaning-generating persons. They are the ultimate heroes of fiction.

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