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Școala Doctorală Interdisciplinară
Facultatea de Științe Umaniste și Sociale
Domeniul de doctorat Filologie

OUT OF THE NURSERY - ESCAPING INTO FICTION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

SUMMARY

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ARAD

2023

The bedtime story, parents and grandparents reading to children, the first trip to the local library, and sharing books with siblings and friends are core memories for every child whose childhood has been blessed by literature. They become an essential part of us not only because they represent the bond we have with our friends and family, but also because they ensure the introduction to the magic of stories and make-belief. For any child whose taste and appreciation for literature has been developed at any point in their childhood, these stories become not only a core memory strengthened by nostalgia, but also a point of reference for the rest of their lives. The fairy tale, the myth and legends, the fantasies and the domestic tales, the adventures, and the magical stories become an etalon against which consciously and unconsciously everything else will be compared. The heroes, the villains, and the trials and tribulations of them remain within us and teach us not only about the world, life, the dangers of the universe, how to become resilient, how to face adversity, and how to connect with others, but also about ourselves.

Stories offer children the opportunity to live adventures beyond their wildest dreams, to travel to strange, fantastic, foreign, or real settings, and experience diverse cultures, civilisations, and societal structures. Only from the point of view of the adult, we can now see that the same stories and their heroes are in fact teaching our children how to overcome obstacles and weaknesses, how to find joy in the little things, and how to reach for our dreams with unbound courage. This is not surprising, since from their inceptions, stories have been a means of sharing information about the world, a method

of motivating the listening public, and also a reflection of the society that created them. The essence of any and every story does not only reflect the society that it is rooted in, but it also significantly impacts future generations of readers and listeners with their message.

The purpose of this research is to answer several questions about children's literature, motivated by both the understanding of its importance as a teaching and formative tool, but also as an entertaining and cathartic experience. I have approached this study by attempting to tackle several issues about children's literature such as the essential lesson found at the core of every piece of children's literature, the way children's literature impacted generations of children throughout its history, and how it has been affected by different generations of children reading it and, last but not least, what it offers children besides the didactic value adults imbue it with.

The first chapter depicts Campbell's hero journey as a narrative pattern that has been found true and identified in stories across millennia and the globe. The monomyth and the archetypal characters it presents have been instrumental in reflecting the journeys of not only millions of literary heroes, but also of the billions of people that have lived before us. It has been pointed out the fact that the monomyth is true not only for world literature, especially children's literature, but also for humanity itself. The hero's journey has been approached as the journey of our ancestors, the journey we all go through daily, the journey of our fellows for which we fulfil, in turn, one of the archetypal roles.

It has been highlighted not only the fact that the three-stepped journey begins with the hero finding himself in a situation

beyond his capabilities, in a difficult situation that can be solved only through a creative act for which the hero must leave his comfort zone, but also that at its core we find the archetypal figure of the hero. The journey begins as such with a separation, with the departure of the hero from what he knows and is comfortable with, from the ordinary. The departure is further divided into five steps that carry the hero throughout the separation from what is known and familiar and into the new and unfamiliar, into the initiating space. Along the first leg of the journey, the hero will meet the Herald, the Supernatural Helper and the Threshold Guardian, all of them providing guidance, tools and support for the challenges the hero will soon face.

Relevant information has emerged from studying the second part of the journey, made up of six sub-stages, which depict the hero with small trials and tribulations and the big challenge of the Temptress' call. Perhaps The Temptress is the second most influential archetypal figure for the hero's journey, attempting to trick the hero into betraying himself, his friends, his consciousness, and the Father. The one true God, the Father, is an archetypal figure that, due to the hero's betrayal, becomes a reflection of the hero's bitter regret and severe guilt, and the Atonement with the Father must be secured for the story to move forward. If Atonement is achieved, the hero reaches Apotheosis, a moment of clarity and sharp focus, a eureka moment that will bring about new knowledge regarding the world and himself, the life-saving knowledge that can solve the symbolic deficit of the world.

Special attention has been paid to the third leg of the journey, a stage in which, after having conquered the initiating space, the hero

feels comfortable, at ease, as part of the new ecosystem, unwilling to return to the world he had left behind. The Refusal of Return is, as such, the first of the six sub-stages of the reintegration of the hero into the initial space. After a Magic Flight, the hero receives help/ Rescue from Without and finally crosses the Return Threshold in order to become the Master of the Two Worlds. After delivering the life-saving elixir/ knowledge/ epiphany, he gains the Freedom to Live. The journey ends once the balance of the world(s) has been restored by the hero having accomplished his purpose and has completed the mission and the role of the hero. The Freedom to live signifies the freedom to explore other symbolic deficits and imbalances; it represents the hero's freedom to shed the role once his initiation has been completed and the possibility to take on other archetypal roles, to become the Herald, the Supernatural Aid, the Threshold Guardian, the Goddess, the Temptress or quite possibly the Father.

Christopher Vogler's interpretation of the journey and his condensing of Campbell's seventeen steps into only twelve, bringing about simplicity and clarity and have been another methodological lens employed within this chapter. The attention the cinematography industry has paid to the monomyth only reinforces the deep truth and philosophy uncovered by Campbell. Vogler's interpretation included more archetypal characters in favour of others and offered a new understanding of the monomyth as a blueprint for writing future successful stories. In the years to follow, the monomyth will cross even more interdisciplinary borders and travel from literature and mythology to cinematography, sociology, plastic arts and even to

psychology, where it has been used in therapy as a template to follow in therapy for the last 25 years.

Consequently, due to so many functionalities, it has been clearly articulated the reason why the monomyth continues to be promoted and used both in storytelling and other humanity sciences. The questions addressed concern what it brings to the readers of the stories that follow the pattern and why generations after generations of readers respond to it. In order to find the answer, we have argued that we must go through our own journey and reach our own apotheosis and epiphany, that is to discover that myths hold within their nuclear structure the circularity of the universe, the cyclic character of nature, and the deep truths and core philosophies that have guided humanity across millennia.

Arguments regarding Campbell's monomyth have been discussed in relation to the popular and well-liked issues present in fantasies, especially in children's and young adults' fantasies. It has been pointed out the fact that young readers respond extremely well to the formula of the hero's journey not only because they find a sense of comfort and security in the familiar stages and the well-known archetypal characters, but also because the monomyth offers a way to make sense of the paradoxical nature of fantasy literature. I believe that it is the structure and the archetypal characters of the monomyth that grant fantasy literature, especially children's fantasy literature, the capacity to hold within the wildness, the magical, the imaginative and the unbelievable, a truth everybody can see, understand and remain with at the end of the story.

It has been highlighted the fact that the truth of the journey, of the monomyth that does not only assure the success of the myth that has been transmitted through word of mouth for thousands of years, but also inter-relates with the truth of humanity, the philosophy of human nature, the core of the human psyche, transforming them from lessons about one's journey into the journeys of their readers, for whom discovering the truth represents gaining the Elixir needed to better themselves and those around them.

The second chapter has aimed to explore several approaches to the history of children's literature; thus, the historical approach has offered a descriptive, chronological and factual perspective on the evolution of children's literature, although limited to the causality relationship it looks for. Mention has been made of the fact that the need for multiple perspectives is due to the unique duality of children's literature: its belonging to both the adults' and children's universe and its bending under the whim and necessities of both categories. Written by adults in order to be read by children, so that they can find enjoyment and education within its texts, children's literature is created by an adult mind thinking of what the child might want or need, but as it has been proved, adults' perspective on children has changed greatly in the last centuries.

The semiotic approach has focused on Nikolajeva's innovative idea borrowed from the semiotics and points out code shifts that are true on all levels of the literary system. Her patterns prove that changes can be explained outside of the historical socio-economic conditions and reveal shifting trends that remain truthful, unlimited by time, culture or language. The semiotic analysis of the

development of children's literature has proved that there is a method to what seems to be at first an abundance of texts intuitively gathered under the same banner.

Special attention has been paid to the trends depicted: from simplicity to abundance, from visual to verbal, from certainty to hesitation and from social engagement to imaginative writing, which stand proof to the theory of the peripheral codes infringing on the central position in order to replace the inactive central code. They highlight the relationship between the dominant adult code and the peripheral children's code that closes on the central position at the same time as the children grow up and become capable to express their opinion, to pick the texts they read and even to become authors. Interestingly, the chapter illustrated the idea that all changes depicted by the historical perspective can be explained from a semiotic point of view: the adoption of taboo themes, elements of chapbooks being adopted and integrated into the mainstream literature, the escapism literature becoming a form we regard as classic today, and many others.

Consequently, children's literature has proved to be a unique system due to its double code, due to its ever-present struggle between being a form of entertainment and a method of education. Its uniqueness is also due to the fact that, although some of the centripetal movement started in the 18th century, two centuries later, the same peripheral codes still have not replaced the central ones. Equally significant has been the argument that, although, children's literature has had an outstandingly rapid evolution, especially compared with the traditional literary systems, its strong roots set

into the moral upbringing of the next generations and the adults' interest in the education of children mean that true change is rare and can happen only when the society's perspective on children and their needs has changed. Only when we come to consider it as being different or opposite to what it is today, when our perspective is about to be shaken, when the children of today are ready to speak up, emboldened by their own happy or unhappy childhood, only then their literature will severely change.

Conclusively, children's literature finds itself in a waiting stage. It waits for the peripheral code to finally replace the central one and for new peripheral codes to make themselves known. It pauses for children to grow up and become new generations of adults with a different perspective on childhood. It waits for the next unexpected, unpredictable bifurcation in its evolution.

The employment of the methodological lens of Campbell's monomyth has revealed that the same structure identified in the most mesmerising and religiously important myths of the world would not only be identifiable, but characteristic to children's fantasy novels. The pattern of the initiation journey is not only a structural trait of children's literature, but also the backbone on which the authors can allow themselves to dare the readers and invent and risk approaching new topics and themes. While the inclusion of less palatable topics, such as those that *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer abounds off, namely, physical conflict, death, mental health, open use of firearms, deception, etc., and harsher themes such as abuse and abandonment, endangers the readers to turn away from the novel, it is exactly the structure identified by Campbell that offers the child-readers a safety

line they can hang on to when the story hits too close to their home. The hero's journey is thus the backbone and the landing mark of every child's novel, allowing both the authors to explore the limits of children's literature and the children to reach for comfort when the author's explorations approaches sensitive topics. At this point in time, after centuries of use, the hero's journey is a structure every experienced reader intuitively knows.

This approach has revealed the fact that the age and the repeated use of the hero's journey initiation structure have led to the slight changes occurred along the history of children's literature, changes that incrementally appear spanning the last two centuries. The changes take place so slow with such narrow departure from the original form that there cannot be composed a clear chronological illustration on how children's literature has changed across its history. Instead, Maria Nikolajeva turned to semiotics and offered us the theory of six peripheral phenomena infringing on the central phenomena in order to eventually replace it. The analysis composed above is not only a comparison between three novels representative for children's literature of their relative time of publishing, but an illustration of some of the shifts identified by Nikolajeva, focusing especially on the one from circular to linear journeys.

Equally relevant information has been revealed from the comparative analysis of the hero's journey structure found to be true in all three novels studied. It is easy to notice the clean-cut manner in which the stages of the journey chronologically succeed one another in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*, and the manner in which, four decades later, Barrie introduces in *Peter and Wendy* not only new

ideas, but he also successfully manages to minimally alter the structure, as he is toying with the readers, especially in the beginning, teasing them with numerous repetitions of faux calls to adventure. Following that, the twenty-first-century representative, *Artemis Fowl*, while still checking off all the stages of the initiation journey, allows free movement between the stages, reorganising them, intersecting and scything them so as not only to form an interesting journey, but also to offer an interesting reading experience for the children that form its public. These slight changes address not only the awareness of children's interests and inclinations that the authors of the later decades gain, but their own interest in pleasing both the reading public (the children) and the commercial public (parents and grandparents, teachers, librarians, etc.).

I have also tackled the balancing act needed in order to find the happy medium in between introducing new daring themes and not upsetting the sensibilities of the public, the same balancing act that has to be done in order to achieve an equilibrium between writing a story that the children will enjoy and one that the parents will spend time and money promoting and purchasing. The task of the authors of modern children's literature is not easier than that of those authors belonging to previous centuries, but the liberties are considerably more numerous. Contemporary authors, such as Colfer, can allow themselves more freedom than ever before both as concerns the structure of the story and the topics approached.

Special attention has been paid to the idea that this gained advantage of the contemporary writers is not a sudden development, but the result of centuries of incrementally educating the reading

public and developing their palate and taste for quality literature through minuscule changes, barely noticeable. As such, the initiation journeys that dominated and still dominate children's literature, were in turn an initiation act for the reading public. By reading and living alongside Alice, Wendy, Peter, Edmund, Lucy and Susan, Charlie, Matilda, Lisa, Harry, Ron and Hermione and Artemis their respective initiation journeys, the readers have themselves become initiated in the genre of children's literature and are nowadays not only ready for new and daring approaches, but also demand it unflinchingly. While the adults are quick to point out the mentioning of armament, magic, war, death, abuse and neglect as reasons for the books to be banned and the children to be protected, as if they were a virus spreading, it is the same inclusion of guns and violence, abusive, incapable or neglectful adults, war and death and declining health that make the children love the books and identify themselves with the heroes.

The texts' analysis from the perspective of the methodological approaches chosen have shown that the same topics that some people claim to have no place in children's literature are in fact daily realities of the same children's lives. It is of no use to hide behind the curtain and pretend that the problem is not there and children are generally rather courageous, or brave enough to confront the problems. The contemporary child needs and demands representations of his pain and joy, his daily failing and tributes in the literature he reads. Fake, artificially contrived happily ever after are no longer accepted and nothing but true mirroring of daily reality in excellently crafted and extremely imaginative tales are the bar to be hit.

The methodological lenses of Vogler and Jung's archetypes have proven the fact that archetypes are a reality. They are a permanent part of literature, cinematography, digital storytelling through video-games, cartoons and short clips, as well as of everyday life. They are more than empty structures to be filled with content, or empty vessels dormant in the collective unconscious and all of us possess several archetypes as part of our own personalities. It is not only the literary hero's responsibility, but also our own demand to permanently and continuously harmonise our conscious self with our unconscious archetypal one in order to achieve personal development and empowerment as we face daily challenges. Once we became aware of the archetypal structures within ourselves and those surrounding us, once we adopt or relate to their characteristics, then we become the hero of our own initiating journey and give meaning to our lives.

Consequently, when considering the role and function of archetypes, not only in children's literature, but also throughout storytelling, it is important to notice that archetypes do not limit, but lend their recognisability and iconicity to characters in order for them to achieve their full dramatic and psychological function.

Regardless if the writers make use consciously or unconsciously of the characters' archetypes, these a-temporal structures hold meaning and resonate throughout millennia. Through the analysis of the four main archetypes found in children's literature: the Hero, the Helper, the Mother and the Trickster, as well as the Villain as portrayed in some of the most notable works of children's literature, it has been proven not only that the presence of these

archetypes is a reality irrespective of the century in which the stories were written, but also that, although the characters present common traits, each of them is in fact straining away from the mould. This stepping outside of the boundaries of the archetype does not only prove the singleness of the character and the utmost creativity of the author, but also their quality. By finding little but meaningful ways of escaping the traditional pattern of the archetype, by combining and mixing archetypes and allowing one archetype to play under the mask of another, they survive yet another generation of readers and retain both their meaning and charm.

Mention has been made of the fact that in the short history of children's literature, there are several key moments that have greatly changed the course of events. One of these key moments, the popularisation of the Romantics' perspective on children and childhood displaced the trend of children's literature being placed under the function of imparting moral and religious values and dared to propose an exultation of the imaginative and the fancy. That was the starting point of children's literature as we know it today: highly creative, inventive and extremely flamboyant. Another important mark of the Romantics' ideology is the creation of secret gardens, spaces in which the characters can escape and which provide them with safety, security, nourishment and guidance.

It has been my strongest argument that children's literature abounds in such secret gardens beloved by many readers, the most popular being the famous secondary worlds such as Wonderland, Neverland, Middle Earth, Narnia, Hogwarts and many others. These spaces do not only represent a space of respite for the heroes, but

they also offer adventures, challenges and awards, enemies and mentors. By experiencing them all, the heroes are initiated and, upon their exit out of the secret spaces, they have evolved perceptions, a new understanding of the world and a superior status; in other words, they have been initiated. The comprehension of the fact that the secret spaces of children's literature are the sacral land that the initiate enters in order to be initiated only reinforces the idea that all children's stories are in fact modelled in accordance with the same structure as the oldest and most popular myths and legends of the world: the initiation journey identified by Campbell.

Relevant information has emerged from the analysis of other spaces often and typically portrayed in children's literature, besides the secret garden. These spaces are usually presented in oppositional and antithetical pairs that hold clear meaning and express expectations. On one side of the pair, you find home-bound spaces dominated by nostalgia: the rural space and the homeland while, on the other side, I have identified the rural space and the foreign country. The parallel between the two types of spaces reveals the nostalgic value of the first category and the industrial, futuristic and ethnic culture of the second category. Through the analysis of the parallel between the rural and the urban spaces, it has been shown that children's literature is very rarely set in urban landscapes and that within their short-lasting residence there is a transitory period for the hero, a challenge he must surpass in order to return to his home. Urban spaces are considered to be not only unsuitable for the children's development, but also harming, in opposition with the rural landscape, which is safe, peaceful and healing. Under the same

prejudice of being unsuitable for children we find the foreign spaces tackled in such novels as *The Secret Garden*, which portray India as a place of death and disease. The danger in portraying these antithetical parallels comes from the manner in which children instinctively and intuitively internalize the portrayed ideas and ideologies. In other words, if foreign and urban spaces continue to be portrayed only as unwelcoming and harming, and the text depicting foreign spaces continue to be as rare as they are on today's market, children will not only internalize a western-centric perception of the world, but also that perception according to which other countries and their respective cultures are less valuable and less respectable.

Special attention has been paid to the home as both a secret garden opposing the urban space and as reflection of the mother archetype. Home as a secret garden, a protective, secluded space that protects the heroes from the public life has proved to be a remnant of the Victorians' perception that the house was distinctive and separate from the commercial world. The Victorians' view of the home has been depicted as extremely influential on the home tackled in the children's literature, the ideal Victorian home being adopted as the ideal place depicted in children's literature. Moreover, the clear demarcations between the public and the private, the rooms dedicated to the family, those dedicated to the public and those dedicated to the servants, the rooms belonging to the parents, and those belonging to children had been transferred from the Victorian culture into the fictional home of children's literature, representing the source for most of the inner conflicts the hero has to take part in.

Another important methodological lens employed comes from the understanding of the mother's role within the home and from the realization that the mother and the home are intrinsically connected. From this point of view, it has been revealed that there are four types of homes portrayed in children's literature: the haven-home, the not-so-perfect home, the home as a mother and the womb-home. While the haven-home represents the perfect space in which the child finds his every need met, the not-so-perfect home is a device employed in order to make the good homes shine even brighter. The home as the mother reinforces the idea that one can't exist without the other, while the idea of the womb-like home approaches the space as a safe protective womb in which the child can develop so that he can successfully enter the world at large.

Consequently, I have identified that the Victorian space of the nursery is the architectural correspondent of the womb: a space in which the child is perfectly safe and that prioritises protecting the child from danger and disease. The effects of the nursery room in the Victorian era have been dealt with in relation to the explosive popularity of fantasy and escapism literature, while in children's books the nursery space became a place for children to escape from. In children's literature nursery-spaces protect and nourish but, at the same time, they cut the opportunities for adventure and learning experiences in order to protect the child from possible dangers. As a result, escaping the nursery-space can be done only by the hero when he is ready to step into another stage of his life, since escaping the nursery is both a rite of initiation and its result.

Through the portrayed archetypes, patterns, spaces and the ideal home, children's literature has proved to have an immense impact on children and their budding conception of themselves and the world. Through reading about other persons' rite of initiation, children contemplate their own journeys of initiation, form new expectation of the world and internalise some of the ideals presented. It comes as a result of the fact that children's literature has an uncontested power of majorly influencing children and, by making their mark upon the young minds of today, children's literature undoubtedly influences the adults of the future, thus being capable of changing the world.