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Fairy Tales in Chains of Education

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

fairy tales, literary education, early education textbooks

This paper presents the case of introducing children to fairy tale literature. Fairy tales, which initiate children's literary education, tend to be interpreted as typical didactic pieces at school. Their potential connected with influencing the emotional realm and developing aesthetic sensitivity is underestimated. The aim of the current research is to recognize ways of introducing fairy tales and presenting them in selected textbooks used in early education. The subjects of the analysis include *My i nasz elementarz* [*We and Our Primer*] and *My i nasza szkoła* [*We and Our School*]. The choice of the above-mentioned textbooks resulted from the desire to learn which ways of using fairy tales (or their components) are propagated by the contemporary creators of early childhood education goals. These considerations led me to the description of reception through cognition (intellectual cognition, the fulfilment of didactic goals) and constitute the first part of the article, which I compared with the intuitive reception that grew out of psychoanalytic interpretations. Knowledge, which has its source in a psychoanalytical approach, can provide valuable support in designing activities and creating the conditions for the reception of texts in early literary education.

Introduction

The first contacts between the child and the book are, among others, contacts with fairy tales. Thus, it is not surprising that these texts are used in the educational process – including by placing them (as entire works or in fragments) in school textbooks. The analyses of Polish educational materials for students of grades I-III conducted within the last decade (Pankowska 2009; Łaciak 2011; Wiśniewska-Kin 2013; Zalewska 2013, Klus-Stańska 2014; Adrjan, Kalinowska 2018; Szyller 2018) found the following disadvantages of such texts: poor contents, a childish style, as well as not taking children's competences and biographic experience into account. Also, the way of building meanings based on fairy tales is of poor quality. Literary works rewritten according to methodical frames determined by authors of school textbooks often leave much to be desired. My critical analysis refers to the textbooks *My i nasz elementarz* [*We and Our Primer*] and *My i nasza szkoła* [*We and Our School*], which, in terms of choosing fairy tale content, are based on the original versions of *Nasz elementarz* and *Nasza szkoła* available on the website of the Polish Ministry of National Education.

On the research

I carried out an analysis of educational materials based on the assumptions of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy define discourse as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (Phillips, Hardy 2002: 3, quoted after Kunter 2012). However, they assume that texts analyzed as separate units are not important unless they are connected with other aspects of discourse and context in which they had been created. This is an expression of the idea of Pierre Bourdieu – the analysis of discourse facilitates a better understanding of social phenomena (1991). According to Norman Fairclough, the use of the word “critical” to describe discourse analysis is connected with investigating verbal interactions accompanied by the awareness of the fact that they are determined by social structures and, at the same time, influence such structures (1995: 36). Thus, CDA assumes that language intermingles with shaping the relationship between knowledge and power. Therefore, the tasks of CDA (Szkudlarek 1997: 184-185), with reference to fairy tales “locked up” in textbooks, include (1) the “denaturalization of texts” (revealing what is biased in thinking about a fairytale – what hides certain interests); (2) discovering “the means used to influence” the recipients of literary works; and (3) analyzing the (predictable) effects of discourse built by the authors of educational materials.

During the analysis, I was looking for fairy tales in the above-mentioned educational materials. I was searching for texts, instructions based on the texts, as well as other contents that included the elements of magic typical of fairy tales. Due to the often incorrect understanding of a “fairy tale”, during the analysis of the textbooks I also paid attention to fables about animals and legends (which might appear next to fairy tale texts).

A broader commentary is required for a discussion of the relationship between magical tales (fairy tales) and Aesop’s fables. Today, both are present in school curricula. Contact with the latter (which have sources in the folk tradition but also in our ancient heritage) is something students have much earlier: Aesop’s fairy tales were not the product of one author (the legendary Aesop), nor of a folk tradition, but are the product of schools. This explains their didactic and moral nature (Cieślakowski 1985: 380). Probably under the influence of teachers’ suggestions, students were to add appropriate moral interpretations (Waksmund 2011: 75) to the fairy tale themes. Unlike fairy tale magic, Aesop’s material has been approved for widespread use in both Catholic and Protestant environments. Therefore, it joined the Biblical stories as a common corpus of European children’s literature (Bottigheimer 1996: 261). The common approval of Aesop’s fables as the contents of the medieval and renaissance curriculum resulted from their compliance with Christian ethics, and the moral teachings promoted in those texts actually match the Ten Commandments (Hall 2016: 177-178).

Fairy tales that included magic followed the path of Aesop’s fables, becoming an obvious component of educational reality that brought them to a typically didactic or utilitarian role. At present, a young recipient of fairy tales at school is trapped somewhere between (negative) morals, making art projects such as “an illustration for a fairy tale”, knowledge competitions concerning fairy tale authors, and tasks such as “How do you imagine a real princess? You can use phrases such as a wonderful dress, pink frills, white stockings, bouffant sleeves, lacy gloves, a colourful umbrella.” Another alternative is a utilitarian attitude to the text as a script for school theatre plays. Therefore, it is crucial to try to answer the following questions: How does the institutionalized attitude to texts influence the process of the infantilization and simplification of fairy tales? And is it possible to carry out activities that allow readers to truly ‘experience’ a fairy tale by creating the conditions for its intuitive and emotional reception?

Reduced to the role of a tool – fairy tales in Polish primers

In part one of *Nasz Elementarz* [*Our Primer*], the use of the term “fairy tale” already attracts one’s attention in the table of contents. As it turns out, the authors refer to a work by Henryk Sienkiewicz – a short story about fairies who gathered at the cradle

of a little princess. Each of them offers the girl an extraordinary gift: a face as beautiful as a spring flower, eyes deep as the ocean, a slim and wispy body, and buried treasure. The queen of fairies gives the princess a gift different from all the others: a good heart. It cannot be denied that Sienkiewicz's work provides an introduction to the world of values, but it does not do so in a "fairy tale" way: there is no tension, no rejection, no tests that the hero must face, no hope for a happy ending. Sienkiewicz's "fairy tale" is, in essence, neither a fairy tale nor a fable, although it could be considered to be a fragment of the latter. Interestingly, in its entry on "Wolne Lektury" ["Free Readings"] (a website under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of National Education), a "fairy tale" is defined as "a story that teaches a lesson, not only to children, and shows which values in life are the most enduring and the most beautiful". In the teacher's guide, it is evident that the learner's activity is determined by imposing an interpretation of the text: "we explain why the gift from the queen of fairies is the most valuable". Including this work in the primer may reinforce teachers' misconceptions about what fairy tales truly are.

The fantastic elements present in the works are meant to emphasize a certain moral message, as in Justyna Bednarek's short story "Jedno życzenie" ["One Wish"]. In this story, some siblings find a dusty bottle in a corner in the attic, in which, as it turns out, a genie lives:

"What a relief!", he exclaimed. "I've been sitting here for a hundred years and my legs have gone numb. Thank you for letting me out. I will fulfil your wish as a reward! Well, what should I conjure up? Maybe a flying carpet that will take you to the end of the world? Or to the moon?"

"Airplanes and space rockets are used for this", said Iza.

"So maybe a magic syrup that will reduce you to the size of a flea?"

"Using a microscope you can see the world through the eyes of a flea", Franek was not convinced.

"I've been in the bottle for too long, everything has been invented! What do you need, then?"

"Genie, make people be good and kind to each other", said Iza.

"I can only make magical items", the genie responded.

"It's a pity, because I wanted to ask you for a good mood. I would spray it whenever my mother calls: *What a mess!*" Franek smiled.

"I'll get you a dust-eating machine!"

"Thank you, I already have a vacuum cleaner".

"Children, think of something", the genie's voice was pleading. "If I do not conjure up anything, I will have to go back to the bottle forever and it is so tight inside!"

"I know!" Iza clapped her hands. "Make a large cylinder in which you will not get your legs cramped!"

"Abracadabra!" the genie said, delighted, and a huge bottle appeared in the attic. But before he disappeared in it, he whispered:

“All in all, I managed to conjure up a portion of kindness...”
 At first, the children did not understand what he meant.
 Do you understand? (Lorek, Wollman 2017: 40-41)

It is essential for textbook authors to construct clear messages that foster particular social attitudes (kindness, diligence). At the same time, magical elements are denied their expected status in the eyes of the reader. This may bring to mind the works involved in “engineering the human soul”, which are intended to educate readers in accordance with a valid ideological attitude. Depreciating magical elements is apparent in Soviet fairy tales, among others in those by Evgeniy Permyak (which appeared in print in 1924): the main characters of these fairy tales do not seek help from magical forces but achieve success through their own work and knowledge. More on this topic has been written by Anna Wrońska (2011). This is an example of narrative prototypes that are inevitably manipulated in such a way as to position the reader towards a pedagogical goal that is also charged with ideological meaning (Gutierrez 2017: 7).

The authors confuse the readers with another misunderstanding included in the second part of this first-grade textbook. In the text “B jak bajka” [“F as a Fairy Tale”], the readers get to know an old woman who had a big nose, flew on a broomstick and liked fairy tales. She lived in a candy house and wrote down many volumes of fairy tales that animals told to her: a red cat, a white raven, and some fish in a pond. One day, Beata and Kuba knocked on her door, asking how they could find the way back to town.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me a new fairy tale in return”, the old woman replied.
 Beata and Kuba offered her different stories, but she already knew them: “The Fisherman and His Wife,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Pigeon and the Ant”.
 “How about the fairy tale about an evil Baba-Yaga who was turned into a pebble?”
 Beata asked suddenly.
 She didn’t know this tale. The story was sad, but beautiful. The old woman wiped a tear from her cheek.
 “Poor Baba-Yaga. I am a Baba-Yaga too, but I am quite a different one. I’ll take you to the town on my broom”. And so she did. (Lorek, Wollman 2017: 38-39)

Placing fairy tales in one row with a work based on the tradition of Aesop’s fables, in which the most important element is the moral of the story, is a disturbing sign that confirms that the authors may not understand the difference between fairy tales and fables and that they may not regard this as important for education in Polish literature and socialization (as might be expected, these two forms of education are dominant in texts “related to fairy tales” or “related to fables”). The questions included below the text only confirm these conclusions:

1. What are your favourite fairy tales? Discuss them with the class.
2. Ask the school librarian for interesting fairy tales that are also called fables for children. Borrow a book with fairy tales.
3. Think of a fairy tale about Baba-Yaga.
4. Draw an illustration for a fairy tale you have made up. (Lorek, Wollman 2017: 38)

The second-grade textbook (part 1A) includes the story “Lew i zwierzęta” [“The Lion and the Animals”], and it includes a suggestion to borrow from some fables by Ignacy Krasicki. The student’s task is to illustrate a saying in which a human trait is compared to an animal, e.g. sly as a fox, proud as a peacock, slow as a tortoise. Then, the textbook authors present their definition of a fairy tale: “A brief literary work in which human traits are given to animals. Its content often includes a moral or a lesson” (Lorek, Zatorska 2018a: 27).

The fairy tale texts found in the analyzed materials are “The Ugly Duckling” (second grade) and “The Little Match Girl” (third grade) by Hans Christian Andersen. “The Little Match Girl” can be considered a modern literary fairy tale in which ultimately good does not prevail (this is the saddest fairy tale written by this Danish author). I adopted the division suggested by Violetta Wróblewska who, apart from folk fairy tales (which include magic fairy tales), distinguishes between traditional literary fairy tales and modern literary fairy tales (Wróblewska 2003: 20). Traditional literary fairy tales include adaptations built on the principles of folk magic tales. Modern fairy tales are original works with new, non-folk motives, presenting the ethical complexity of the world and the complexity of the character’s fate. In a literary fairy tale, symbols and metaphors are more important than magic (Baluch 2003: 71). The prototypical path of a traditional fairy tale, described in detail in the structuralist concept by Vladimir Propp (1928), generates the following plot: 1. A young hero or heroine experiences a sudden change in his/her status or life, sets off on a journey, or is involved in a number of tasks or tests; 2. The protagonist’s journey, tasks or trials take place in a magical environment inhabited by strange and wonderful creatures that either help, disturb or threaten the hero/heroine; 3. A dangerous antagonist inhibits the progress of the hero or heroine; 4. The hero or heroine overcomes the dangerous actions of the antagonist and ends the journey or series of tasks or tests, and, as a result, gains a more comfortable life and climbs the social ladder. That path is the most important feature of the genre (Teverson 2013: 32). However, when it comes to the authors of the textbooks, their comprehension of fairy tales is determined by the idea of a non-obvious fate of the main characters.

According to the textbooks’ authors, fairy tales are supposed to develop the learner’s imagination. However, this does not prevent the genre from being infantilized on a visual level: the textbooks contain images of fairies in pink dresses with puff

sleeves (first grade), a small princess in a similar outfit with a tiara in her hair (second grade – *Nightingale Lane*), or a fairy in a pointy hat with a star wand in her hand. All these illustrations are made in “candy” style, accompanied by a quotation from one of the primer’s rhymes: “F like a fairy tale – where the beautiful princesses are.” This reinforces the ‘enslavement’ of a fairy tale, which is manifested by further devaluations in text-based activities in higher grades: “How do you imagine a true princess? In your description, you may use the following phrases: a wonderful dress, pink frills, a colourful umbrella”. This is a task for fourth-graders (the quoted written assignment comes from the fourth-grade textbook *Mówię, czytam, piszę [I speak, I read, I write]*), but it is part of the aftermath of the way of perceiving and understanding fairy tales in early school education. Therefore, the inconsistency of the authors starting “the fairy tale adventure” of a child from Sienkiewicz’s “fairy tale” may be puzzling. If only superficiality remains, where is the most important gift of the fairy queen?

In the primers, fairy tales are closely linked to their authors. As Anna Wasilewska (2012) points out, there is already a high level of exposure to knowledge about authors in pre-school. A child does not need this, however, to receive a literary work. Such exposure is not related to emotional reception, the development of an aesthetic sensibility or imagination. In the second grade, learners get to know Andersen’s biography. Biographical knowledge prevails over the message of the text, and although children are granted the right to interpret the fairy tale on their own (children relate their feelings after reading the work), the questions about what can be learned from it create the belief that the only proper way to understand a fairy tale is intellectual analysis (without intuition).

Knowledge about the author is to be intertwined with discussions of the text itself and other tasks suggested by the designers of the materials (such as solving riddles or doing physical exercises inspired by the text). Among the activities are instructions related to achieving cognitive goals, which, in some cases, seem to ‘mask’ the essence of the text and introduce distance to its contents. Examples of such tasks include searching for information on the production of matches, ways to warm up in cold weather, or transcribing selected fragments of a fairy tale into a notebook. Deep reception is also hindered by the utilitarian approach to the text as a script for school performances (based on the mechanical copying of dialogues, with no prior analysis of the plot, characters or elements of the world shown in the story).

In textbooks, text-based exercises do appear, but they activate the mechanism of ‘wishful thinking’ regarding the behaviour of particular characters in the fairy tale. The following exercise is found in the teacher’s guide:

The children talk about the behaviour and attitudes of the characters in the fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling”, they try to assess (and explain their assessment) the behaviour

of the animals that the ugly duckling meets along its way. The children try to think of advice to give to the animals about how they could behave towards the duckling so as not to hurt him, but to help him in a difficult situation. (Boćko, Grzybowska, Oleksy-Zborowska 2015: 45)

Once again, the issue of the presence of modern literary fairy tales in which the characters are neither typical antagonists nor ones who follow the dichotomous division into good and evil is important here. The child, in the process of receiving traditional fairy tales emerging from a deterministic worldview, identifies with the main protagonist (in order to follow a certain path and win). In “The Ugly Duckling,” however, the textbook authors suggest a deeper understanding of the motives behind the behaviour of other characters, even if the planned exercise assumes a possible change in their actions.

In the description of the aims, there is an evaluation of the behaviour of the characters in the fairy tale, which, in essence, shapes the desired attitudes and situations. However, in this way, the essence of a fairy tale is distorted. This is because a fairy tale presents the world as it is, along with the hardships and adversities we all face. Wishful thinking is more justified in the case of writing an alternative ending to “The Little Match Girl” – adding a happy ending that a child wants in order to be certain that everything can end well. Those who analyze Andersen’s fairy tales point out that physical and spiritual suffering is presented in several of his tales, but they are either omitted or modified in versions for children. Thus, in some of these versions, the titular little match girl is adopted by a nice family (Nikolajeva 2008: 189). Fairy tales express our hopes, which is why the promise of a happy ending is fundamental to a fairy-tale narrative (Warner 2014: xxii). The addition of the happy ending makes a child believe that everything in life ends well. And such a belief is most needed for the youngest readers.

In the textbooks approved by the Polish Ministry of Education, children are often asked to write and illustrate their own fairy tales (the task is suggested to be done independently and in groups of classmates). The teacher asks the learners to try to invent a fairy tale by telling it one sentence at a time while maintaining cause and effect relationships. The teacher can start the fairy tale by introducing a description of an extraordinary, magical, wonderful world. On the basis of the ideas offered in the game, information gathered during the classes, their own experiences from reading fairy tales, and the action plan, the children create a booklet entitled “A Fairy Tale”. The teacher reminds the children of the features of a fairy tale. However, the students do not build their knowledge about these features in the course of the lesson. They are expected to read a few fairy tales of their choice and consider what they have in common and what makes them different. Teachers do not take any responsibility for

the kinds of fairy tales the learner discovers. Will it be a full version, a version lacking certain threads, or a fairy tale to which an educational thread has been added? “How do we know that a given text is a fairy tale?” is the basic question for a learner. The mechanical recall of components and features of the genre and the ability to distinguish a fairy tale from a legend (together with the naming of specific titles) are explicit goals of the textbook authors.

Checking this knowledge is carried out through an exercise entitled “A fairy tale – what’s that?”. Children sit in a circle on a carpet while the teacher places pieces of paper with printed expressions in the middle: “moral”, “grain of truth”, “fantastic characters and events”, “struggle between good and evil”, “short literary work”, “frequently written in rhymes”, “animals show the traits of people, e.g. a donkey is stubborn, a lion is brave, a turtle is slow, old and wise”, “nature is made alive”, “we know the exact place and time of events described”, “the story could really happen”, etc. (Połec, Ochmańska 2016: 19). Together, the learners are to think which of the features written on the cards are typical of the fairy tales they know. Then they write down a short note in their notebooks concerning the characteristics of fairy tales. The authors decide to expose only one of these features:

FAIRY TALES’ MORALS

The teacher asks the children what a moral is. Students try to define the term. Then they think of the morals of Andersen’s fairy tales they know. The children are divided into several groups and, on the sheets of grey paper, they create posters. The topic is: What do fairy tales teach us? Students hang their works in a visible place. (Połec, Ochmańska 2016: 19)

Exposing the moral as the basic element of a fairy tale confirms the educational ‘hopes’ of school with regard to this literary form. There are no attempts to distinguish the common language, formulas, plot fragments, types of characters, or parts of the fairy tale world, nor the elements that belong to them.

Breaking the chains of education – a primer for the person’s inner life

Approaching a fairy tale, as a literary work of art, from the perspective of emancipation requires understanding it on the basis of the principles of psychoanalysis. Telling and reading fairy tales, following Bettelheim, may be perceived as a process that makes it easier for children to discover their own identity and vocation. Interacting with a fairy tale shows what experiences the reader needs in order to develop his or her character (Bettelheim 1985: 29). Since, with age, children experience more and more,

their inner world develops, although the balance in this world is still uncertain and unstable. Listening to fairy tales provides them with ideas of how they can introduce a certain order into the chaos of their inner life resulting from changing experiences and the huge number of events they participate in (Bettelheim 1985: 151). In order to arrange, summarize and describe them in a symbolic and synthetic manner, personal models and patterns of behaviour are necessary during childhood.

A psychoanalytical understanding of a fairy tale “returns it” to the child, allows for intuitive reception, and, most of all, rejects the obligation to shape particular attitudes (which, at school, is so heavily promoted through the use of morals). Bettelheim, who claims to be Freud’s follower, points out the following:

Psychoanalysis was created to help mankind to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it or escaping from it. According to Freud’s prescription, only by struggling courageously against what seems invincible can a person succeed in giving meaning to his/her existence. (Bettelheim 1985: 46)

The aim of psychoanalysis – the acceptance of the nature of life by taking up the struggle with courage – is exactly what fairy tales achieve:

(...) struggling against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable; it is an inseparable part of human existence, but if one does not shy away from but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one overcomes all the obstacles and wins. (Bettelheim 1985: 46)

The educational activities carried out in Polish schools have not been influenced by a psychoanalytic understanding of fairy tales, which is so heavily emphasized in the research of Polish scientists (e.g. Ługowska 1981; Baluch 2008; Wais 2007, 2014). Confirming the recipients’ belief that the fairy tale is an expression of a person’s dreams and desires (Ługowska 1981: 16) or treating ‘pure images’ present in the text as images of values (Baluch 1993: 73-74) are not exemplified in textbooks for early school education. If we assumed that the world of fairy tales invites the reader to find the meanings of universal symbols and primeval images (Ługowska 2006: 37) and that the symbolic contents included in this world are available for children because of their imagery thinking (Wasilewska 2012: 137), it would be possible to free those stories from the chains of didacticism and, at the same time, to free children from the stereotype of incompetent, infantile or undisciplined recipients.

In the school reality, fairy tales, which initiate children’s literary education, are reduced to typically didactic works. Their potential related to their influence on a child’s emotional life and their development of an aesthetic sensitivity is discredited.

Although the textbooks contain some tasks which are intended to develop these areas, these are often superficial and, in fact, refer to a very shallow layer of meanings.

The rationality of interpretation and the imposition of social conventions on how a text should be understood makes it impossible to know it intuitively. Such intuitiveness is connected with the competence of receiving the text with ‘one’s whole self’; in the case of fairy tales, this results in “effective amazement”, which is the foundation of creative activity (Simonides 1973: 116). The versions of fairy tales included in the textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education direct the reader towards their cognitive value. As Kielar-Turska writes, “a fairy tale facilitates a better understanding of the real world in contrast with the fairy tale world” (1992: 152). However, the vision of the world presented in this kind of literature cannot be placed in opposition to the reality, because the fairy tale world is a reflection of people’s inner reality. Children, who are so eager to listen to the same story many times, want to experience the hero’s victory again and again. Also, they need to confirm their conviction that every adventure (even the most horrible one) can end well. “The monster struck dead is a reason to feel relief (...). The ranks of dead enemies allow everyone to believe that evil can be defeated. They can even make the recipient believe that he/she defeated evil in person while listening to or reading a fairy tale” (Książek-Szczepanikowa 2003: 180).

The strategy of imposing meanings on the fairy tales included in *Nasz elementarz* and *Nasza szkoła* makes it impossible to understand them at a deep level. The above-mentioned fragments of exercises (as well as the selection of texts) indicate that the authors are not interested in creating conditions for their being ‘experienced’ fully and intuitively. The activities they offer reduce these fairy tales to didactic stories with clear messages. The expectation of a clearly articulated moral of the story contradicts not only the potential of this literature but also the supposed subjective status of the learner and the aspiration for his or her overall development.

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