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# The Educational Aspect of Disabled Literary Characters from the Work of Walt Disney in Primary Education<sup>36</sup>

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**Abstract:** The article deals with some educational aspects of the Walt Disney book version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* that is available on the Slovakian book market. Attention is given not only to the literary-historical context of its origin and the current perception, but particularly to the educational potential which it could have, despite its obscure artistic value. The educational dimension within primary education of the adaptation of a disabled literary character of the bellman will be analysed on the basis of the Disney book (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*) and its counterpart, the animated Disney movie inspired by V. Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

**Key words:** Walt Disney, The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, disabled literary character, educational aspect, adaptation, literary character.

## Introduction

The education of children in a school setting is traditionally implemented through didactic communication through which some positive aspects, role models and patterns of behaviour are demonstrated. This

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fact has significantly influenced the curriculum of literary education which introduces children, from an early age, to literature and enables them to be raised by literature. The starting point here is a socially accepted idea that stories for children should include positive models of behaviour; i.e. the characters that act in a socially acceptable manner and are rewarded for it. The stories should neither describe unacceptable behaviour (such as violence and rudeness that could be imitated by children) nor include or display scary facts that could be perceived as frightening by children (Nodelman, Reimer, 2003 p. 86, 92).

It is undisputed that literature has an important place in the life of a child and that it becomes one of the best educators over a long-term horizon. From the child's point of view, it is the most joyful and spontaneous form of education (Poliak, 1973). According to Klátik (1962), the artistic word can, in addition, prepare the most fruitful grounds for any educational activity. Therefore, everything relevant for a pre-school age is conveyed through the literature and artistic text in kindergarten, and, according to Nezkusil (1972), one will not find anywhere else than in children's literature such a strong expectation that it is the hero who helps the reader to overcome the problems of his intellectual maturation and helps clarify the difficult situation of interpersonal relationships and facilitate his integration.

It is hard to imagine fiction for children without literary heroes and characters. Children's literature, as observed by Tichý (1972, p. 335), must always have its personal hero. The main character, or literary hero, has an irreplaceable position in the reception by children. According to Šubrtová (2008, p. 289), the literary character is the narrative construct through which the sense of the literary work is revealed to the child recipient, due to the anthropological dimension of the literary character. At the same time, in the view of the author, a literary character can function as a defining sign in the development of genre awareness in children.

### **The place of literary hero in literature for children**

From the aspect of literary-theoretical discourse, the literary hero is seen as a character that could exist in different situations (Compagnon, 2006; Ronenová, 2006). In other words, the character does not exist from the logical point of view, does not live in the real actual world, but only in the cultural practices of pre-school and junior school age children; the teacher can always refer children to the qualities of well-known literary heroes (Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Pinocchio, etc.). The child needs its hero from a very early age because everything he does is in a way interconnected, so the child is involved in the formation of his own personality. According to Rúfus (1997), children think through their whole person as if there were no distinction between the soul and body. Therefore, nothing can replace the actions of a hero in the literature: a hero affects those around him immediately and irreplaceably, the integrated effort of the child to assert and develop his own personality (Tichý, 1972). Naturally, the question arises as to what should a literary hero of the children's literature be like, if he is to enrich the child-reader. In the case of the main protagonist, it holds that he can be the focal point of both positive and negative qualities – this fact is not so important, however, as the important fact is that he lives his life in the artwork as a character who enters into relationships and conflicts within the overall context of the literary work. According to Tichý (1972), it is the resulting vector that has to have a positive value: positive literature is a precondition for the child-reader. It is such literature that, in its artistic result, does not reaffirm life decay, destruction or escapism, but affirms and provides for both progress and advancement in the self-formation of a human being.

Yet, nowadays, the fact that a literary hero, despite his fictional character, can prepare a child for coping with authentic real-life pain is somehow overlooked. K. Chukovsky (1963) captured the ethos of children's literature in that its mission is to develop humanity in man – the unusual ability of man to worry about someone else's suffering, as well as to enjoy the delight of others and to live out someone else's fate as his own. The child, in his view, cuts himself off from his own egocentric interests and

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feelings by engaging in an imaginary life of fictional entities (people, animals and objects). Literature for children and youth is therefore the liveliest and most attractive when it conveys a human fate, i.e. both tragic elements and happiness at the same time, while, as remarked by J. Šimůnek (1972) and I. Nagaiev (1974), with the future and brightness as the only legitimate foundations. Therefore, literature for children must not evoke a fear of the future but trust in the future.

In the scientific discourse, the period of childhood has neither been considered as ontogenetically inferior nor as the preparatory phase for something more substantial to come for quite a long time. Nevertheless, childhood is unique in some way since, in its early stage, the inner life of the child is murky, unenlightened and unclear. Therefore, the child needs to understand himself, to generate distance from himself and return back by means of a different path. Against the background of a literary character, the child looks beyond himself, considers, evaluates and criticises himself only to return to himself in a clearer form (Helus, 1972). Both literature and the literary hero, as aptly noted by Šimůnek (1972), are involved in what can be called the social attunement of the child: a child verifies, against the background of a literary hero, the fact that s/he is a human child.

### **The Walt Disney Company**

In the context of the 1990s, alongside a massive influx of commercial fairy tales, a book appeared in the domain of Slovak literary translations with a hero that could be characterised as peculiar, not taken for granted, and, from the aspect of “a societal demand by kids”, partially taboo. This was a book adapted from the Walt Disney production of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1996, translated by Stano Martin).

Books from Walt Disney productions usually enter the market immediately after the release of their feature film (their counterpart) to maintain and multiply their audience share and to keep the film in circulation for as long as possible. In this regard, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*

is listed among the numerous other similar books, a fact which notably reflects significant changes in the children's book market after the November Revolution of 1989. This significant change also affected publishers in Slovakia in just a few years following November 1989, as noted by Stanislavová (2010). After the advent of the free market economy, the area of culture and books for children became the domain of making profit. It meant that Slovak publishers started to focus on publications of a commercial nature and trivial titles, mostly of foreign provenance, among which Walt Disney productions had an indisputable lead. Foreign literary titles of dubious value have found their place on the shelves of Slovak bookstores, libraries, and also Slovak children's rooms for nearly thirty years since November 1989.

It is no secret that Walt Disney productions are primarily a matter of commerce and marketing. They are driven by the need to target its viewers, readers, or, in terms of the market language – its consumer and customer. The prolific and immensely attractive productions of Walt Disney films are known to children all over the world. The literary-historical discourse in Walt Disney's home country indicated that this production must be viewed through the prism and context of the historical period in which it originated – around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, even its older animated movies enjoy considerable attention amongst film and literary critics, especially due to the fact that Disney's feature movies confirm the values of mainstream society about what is normal and desirable (cf. Nodelman, Reimer, 2003, p. 142). Today, it is socially, culturally and politically incorrect to use the voices of African Americans when dubbing monkey characters (*The Jungle Book*), to depict Italian characters as aggressive and dull people who speak broken English (*Pinocchio*, *Lady and the Tramp*), or, in the animated film industry, to present a gender biased stereotypical view of a man and a woman as the only acceptable model of happiness (*Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*).

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### Disney's film and literary version of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*

A fairy tale feature film about *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* was, in 1996, the thirty fourth animated feature film from the Disney production line. It belongs to the so-called animated classics of Walt Disney. As mentioned above, its eponymous literary form appeared on the children's book market in Slovakia soon after the release of the film, mainly for marketing and commercial reasons. The film version of the story is not the original production of the American company. It is a story inspired by a classic work of romanticism by Victor Hugo – *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. It is therefore just a film adaptation – an adaptation of the original work that sketches the classic literary work for a young audience; an audience which had not been targeted as addressees of Hugo's original work (Čeňková, 2006, p. 87). The Disney adaptation of the book, like most adaptations, transformed the original work into a version which is simpler, from the textological point of view, in terms of genre (novel – a fairy tale), composition, theme and language (cf. Štraus, 2005, p. 10). In the ideal case, an adaptation should not deprive the original work of either its values or artistically. However, the practical adaptation of the Disney production brought some adjustments that were intended and deliberate. The most fundamental of these is the one that R. Schnickel (in Nodelman, Reimer, 2003) denotes with the term *Disneyfication*. It means the deliberate changing of the story's ending that is in contrast to the original; in the Disney version, neither Quasimodo nor Esmeralda dies, both of them find their version of happiness (Esmeralda in the arms of Phoebus, Quasimodo at the hands of the cheering crowd who hail him as a hero).<sup>37</sup>

The Disney adaptation of the romantic piece *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* by V. Hugo is an example of such an adaptation that can be considered a modification in the conception of Z. Klátik. In such cases,

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<sup>37</sup> The Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* by H. Ch. Andersen is also a Disneyfication because the princess ends up in the arms of the Prince – also in this case the ending differs from the original story by Andersen.

the original literary work does not appear in the children's literary version in its authentic form. There are two possible formats of adaptation: one which retains its authentic form (for the adult reader), the other which is adapted for the child reader. Such a reduction, typical for adaptations for a young audience, may, to some extent, alter the original nature of the literary work, as happened in Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.<sup>38</sup> The modified artworks thus reveal two faces of the literary text. In the case of Disney's treatment, the tension between Disney's surface structure of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the deep structure of Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* can be felt more intensively by the adult viewer (and reader if s/he reads it to a child). *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* film could therefore be classified as a type of adaptation specifically referred to as *ad usum delphini*.<sup>39</sup> This adaptation of a literary piece with a dramatic storyline and tragic finale executed a deeper invasion into the original structure to befit the expectations placed on animated movies for a young audience. Referring to the words of D. Karpatský (2008, p. 12), we can consider the substantial invasion into Hugo's novel as a Disneyfied adaptation of the original work for a medium other than a book – for a film; moreover, a feature film of a fairy tale nature primarily for a child viewer. Some production features also played a role here (e.g. the limited length of film screening) which requires elimination (omission) of unattractive or inappropriate parts from the adult point of view, and, amplification (extension) of those passages that accommodated the storyline to the expected receptive needs of a young audience.

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<sup>38</sup> There is also a "child" version of the fairy tale *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Don Quixote* by M. Cervante or *Gulliver's Travels* by J. Swift.

<sup>39</sup> Libor Pavera (2002, p. 9) states that there are many literary works, originally intended for adults, routinely adapted for children and youth. Such modified texts were given a specific name after the French heir to the throne – *ad usum delphini*. It was used to mark special editions of classic authors for the purpose of the education of the young heir to the throne of France. The so-called "inappropriate passages" were removed from it. Today, this term is used to denote works from which something was deliberately omitted for some reasons (usually moral).

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### **Educational aspects of the Quasimodo character**

Psychological theory posits that a hero should have, especially for pre-school aged children, certain characteristic features of the child – it means that a hero should be small and helpless, and, by virtue of his powerlessness and helplessness, be triumphant in some form. The requirement for a hero in children's literature should therefore be, according to Helus (1972), as follows: a hero should embody something moderate and weak that can only attain the desired position through the power of his powerlessness.

Despite their "deficiency", the characters of children's literature should not be deprived of the most important thing that is referred to as a dimension of life. A child should not lose confidence in life and confidence in the world as such, despite all of the darker sides of a literary text faced by a literary character (and with him, hand in hand, faced by the child itself). As a result, there must always be optimism for a child, even if the story informs us about the negative things and phenomena that a child knows from real life. The adult reader can cope with adversities by his own means because his concept of life has already matured. However, a child, as stressed by Šmahelová (1972), must always be given a helping hand in this regard. This is also the case in more demanding stories in which a hero, or his close person, is confronted with death, a phenomenon which is not very common in literature for children. It is natural that the subject of death in the plot is refused emotionally by the child because it contradicts his expectations. A hero, however, should not be formed only by the demands of the child, because he would then only confirm the child's childishness and would thus stand in the way of a child's prospective development and progress. The child also expects, to some extent, that the author provides him not only with what fulfils a child's horizon of expectations (H. R. Jauss), but also something personal, i.e. a personalised knowledge of the world (elements of the adult world from the child's perspective). In this way, an interesting process is secured within literary communication resulting in the fact that the reader will never be bored, which could happen if the storyline were predictable (Nezkusil, 1972). A literary



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hero has therefore an irreplaceable role in children's literature. He is a factor of an artistic text of irreplaceable importance not only for a child reader (and their enjoyment of various fictional worlds), but also for the full-valued integration of the child into the context of the real world.

Disney's Quasimodo is both a film and literary hero with a disability; even though he does not meet the basic psychological requirements of being small and weak, he is "at least" ugly. Highlighting some negative features of the character and exaggerating his ugliness related to physical disability reveals, in the case of Quasimodo, the hidden meaning of more significant human values. One must not perceive the ugliness, distortion and physical disproportion of the literary hero in the context of the artwork as violating aesthetics. In fact, the defacing of Quasimodo fulfils a semiotic function – it carries a potential of significance. The utilisation of ugliness in the depiction of the main character (including a variety of his deficiencies) can be considered a strategic descent from the higher to the lower position. From the literary-theoretical point of view, such a usage of the deficiencies and deformations in a film and literary work is a creative process of reduction that can be enriching for the reader from the pragmatic point of view, emphasising an inclusive and pro-social attitude (Rakús, 1996).

Quasimodo, the central character of the story, is a type of outsider and outlaw for his physical features (and for societal-social status too) who is confronted with potentially stronger and more powerful enemies. He is similar to and appealing to the young audience of both the film and the book, so children can identify with him more easily. The triumph of Quasimodo as the underdog, outsider or outlaw represents, in the Disney treatment, a type of narrative scheme that a child must familiarise themselves with in the process of education in order to learn how to apply it later in a new situation. Since children's reception is affected by their prediction, familiarity with the narrative scheme of the triumph of the oppressed provides children with some scaffolding in the text reception. It is exactly this permanent exposure to the narratives of underdogs and outsiders which helps children to develop a sense for this type of stories (cf. Nodelman, Reimer, 2003, p. 119, 147).

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The adaptation of an original artwork, according to Žilka (2011, p. 22–25) is always at the interface between the original work and the new one. According to the author, two principles are involved in its realisation: the creative and the reproductive. If the creative principle prevails, the outcome is a new artwork. Less interference with the thematic composition of a text is a characteristic for the so-called reproductive genres. If, within the outlined context, Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (both the film and book versions) are assessed and compared in relation to Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, one must inevitably conclude that the fairy tale's film adaptation by Disney applied a creative principle in relation to the original book by V. Hugo. The book adaptation of the fairy tale, for which the movie is a counterpart (not the original novel) has, on the contrary, adopted the reproductive principle.

The teacher should draw children's attention to a comparison of both the film and the book adaptation – using only a book version of the story is didactically undesirable, particularly for its strikingly kitschy elements. The creative principle of the Walt Disney Company was manifested in several ways in the feature film version:

- transformation of the genre (romantic novel to animated fairy tale),
- film production features (visual literacy):
  - focus (focal point),
  - light (colour, shadows),
  - angle (points of view),
  - framing (proximity – distance, large – small),
- combination of image, word and music – rendered as musical,
- characters modification (child's aspect):
  - Quasimodo (elimination of deafness, single-eyed),
  - Phoebus (transformation into a positive character),
- modification of structural significance:
  - Disneyfication – happy ending,
  - elimination of the theme of death and grim elements (the relationship of Quasimodo-Esmeralda, Esmeralda-Phoebus),
  - amplification (situational humour, gargoyles, updated insertions).

By comparing film and book versions of the story, the teacher can develop in children the desired understanding of intertextual and inter-media connections within a story. This develops the awareness of how the story changes when rendered in two different media, which helps children realise that the book version does not reach, by far, the standard of the film:

- visual kitsch (Kulka, 2000, p. 131):
  - emotionality,
  - identifiability,
  - shallow associations,
- reduction of the reduction (lameness, trivialisation and “unintelligibility” of conflict),
- Reader’s Digest-like treatment of textual components (resembling a commentary for visually impaired addressees),
- weakened/eliminated motivation of characters acts,
- insufficient expressive level of illustration (paradox).

The literary hero as a character with a particular name is essentially a non-existent entity. Even though he does not exist in the real world as he is a fictional character, one can pronounce that he exists in the logical and ontological spheres of literary or film worlds. The character of Quasimodo does not exist from the logical point of view, but he exists in our cultural practice (Ronenová, 2006, p. 129, 135). Based on this, the teacher can make educational references to his qualities, enabling the literary and film character become a part of the so-called collective memory (the term of U. Eco).

## **Conclusion**

Disney productions are well established in today’s world of children’s literature. The question is, however, to what extent educators are able to pass on knowledge to children that reading a book as well as “reading”

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a movie is – as one writer once said – a gift that should not be wasted. In another place and time, R. Rolland noted that we never read a book, but we read ourselves in books – in order to regulate, discover and know ourselves. In what manner can the child and the Disney's production fit into it? The answer is hidden in Disney's film and literary characters that do not introduce children into "childish" situations; as a child does not normally experience such situations in the real world. A child's situations are primarily of a human nature. Trashy and naive literature is apt to create childish situations very easily, through children characters, but – in the words of Šimůnek (1972) – to uncover something specifically human in a "child's" situation is quite a demanding task, which artistically impoverished literature for children is unable to fulfil. The Disneyfication of human situations, in the domain of film and literature, is certainly not a hallmark of artistic truthfulness. Nevertheless, the film adaptation of Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is a work that deserves attention in contemporary art for children – even in an educational setting. Through the comparison of the Quasimodo story in both film and book adaptations, the teacher can develop the desired awareness of how the same story changes when rendered in different media. The trashy literary version has disqualified itself in this educational comparison.

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