

## VARIANTS OF AUTHORIAL FAIRY TALE AND THE CURRENT CHILDREN AUDIENCE

© Radoslav RUSŇÁK  
(University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia)

[radoslav.rusnak@pf.unipo.sk](mailto:radoslav.rusnak@pf.unipo.sk)

*The issue of authorial fairy tale and its relationship with children audience at the first stage of elementary school (readers of the Year 4) is, even today, not entirely clear. In terms of the notion of authorial fairy tale, we distinguish three relevant reasons, why we chose the genre of authorial fairy tale for our research in literary genealogy. In relation to the notion of the current children audience, we present the notion of the so-called “new child”, whose characteristic feature is especially its apathy, lack of interest, passivity as well as an ever growing loss of sensibility and emotions, suppressed by rationality. Moreover, we specify the methodology of the experimental research, performed in elementary schools, using typologically different variants of modern authorial fairy tales: the basic set was made up of all the pupils of the fourth form in the Slovak republic, whereby an available focused selection was performed. The experimental research was carried out by means of one group. From a methodological point of view, it was an experimental interference in one group, whereby the consequences were compared (changes that occurred) in the dependant variable before and after the experiment. The research had a confirmatory character and was aimed at the influence of experimental interference as independent variables on the reception of pupils of the fourth form (dependent variable). In the end, we present the results that, de facto, unmasked the low perception preference of children of parody-nonsense texts and on the other hand, they revealed a receptor conductivity of subversive texts. A side effect of such an experimental research, we recorded presentations of evil in the products of children creativity, closely linked to the current (socially not regulated) trend of mass media culture.*

**Keywords:** tale authorial fairy tale, subversive fairy tale, parody-nonsense fairy tale, children audience

In the very beginning of the study, it needs to be stated that any further contemplation in this matter will be based in two elementary notions, which are closely connected to education theory and practice and, perhaps, we might just stress that that area of education is concerned, which is realised in terms of literary education. The paper, therefore, draws from two central notions – authorial fairy tale and children audience.

The first pillar notion of the title includes one of the elementary genres of children literature – the fairy tale (in our case, we are dealing with a

genealogically younger type, the authorial fairy tale), without which, children and teenage literature - in the past as well as in the present – cannot be even thought of. Concerning the reasons we decided to focus on the genre of fairy tale, we may, at this point, state at least three, whereby each one is equally interesting and important.

From a genealogical point of view, the fairy tale is the youngest epic genre, which, even today, communicates all the values, mankind assigned value to, in terms of its evolution and in terms of life in society. Thus, as a genre, the fairy tale still remains a *dominant* literary genre for children and teenagers, more precisely for the period of young learner age, which, at this point, will be of interest to us, as we would like to focus our attention on the ability and willingness of children of this age to receive and understand the structurally anchored values of an authorial fairy tale text.

Moreover, fairy tales are still *popular and favoured* by children audiences and their high receptive preference of children lasts, even despite various current forms of shifts of this genre into other, more modern positions. That is the reason why we decided to focus solely on the authorial fairy tale, the dominance and popularity of which in terms of the Slovak literary context is evidenced by bookshop shelves which are filled with more or less valuable fairy tales for the children audience. On the other hand, from an academic and practical point of view of education practice, there exist justified doubts concerning the quality of reception as well as willingness to receive authorial fairy tales of a specific type. Based on the popularity of the genre, we therefore decided to focus on the semantically multi-code and aesthetically more demanding authorial fairy tales, which lacked the aspect of literary triviality and naivety (it is there text that resists the children audience the most).

Today, we cannot deny the fact that fairy tales has not been a purely child-oriented genre for some time now, as *its borders are being relativised*, including its address (Urbanová, 2004). The modern fairy tale today is able to fully reach an adult audience. Even adult audience is able to read it with enthusiasm. Thus, the focus of the genre is constantly expanding and the intention also acquires broader contexts. The authorial fairy tale, therefore, destabilises from the inside as well as from the outside all that, until now, has been traditional.

The second elementary notion of our research is the *children audience*, as has been mention in the beginning. It is an audience made up of young learner readers, more precisely pupils of the fourth form of elementary schools. Why this form? The reason is mainly that the problem of reception of authorial fairy tales is updated from the point of view of a dynamically changing child reader, who, at the age when they attend the fourth form, is, in a certain manner, more specific than pupils of other forms. From an ontological point of view, the child matures physically and mentally at this age, its naïve concrete-illustrative thinking develops, and this age is the precursor of the age of puberty, in which, from a reader point of view, significant changes appear, connected to the literary-genre preference. From a contemporary point of view and from that of the presence in schools (the children audience, in terms of didactic communication in literary education take the role of pupils), it is important to note that there is another fact, connected to the notion of children audience – the phenomenon of the so-called “new child”. The new child is surrounded by a culture of mobile telephones, radios, action, individual heroism and terrorism, nanotechnology, Disney cartoons, Playstations, tabloid press, speed, advertising, internet and the resulting culture of short and superficial relationships. The child (as opposed to adults) is a passive but grateful

recipient of all external stimuli. It does not have a well-formed value structure yet that it would use to consciously sort the input of various types of stimuli that attack it in contact with the external world aggressively and subserviently. If we, then, talk about the new child or about a new type of the current child in school, we do not mean physiological changes but rather changes in the internal life of today's children. These changes of the emotional life and behaviour are, in connection with the progress in thinking and knowledge, as harmless and unproblematic. To be more specific, in terms of Slovakia, it is a large-scale change in child behaviour, which manifests itself in the following significant characteristics: 1. The new child is apathetic, exhibits lack of interest and passivity. 2. The new child exhibits an increasingly more apparent loss of sensitivity and emotion, pushed away by rationality. 3. The new child, on the other hand, is rather fast in settling in a chaotic world which adults, based on their life experience, are still not able to fully comprehend and assign meaning to it. 4. The new child causes the middle generation to feel old too early, it cannot understand many phenomena and adapt to them (MP3, mobile telephones, bluetooth, iPhone, etc.).

In terms of practice, it is interesting to note that children do not come to school in this mental state but they become new children within the process of institutionalised education. How, then, can the teacher adequately react to current problems? The answer follows from the very mission of the teacher – literary art, which is the most powerful weapon teachers may legally use.

As was already said before, both notions – authorial fairy tale and children audience – carry along a series of additional issues and problems, which we cannot address at this point, due to lack of space. Therefore, we will focus on one issue, more specifically on the relationship of the current children audience towards poetics, noetic and aesthetics of the contemporary authorial fairy tale, with which it can come into contact not just at school, but also at home. The question, then, is: which variant (genre form) of the authorial fairy tale is the most sympathetic to today's children audience and in which manner can the teacher react to these preferences in terms of their educational input on the child?

We base our statements in our research, conducted among children of the fourth form of an elementary school, using different types of authorial fairy tale (Rusňák, 2006). The chosen experimental method was aimed at the research of reception of the authorial fairy tale. Mapping the quality of reception is generally a difficult task and from a scientific point of view hardly verifiable. This was one of the reasons the research was conducted as combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The experiment, as a method of quantitative research could not fully map the complex character of reception of a literary text, as not all aspects of reception can be measured and quantified statistically and in terms of numbers. From the array of quantitative research, the methods of test and retest were used, the method of cloze test, the method of structured observation, analysis of products of pupil activity, the method of scaling and assessment methods – statistical percentile assessment method (coefficients and mean values), statistical descriptive assessment method. As far as qualitative methods are concerned, the main focus was put on non-structured observation and partially, we used non-structured interviews. The choice of research methods of quantitative research is based in the subject-matter of our research (the quality and character of reception of variants of authorial fairy tales), whereby the methods of qualitative research had been used in cases where numeral quantification was not sufficiently possible. In terms of the experimental research of fourth form pupil reception, we accentuated the strong sides of

quantitative research; its limitations, on the other hand, had been made up for by means of qualitative research methods.

The elementary set was made up of all fourth form students of the Slovak republic. No random selection could have been made from this set nor was it possible to make the experimental groups equal in terms of number of pupils in them, as we could only work with ready-made groups, i.e. school classes. For that reason, a convenient sample was used. The disadvantage of such a type of sample is the possible distortion of the result, as the data and results of one school used in the experiment may not be representative of the whole set. That is why three additional school had been included in the in the research experiment, to avoid a possible distortion as much as possible. The selected set was made up of 93 pupils (50 males and 43 females) from four elementary schools of one region of Slovakia.

The experimental research was performed by means of one group. From a methodological point of view, this was an experimental interference into one group, whereby we compared the results (changes) that appeared in the dependant variable before the experiment (initial measurements – tests) and after the experiment (output measurements – retests). In the interest of raising the representative value of the research (its reliability and validity), the one group technique was applied four times – on four fourth form classes on four different schools. The research had a confirmatory (verifying) nature, in terms of which the two research problems were set up (further resulting into operationalised variables: text noetic, literary experience, text poetics, reader competence) and two hypotheses were formulated. We monitored the influence of experimental interference (independent variables) on the reception of fourth form pupils (dependant variables). The experimental interference was performed in the natural environment of the classroom (outside validity) and the real dimension of the experiment on four elementary schools also increased the force of the variables, whereby it also influenced the representativeness of the reached conclusions.

One of the main results of the research was the stratification of preferences of the child audience in terms of various genre forms of the authorial fairy tale. *The most successful* variant proved to be *the subversive fairy tale* (in the Slovak context, represented, for example, by Dušan Taragel, in a greater context by Roald Dahl). The research thus revealed that high child preferences are connected with texts of a subversive genre. From a practical point of view, this should not lead to the conclusion that this type of fairy tale, based on its popularity, should be given preference over others and that it should be pushed onto the children audience, as even this type features certain qualitative limits. Based on the research we presume that the overall positive reception was probably caused also by the nature of the text being light-hearted entertainment, with which the child audience could connect due to its rich experience with the film genre, based on the simple dramatic curve of action and fast reaction.

On the other hand, the results of the research showed that the children audience has obvious problems to receive especially *parody-nonsense variants* of authorial fairy tales (in the Slovak context, for example Ľubomír Feldek, in a global context, for example Lewis Carroll). We should, thus, ask ourselves the question, what stance to take in relation to this type of text in teaching practice. Based in the results of the research, we arrived at the conclusion that it is not right to completely eliminate this genre form of the authorial fairy tale in terms of children reading; it is wiser to consider its presence in the reading list of all children. Working with this type proved to be rather premature for fourth form pupils. In terms of didactic practice, the teacher should (based on the knowledge of the group and individuals) work

with the said type of fairy tale more delicately. This means that they should differentiate working with it, whereby any work should be based on an individualist platform, taking into account the unequal dispositions of children in the communication of the text of this type. In reading and literature classes, it is important to let all the children experience the text first (give them a chance to interact with the specific type of the authors game with the reader) and at the same time to give them the opportunity to talk about the fairy tale. By means of expressing subjective attitudes and an estimation of the reader interest in the text, it is then necessary to guide only certain pupils towards it. We cannot expect fourth form pupils to understand the nature of parody and nonsense, unless they experience this type of text for themselves and unless they acquire their own experience with this type of fairy tale. Apart from the target group that would be able and willing to accept the text, the selection of a specific fairy tale is equally important (it should not be its hardest, highly intellectual form).

As a kind of by-product, the research showed another interesting conclusion, mirroring the implications of child assimilation and accommodation to today's dynamic world. By this we mean the *presentations of evil* in the products of child activity and creativity. It is not a unique phenomenon that a manifestation of evil is a physical attack or dislike of children to cooperate with the opposite sex or, there have been insults pertaining to weight problems or ethnicity (Roma) recorded. A reflection of evil was perceived even in applying methods of creative drama (pantomime, puppetry, philosophising, improvisation, etc.) and a surprise were several indications of black humour and irony, which, on one hand originated in an untraditionally broad knowledge of the children, on the other hand, though, they were lacking the emotional reflection of this knowledge (the relationship of friendship was connected to sexual contact, friendship was compared to the relationship of Hitler to other people). Evil in performance art manifested itself in desire to destroy or kill, which was connected to the life of the main protagonist. A wide array of weapons was used – ranging from fire arms to stabbing and cutting instruments. A very common motive mirroring the demise and nihilisation of the value of life was blood and graphic novel-like bubbles with text expressing a limit situation of a plea for help.

Manifestations of evil and their picture in the products of child creativity pointed to a fact not unknown to us today, connected especially to the vector of these days. Young learners extend their knowledge base, sacrificing sensibility, which manifests itself especially in the inability to experience empathy and express a positive attitude. The children are rich on information, but emotionally empty. This loss of sensibility to external stimuli starts in an early age, whereby the over-satiation by mass media stimuli manifests itself in another problem which is that of passivity. Passivity as a phenomenon is connected to the state in which the child is unable to be surprised by anything, as it had already encountered all types of stories in a more attractive sound and picture form. The over-satiation by external stimuli and the extension of the information horizon of children can be seen in extra-structural projections into the fairy tale texts, which do not correspond with the semantic gesture of the author, which caused an overall misunderstanding of the tonality of the story and an effort to fable one's own action, connected to personal expectations.

The research confirmed that the child reader of the fourth form of elementary school does not yet dispose of an adequate distance from the text of an authorial fairy tale. The child does not have clearly profiled axiological criteria yet and therefore, it is only able to express that which it experiences

at that time. It is at this point where we see an opportunity for the teacher to intervene in order to positively influence the formation of the child text reception. In terms of the reception of the fairy tale text, it is not the expression of uniformity that is expected, but we expect self-reflection, self-awareness and self-cultivation processes, connected to a personal differentiation of the child personality in connection to its peers.

The fairy tale genre has, until now, kept its status of extraordinary receptive support in child audiences at the border of the pre-pubescent and pubescent age. But child preconception about the fairy tale genre, as supported by the research, originates from the ever popular texts of folk fairy tales we encounter from very early childhood and that is why there appear problems faced by the child reader, who is not able to fully receive these authorial fairy tales. The authorial variant of fairy tales, in many cases, proposes much higher demands on the reception than other genres of child literature do. This is caused mainly by the fact that authorial fairy tales of modern age often use expressive means, which, to a large extent, code textual meanings and so the child reader is very much challenged in their reception in its spontaneous (school and family environment) form. That is why children of this age do not prefer in terms of reception the intellectualised type of authorial fairy tale which, to some extent, requires a certain literary education of the child (a competent reader) and that variant of authorial fairy tale wins which subscribes to the current trend of blurring the boundaries between good and evil, presented on a daily basis in all types of media. Even the reflection of evil, which is becoming more and more apparent in schools, is often connected to undigested impressions of technology of more advanced communication media, such as television, video, CD, games or DVD players. If, though, the institution of the family fails to play its part, the teacher as a representative of the school is not able to fish all the ambers out of the fire.

*The paper is a partial output of the grant research task  
KEGA (no. 3/7270/09) Integrovaná didaktika slovenského  
jazyka a literatúry pre primárne vzdelávanie.*

## References

- RUSŇÁK, R. (2006). *Moderná rozprávka a jej detská recepcia*. Prešov: Pedagogická fakulta Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove.
- URBANOVÁ, S., et al. (2004). *Sedm klíčů k otevření literatury pro děti a mládež 90. let XX. století*. Olomouc: Votobia.