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## Literature and theatre as support for a healthy and ill child

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### Summary

This text aims to draw the attention to the possibilities of supporting the development process of children in preschool and early school age, through bibliotherapy and participation in theatre classes, based on a review of selected literature.

The author's intention was to point out the differences in the experience of literature or participation in the creation of theatre by a healthy child and a child with an illness. Common to all children is the relatively late separation of the real world from the world of fantasy, created and developed by children's imaginations.

It is also important to indicate the role of theatre, which is primarily to stimulate development, awakening cognitive passions, opening to new experiences of a young person, and additionally allows ill children to forget about everyday life, marked by suffering.

**Key words: bibliotherapy, theatre, supporting a healthy child, supporting a ill child**

## Introduction

Today, there is probably no need to convince anyone that both literature and theatre play a huge role in a child's life. The way in which they affect them, however, may seem less obvious. Usually, when we think about it, we think of a scene where the heroes of favorite stories, fairy tales accompanying children from an early age until adulthood, as well as physical games appear. This is an obvious association because it is characteristic of childhood cognitive and developmental processes that children learn and master new skills mainly through observation and imitation. They look for models worth following not only in the real world, among adults or in their surroundings, but also in fairy-tale and fairy-tale lands conjured up by children's literature, presented in a unique way in theatre and at games.

Therefore, for the purposes of this argument, recalling the most important processes in a child's development, it is necessary to point out the didactic, educational, cognitive and therapeutic potential of literature, theatre and physical games. H. von Schoenebeck in his book "On that side of upbringing"<sup>1</sup>, which describes the idea of rejecting intentional upbringing, wrote about supporting instead of upbringing.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that a healthy child experiences literature or theatre in a different dimension than that of an ill child. Common, however, is the relatively late separation of the real world from the world of fantasy, created and developed by children's imaginations.

The child believes in the world of fairy tales, in the heroes who inhabit it. Dwarfs, fairies, dragons and evil witches are many times the subject of children's thoughts, dreams, emotions and even fears.

The child is strongly emotionally connected with the world created by the authors of children's literature, a world that does not exist and which, in his opinion, coexists with what is real. In a child's mind, just because something can't be seen doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. In the world co-created by the imagination of a small observer, dwarfs live, there are magic wands, the use of which can often change and reverse the course of events, and inanimate objects are animated. Objects both talk, laugh and sympathize with the personalities

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<sup>1</sup> H. von Schoenebeck, *Po tamtej stronie wychowania*, Impuls, Kraków 1999.

The childhood period is characterized by anthropomorphism and animism, which was repeatedly emphasized by Bruno Bettelheim when he wrote: “the thinking of a child remains animistic until adolescence. Parents and teachers tell him that the object feels nothing and does nothing by itself, and he pretends to believe them, to please them or for fear of being laughed at; deep down, however, it knows better”<sup>2</sup>

### **Bibliotherapy supporting a healthy and ill child**

Literature in a child's life fulfills a number of important functions. It provides information, thanks to which the child acquires new knowledge, expands the scope of vocabulary, develops speech and thinking, stimulates the imagination, sensitizes, relaxes, is a carrier of universal truths and values about life and the world, creates the foundations of the moral system and gives a specific hierarchy to the values professed by the child. It shows certain patterns of behaviour and the consequences that result from adopting them. As F. Dyka writes: “in the experiences of literary characters, a child also recognizes its own emotional states. So he learns to recognize them and classify them accordingly. Moreover, he begins to understand that these are experiences appropriate also for other people, which is the basis for a sense of community with others. The experiences of the characters are also a good opportunity to develop orientation and become aware of their own experiences, which is an extremely important element in shaping the child's personality. By comparing their behaviour with the provided moral patterns, the child develops the ability to understand the motivations of his own and others' behaviour”<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the educational, didactic and educational function, children's literature also fulfills a therapeutic function, and its heroes are able not only to teach and educate, but also to heal. The concept of bibliotherapy is related to the therapeutic influence of literature

Bibliotherapy can be defined as: "therapeutic action consisting in the use of reading materials understood as a means supporting the therapeutic process in medicine"<sup>4</sup>. The essence of bibliotherapy means to provide "mental support, help in solving personal problems, it is a kind of support in the process of achieving safety, it can be a means to meet the needs"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, Warszawa 1985, s. 104.

<sup>3</sup> F. Dyka, *Bajki w edukacji początkowej*, „Edukacja i Dialog”, VI 1999.

<sup>4</sup> I. Borecka, *Biblioterapeuta w poszukiwaniu tożsamości zawodowej*, Wrocław 1997, s.121.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

According to E. Tomasiak, bibliotherapy is "a deliberate action with the use of books or non-printed materials (photos, films, etc.) leading to the achievement of such goals as revalidation, social rehabilitation, prophylactic and general development"<sup>6</sup>.

The use of literature as a therapeutic technique is primarily intended to enable its readers to change the current perception of the situation in which they find themselves. It is supposed to actively influence their awareness, change the perception of their surroundings and themselves. It is supposed to enable a change in how one feels, reacts and behaves.

From the pedagogical perspective, bibliotherapy can be considered as "a method of treatment based on the process of education and upbringing, the purpose of which is to help in coping with a difficult situation. The assumed changes are to occur in behaviour, feelings and beliefs"<sup>7</sup> By paying attention to the use of literary works in supporting the development of children, we can talk about therapy with fairy tales, fairy tales and theatre. We can define a fairy tale as "a story with a fantastic content, made up or based on stories or legends"<sup>8</sup>.

In another approach, a fairy tale is a didactic literary genre, written in verse or prose, containing a moral in its content, i.e. an instruction (instructive tips), taking the form of an order, prohibition or warning<sup>9</sup>. The heroes of fairy tales are people, animals, plants and inanimate objects, to which the authors repeatedly attribute human characteristics.

The fairy tale fulfills the following functions: informing (providing the child with information about people and the world), explaining (explaining a series of events and regularities), inspiring (constituting a kind of stimulus and motivation to take specific actions), instructive (providing models worth following), observing (indicating the consequences of certain behaviors) and calming (eliminating fears, frustrations and restoring emotional balance). Apart from the aforementioned functions of a didactic and educational nature, fairy tales play an important role in therapeutic processes. Their overarching goal is to "reduce anxiety by supporting the child in difficult situations that he or she encounters during its development. Support through fairy tales is to build a beneficial experience that allows you to more effectively deal with stressful situations triggered by strong negative emotions"<sup>10</sup>.

According to M. Molička, a well-known author of many scientific publications

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<sup>6</sup> E. Tomasiak, *Czytelnictwo i biblioterapia w pedagogice specjalnej*, Warszawa 1994, s. 13.

<sup>7</sup> L. Ippoldt, *Biblioterapia w związkach z innymi naukami*, [w:] „Biblioterapeuta”, nr 4, Wrocław 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Mały Słownik Języka Polskiego*, 1995, s. 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> *Podręczny słownik terminów literackich*, 1999, s. 35.

<sup>10</sup> M. Molička, *Bajkoteraapia jako metoda wspierania i terapii dziecka* [w:] Knapik M., Sacher A., *Sztuka w edukacji i terapii*, Kraków 2004, s. 73.

and popular science in the field of child psychology, among therapeutic fairy tales one can distinguish a relaxing, psychoeducational and psychotherapeutic fairy tale<sup>11</sup>.

A therapeutic fairy tale of a relaxing nature is used to induce a feeling of relaxation, calming down, and emotional calm, providing the child with a sense of security and psychological comfort. The world presented in such fairy tales is friendly, safe and usually well known to the child<sup>12</sup>. According to Molicka: "Such a fairy tale has a clear pattern; the hero of the story observes and experiences with all his senses the place where he/ she rests"<sup>13</sup>. Thanks to such events, included in the content of the fairy tale, one obtains, according to E. Małkiewicz, "a strong cleansing effect, releasing from tensions and other negative emotions"<sup>14</sup>.

Another type of therapeutic fairy tale is a psychoeducational one. Psychoeducational fairy tales, full of metaphors and symbols close to the child, repeatedly make a comparative juxtaposition of emotions with a number of different circumstances that may occur in everyday life, develop the ability to identify, understand and name individual emotional states, support optimistic attitudes, and help build interpersonal relationships based on friendship and empathy, provide a lot of advice and valuable tips to help you effectively deal with problem situations. As Molicka emphasizes: "the hero of the fairy tale has a problem similar to that of a child; they gain experience through the world of fairy tales, where they learn what behaviour patterns should be used, expand their self-awareness, which is conducive to learning how to behave in a difficult situation"<sup>15</sup>.

Psychotherapeutic fairy tales are stories from the border of the real world and the world of fantasy, in which the presented world consists of "various situations that arouse fear; and the narrative uses the following methods of influencing the fairy-tale hero: concretization and rationalization of experienced fears, strengthening self-esteem, teaching positive thinking, repeating stimuli and combining anxiety-generating stimuli with those that trigger a positive emotional reaction. Concretization of fear is done by showing the child what people, objects or situations cause it. The text is to enable the child to experience the emotions that he or she experienced through the protagonist's feelings. In this way, the child is to find himself, find his own experiences, a similar situation, which will facilitate the identification process"<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Molicka, *Bajkoterapia*, Poznań 2002, s. 153.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 155.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> E. Małkiewicz, *Bajki relaksacyjno-terapeutyczne w pracy z dziećmi z problemami emocjonalnymi* [w:] *Wspomaganie rozwoju*, red. Kaja B., Bydgoszcz 1997, s. 273.

<sup>15</sup> M. Molicka, *Bajkoterapia*, Poznań 2002, s. 161.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, s. 171.

The purpose of using psychotherapeutic fairy tales is compensation understood as equalizing and satisfying children's needs and preparing the child to cope with difficult life situations - in the face of stress, anxiety and illness. These fairy tales allow you to believe in yourself, raise self-esteem, allow the youngest recipient to accept himself and the situation he finds himself in, they are a source of faith and hope needed in the fight against problem situations. A specific and one of the most important types of therapeutic fairy tales are fairy tales that tell children about illness, about how in pain and suffering you can find meaning in life and the joy of everyday life. They present the eternal relations between joy and sorrow, happiness and suffering. They raise the extremely difficult and often neglected in literature - due to the specificity of a child's mental development - the issues of human life and death. Death, which in the light of these fairy tales and the experiences of their heroes, is nothing terrible or terrifying - it is something inscribed in human existence, something that sooner or later will affect each of us. These fairy tales repeatedly make a metaphysical juxtaposition of two worlds coexisting side by side - the temporal world in which we live, in which pain, despair and suffering are present, and the world that awaits us after death - a better one, full of joy, free from pain that the child experiences every day. A fairy tale, according to the Small Dictionary of the Polish Language, is a story with a fantastic content, an unbelievable story, an invention, a rumour, based on legends and folk tales<sup>17</sup>. In another definition, a fairy tale is one of the genres of folk literature, the plot of which oscillates between the real world and the world of fantasy, in which magic, witchcraft and supernatural forces play a leading role<sup>18</sup>.

The fairy tales contain a number of valuable tips and answers to perennial questions about the world, about the rules and regularities that govern it. Most of the fairy tales contain universal truths about the world and life, and are carriers of moral values and specific patterns of behavior. Thanks to the presence of archetypes, fairy tales convey humanistic and universal messages.

Due to the phenomena of anthropomorphization and personification present in fairy tales, the world in which their characters live is particularly close to children.

Contrary to other literary genres, fairy tales always have a happy ending, which serves to arouse the reader's joy and satisfaction, brings faith and hope in the possibility of a positive resolution not only of the hero's fate, but also of his own problems that the recipient encounters in everyday life. In this way, especially in the youngest audience, a positive attitude towards the real world and the numerous problems they have to face are evoked,

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<sup>17</sup> *Mały Słownik Języka Polskiego*, 1995, s. 38.

<sup>18</sup> *Podręczny słownik terminów literackich*, 1999, s. 37-38.

awakens faith in their own abilities, in the meaning and success of the effort undertaken. The heroes of fairy tales are often endowed with extraordinary power, have magical predispositions, they are brave and brave. In the world of fairy tales, it is witchcraft and magic that are the remedies for almost all troubles and problems, thanks to which emotional tension, frustration and fears are reduced.

In psychological terms, a fairy tale is one of the oldest literary genres that fulfill a compensatory and therapeutic function. One of the promoters of fairy tale therapy was Bruno Bettelheim. He emphasized that “the basic element of the fairy-tale hero's situation is the threat that concerns either his physical existence or his moral existence. At the very beginning of the fairy tale, the protagonist falls into great danger. This is what life is like in the eyes of a child. In the mind of a child, life is a sequence of quiet periods, interrupted by sudden and incomprehensible situations of great danger. It feels safe, does not bother with anything, and suddenly, in an instant, everything changes and the friendly world turns into a nightmare full of dangers”<sup>19</sup>.

There may be many reasons for this transformation. One of them may be the lack of love for the child by his parents, the lack of acceptance among peers, or dramatic circumstances, such as the loss of a loved one or a disease affecting the child. It is then that the fairy-tale heroes come to the rescue, characters with whom the child eagerly identifies, who are perceived by them as authorities and role models. The child looks for an analogy of his life situation to the circumstances in which his favorite characters exist. And here we come closer to the essence of fairy tales as a therapeutic technique - since the child notices that the fairy-tale heroes, despite the difficult situation, do not give up and constantly pursue the goal they finally achieve, try to follow their path and believe that they will win, and sorrows and troubles will pass. The victories of fairy-tale characters are accompanied by magic and spells, which additionally support the child in the fight against problems. The awareness that everything can happen, that nothing is impossible increases the faith and hope that even the most complicated situation, the greatest worries and the greatest troubles can be overcome.

According to J. R. Tolkien: “a fairy tale should have a fantastic character, and its hero must be saved from a desperate situation and should save himself from some great danger; Above all however, it is essential that the fairy tale brings comfort”<sup>20</sup>. This is the advantage of fairy tales over contemporary works classified as children's literature. As B.

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<sup>19</sup> B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, Warszawa 1985, s. 268.

<sup>20</sup> B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, Warszawa 1985, s. 266.

Bettelheim writes, contemporary children's stories “have sad endings, so the protagonist is not saved, and the child is deprived of the comfort necessary in the face of terrifying fairy-tale events - so that he can face unexpected obstacles in his own life with greater courage. If there is no such comforting ending, then after hearing the story, the child will think that, in fact, there is no hope that he will ever get out of his own desperate situations”<sup>21</sup>. Of course, there is always a risk that despite the child's attempts to overcome troublesome problems, the magic of fairy tales and the spells of fairy-tale heroes will turn out to be powerless. However, it should be emphasized that the influence of a fairy tale on a child's psyche is indispensable. All the time he/ she tries to get back to normal, also changes his/ her life - it is a better life, with hope, faith and a momentary forgetfulness of worries and troubles.

Therefore, fairy tales turn out to be a recipe for many different problems characteristic of childhood, from such as fear of falling asleep in a dark room, lack of faith in oneself and one's abilities, shyness, through threats resulting from the existence of a child in pathological families, to health problems.

### **A theatre supporting healthy and ill children**

When we analyse the influence of fairy tales on the child's psyche and examine their influence on therapeutic processes, we are asked what role theatre can play in therapy? How can theatre be helpful in therapeutic processes?

At the outset, it should be noted that theatrical productions have a very strong influence on the child, and the extraordinary and plasticity of literary heroes is of the greatest importance in theatre. Colourful costumes, decorations, fairy-tale heroes in a living, natural and human form, as well as the magical and mysterious atmosphere of a theatrical performance have a very clear impact on a child's psyche. This is because what the child knew only from the books read to him/ her by his parents, what only lived in his imagination becomes visible, is present here and now. A child's perception of a theatrical performance is characterized by spontaneity and a high degree of emotional involvement, as evidenced by, for example, the strength of the emotions verbalized and shown by the young audience. Contrary to books read to a child and read by a child, and fairy tales watched on television, theatre gives the child a chance of direct and "live" contact with art.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.



K. Sołownik - Olbrychska claims: "Theatre that can satisfy many aesthetic needs and conscious or unconscious needs in the field of emotional and intellectual life of children, undertakes important educational tasks. It awakens and develops abilities, interests and initiative. It teaches respect for working together. It increases the general cultural level of the participants, their knowledge, language culture and artistic taste"<sup>22</sup>. The art of theatre makes a child spiritually richer, gives a specific lesson of optimism and ethics, the world appears to him more beautiful and interesting, full of unusual and fantastic experiences. For a child, communing with theatre is not only a journey through fairy-tale and fairy-tale lands, it is also an escape into the dreamland, so close to the psyche of a small child. Theatre combines many arts and thus its influence on the educational process can be considered multidirectional. Theatre shapes a sense of aesthetic values, develops children's imagination and creative thinking. The heroes of fairy tales and fairy tales often become characters with whom the child wants to identify even more strongly than in the case of their literary prototypes. Their character traits, ways of reacting and behaving are a specific indicator of the child's further behaviour

Theatrical performances, which are staging of well-known fairy tales, allow the child to better understand the world, discover and explain to him a number of previously unknown phenomena and regularities, favour intellectual development because: "theatre is a discipline of art that, in some way, inadvertently prepares the recipient (viewer) for intellectual work, and thus favours the educational process. On the other hand, by stimulating certain psycho-intellectual features (curiosity, tendency to analyse, a sense of the relativity of reality, etc.), it encourages the viewer to explore the world, search for, try to explain it, and understand it deeper. At the same time, theatre, showing the fate of man in time and space, is an important humanizing element - which may be the most important factor of education to which we should all be constantly subjected to"<sup>23</sup>.

From the perspective of the views presented above, theatre plays an important role in the education and upbringing of a child. Its role in therapeutic processes and interactions should also be considered important. A special form of theatre are performances presented to ill children, staying in hospitals, and especially to those who may not be able to recover. By participating in a theatrical performance, communing with the heroes of fairy tales, children move into a world far removed from the everyday hospital reality, the pain and suffering that

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<sup>22</sup> K. Sołownik-Olbrychska, *Teatr radości. Teatr szkolny- doświadczenia, uwagi, myśli*, Warszawa 1971, s. 136.

<sup>23</sup> A. Hausbrandt, *Elementy wiedzy o teatrze*, Warszawa 1982, s. 243.

are present in their lives disappear into oblivion. Their psyche functions differently, which has an impact on the physical condition and functioning of the body. In this way, the "soul treatment" of the child is performed, which many times in the fight against the disease turns out to be as important as traditional pharmacological treatment. Visits to hospitals and theatrical productions staged for ill children become an important emotional experience not only for small audiences, but also for the actors performing in the performance.

## **Ending**

The "magic power of theatre" described briefly, allows us to realize the subtle difference between the influence of theatre, literature and physical games on healthy and ill children. In the case of the former, the role of theatre is primarily to stimulate their development, awakening cognitive passions, and opening to new experiences. Moreover, for a healthy child, the fact that they can create theatre themselves is an additional challenge and a chance to get to know and test themselves. If the state of health allows children affected by the disease to create theatre on their own, it performs functions similar to those indicated above, but additionally allows them to forget about everyday life, marked by suffering. Eliminates feelings of isolation, apathy and discouragement, and often teaches a different, more mature perception of oneself and one's illness.

Cz. Dziekanowski believes that "theatre creates an opportunity for development and self-realization for all children. It allows one to compensate for emotional deficiencies and becomes an effective means of fighting for people. It helps to understand the surrounding reality, other people and yourself"<sup>24</sup>.

To sum up, literature and theatre have enormous power to influence both a child's development and the process of its recovery. It is important to use this potential properly and to give children a chance to come into contact with it. Only when we give them such an opportunity, the magic of literature and the magic of theatre will really work.

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<sup>24</sup> Cz. Dziekanowski, *Związek psychoterapii z twórczością artystyczną*, Warszawa 1995, s. 8.

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