

Marcin Kaźmierczak  
University Abat Oliba CEU, Barcelona, Spain

# Fostering Resilience through Fairy Tales: *The Girl Without Hands* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

Wzmacnianie rezyliencji poprzez bajki.  
*Dziewczyzna bez rąk braci Grimm*

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to exemplify the outstanding potential of literary narrations, and particularly the fairy tales, to foster resilience among primary school students. The starting point of these reflections is the mimetic-cathartic vision of a literary narration proposed already by Aristotle and then developed by such contemporary authors as Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, David Carr, etc. The specific application of the general idea, according to which great literary stories have a powerful intrinsic pedagogical potential, is depicted with the use of the example of a classic tale by the Grimm brothers, *The Girl Without Hands*, which is a clear mimesis in both textual and figurative sense of a resilient character. Moreover, the traumatizing circumstances against which the resilient attitude develops in the protagonist are related to family background, which makes the story particularly up-to-date at present times in which we observe an outstandingly high divorce rate as well as many other types of problems affecting large numbers of children in relation with their families. A variety of “pillars” or “factors” of resilience are easily

## KEY WORDS

resilience, narration,  
mimesis, catharsis,  
primary education

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

rezyliencja, narracja,  
mimesis, katharsis,  
edukacja podstawowa

SPI Vol. 20, 2017/4  
ISSN 2450-5358  
e-ISSN 2450-5366  
DOI: 10.12775/SPI.2017.4.001

observable in the behaviour of the “girl without hands,” which converts the story into a remarkable and encouraging example of overcoming all sort of difficulties and obstacles which our students encounter on their own way towards a more complete integration and happiness.

## ABSTRAKT

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zilustrowanie niezwykłego potencjału wzmacniania rezyliencji uczniów szkół podstawowych, jaki posiadają narracje literackie, a zwłaszcza baśnie. Punktem wyjścia tych refleksji jest mimesyčno-katartyczna wizja narracji literackiej, zaproponowana już przez Arystotelesa, a następnie rozwinięta przez takich współczesnych autorów, jak Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, David Carr i inni. Konkretną egzemplifikacją ogólnego twierdzenia, że wielkie historie literackie posiadają znaczny potencjał pedagogiczny, jest analiza klasycznej opowieści braci Grimm *Dziewczyna bez rąk*, będącej doskonałą mimezą, zarówno dosłowną, jak i figuratywną, rezylientnego charakteru. Co więcej, traumatyczne okoliczności, na tle których objawia się rezylienty charakter głównej postaci, są związane z rodziną, co sprawia, że historia ta jest szczególnie aktualna w obecnych czasach, w których obserwujemy wyjątkowo dużą liczbę rozwodów, a także innego rodzaju problemy związane z rodziną, mające bezpośredni wpływ na rozwój dzieci. Różnorodność „filarów” lub „czynników” rezyliencji jest łatwo zauważalna w zachowaniu „dziewczyny bez rąk”, dzięki czemu ta narracja okazuje się być wyjątkowym i zachęcającym przykładem pokonywania wszelkich trudności i przeszkód, które napotykać również nasi uczniowie na swojej drodze do pełniejszej integracji i osobistego szczęścia.

## Introduction

As it has already been pointed out by many philosophers and pedagogues, literary narrations can be an excellent tool which may contribute to the education of children.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> By education, following David Carr and many other experts and philosophers of education, I not only consider the process of acquiring certain practical skills but also moral upbringing or, as Carr calls it “development of moral and social values (...), the cultivation of personal moral character.” D. Carr, T. Harrison, *Educating Character through Stories*, Exeter 2015, p. 1. David

The truthfulness of this affirmation has not only been demonstrated theoretically but also exemplified through some specific lessons' patterns which, in their turn, have occasionally been converted into some practical projects, through which the applicability of the educational potential of fictitious stories in the school day-to-day practice has been put to trial and demonstrated.<sup>2</sup>

As the ancient philosophers proposed theoretically—only just to mention Plato and Aristotle—and the contemporary teachers experience in a very particular way, among a variety of moral virtues which have historically been considered as crucial in the process of personal and human development, that of fortitude, frequently called today with the more modern and “psychological” name of resilience (or resiliency), is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental and

---

Carr, in his vision of the role of the classic narrations in the education, draws inspiration from an old and a powerful tradition starting with the Ancient Greece, especially Aristotle, and reaching to contemporary philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre. He agrees with the latter on the main aspects, nevertheless, discusses some practical issues like, for example, the universality of the virtue and the subsequent idea of schools in which children belonging to different creeds and cultures are integrated or formed mainly in their own value system. Otherwise, speaking about the morally formative role of fictitious narrations it is necessary to mention some of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers and analysts, such as Paul Ricoeur, who, swimming against the tide of the majority currents, such as different formalisms, structuralisms, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, etc., resorts to the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* in order to defend the relation between the literary text and the reality and thus its cognitive and furthermore cathartic or pedagogical potential. I refer here mainly to the chapters dedicated to the analysis of the three stages of the mimetic process, which he terms *Mimesis I*, *Mimesis II* and *Mimesis III* in one of his fundamental books *Temps et récit*.

<sup>2</sup> One of the finest and most noticeable examples of such a practical application is the “Knightly Virtues Project”, carried out by Professor Carr and other professors at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. This project has been applied to a large number of elementary schools all over England with outstanding success. See the scientific report on the research project: “Knightly Virtues. Enhancing Virtue Literacy through Stories. Research Report”, <[www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)> (access: 12.09.2016), <<http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/KVPDF/KnightlyVirtuesReport.pdf>> (access: 12.09.2016). See also the teaching resources and materials, as an outcome of this project, ready for an immediate application in a classroom: “Knightly Virtues Resources”, <[www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)> (access: 12.09.2016), <<http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1641/character-education/resources/knightly-virtues>> (access: 12.09.2016).

indispensable ones. Inverting the statement, it seems to be practically impossible to foster moral and even intellectual development of any kind without a minimum level of the possession of this virtue or capacity; a minimum level adequate to the age of course. The first purpose of this paper is to give an example of how efficiently and persuasively this virtue may be exemplified by a literary story and, secondly, to encourage teachers, parents and educators in general to try to cope with the frequent problem of the insufficient level of resilience/fortitude of our youth by resorting precisely to the use of literary stories. As David Carr and Tom Harrison state in their *Educating Character through Stories*, after Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian MacIntyre: “among the many possible educational routes to the development or education of moral character, the use of stories from the past and present day imaginative literature is perhaps the most promising one.”<sup>3</sup> It is so because “stories and narratives of cultural or literary inheritance have a power to illuminate moral and other aspects of human motivation.”<sup>4</sup> This indubitably echoes that famous quotation from MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* where he affirms that “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things.”<sup>5</sup> Further on he concludes after following the “moral tradition from heroic society to its medieval heirs” that “the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.”<sup>6</sup>

### What is resilience?

Before I proceed with the analysis of the chosen literary work from the perspective of resilience, let us try to clarify the term of resilience. It is hardly possible to formulate a simple and coherent definition of this term mainly due to the overwhelming success it has had in the research field (not only psychological, but also medical and

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Carr, T. Harrison, *Educating Character through Stories*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Indiana (IL) 2007, p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

pedagogical) in recent decades. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of definitions, descriptions and possible methodological approaches towards it, yet, it is not the purpose of this work to contribute to the theoretical discussion on the term on its own. Let us just summarize some of the basic data on which there is a relative consensus among the experts. To start with, as Titus Craig has brilliantly demonstrated it in his doctoral thesis *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude: Aquinas in the Dialogue with the Psychosocial Sciences*, published by The Catholic University of America Press in 2011, from the philosophical point of view it is but a re-formulation of the classic master virtue of fortitude. In this sense it seems not to be particularly interesting for a philosopher to deal with this term as it does not really introduce anything essentially new to reflections upon it; nonetheless, some authors expressed a certain appreciation for the potential contribution that the popularization of this term, as well as a multi-dimensional inquiry into it, may have even within the field of the philosophy, for example as an efficient empirical vehicle of the refutation of anthropological determinism.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, to put a working version of the definition in a nutshell we shall resort to Michel Manciaux, one of the most important and recognized European authors who has been making use of this term not only in his academic work but also in his therapeutic practice for over two decades now. According to Manciaux and other important members of BICE,<sup>8</sup> resilience is “the capacity of persons or groups to continue projecting themselves into the future in spite of destabilizing events, difficult life conditions and traumas that may be serious.”<sup>9</sup> As we can read in the introduction to Manciaux’s work:

<sup>7</sup> See E. Fuchs, “¿Van unidas ética y resiliencia?,” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, ed. M. Manciaux, transl. from French: F. González del Campo Román, Barcelona 2010, pp. 285–289.

<sup>8</sup> *Bureau International Catholique d’Infance* is an international research and assistance organization in Geneva striving to protect the rights of children around the world. See <www.bice.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Beatriz Vera Poseck, Begoña Carbelo Baquero and María Luisa Vecina Jiménez in their paper: B. Vera Poseck, B. Carbelo Baquero, M.L. Vecina Jiménez, “The Traumatic Experience from Positive Psychology: Resiliency and Post-Traumatic Growth,” *Papeles del Psicólogo* 2006, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 40–49, included in the collective work coordinated by Manciaux *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse* (the original text published in 2001 is in

despite the severe traumas, even very serious ones, or the most common misfortunes, resilience seems a reality confirmed by many existential trajectories and successful life histories. (...) we know children, adolescents, adults, families and communities that are “thrown” into the shocks, tests and ruptures, and manage to overcome and to continue live their life—often on a higher level—as if the trauma they suffered and experienced had developed in them, and sometimes revealed, latent and even unsuspected resources.<sup>10</sup>

Vera Poseck, Baquero and Vecina Jiménez, in their previously mentioned article “The Traumatic Experience from Positive Psychology: Resiliency and Post-Traumatic Growth,” paraphrase the above quoted citation, while they refer to the phenomenon of post-traumatic growth (related with that of resilience), in the following way:

Another phenomenon overlooked by theorists of trauma is the possibility of learning and growing from adverse experiences. As in the case of resiliency, research has shown that it is a much more common phenomenon than we might be led to believe, and that many people succeed in accessing latent and unsuspected resources.<sup>11</sup>

## The factors of resilience

Before we approach the possibility of analysing literary texts from the perspective of resilience, as well as using these texts to foster resilience among teachers and students, it seems to be necessary to consider what factors, parts or elements resilience is composed of. Various authors enumerate a different number and variation of elements

---

French, yet I acceded to it in Spanish translation edited in 2010), Manciaux, together with Vanistendael, Lecomte and Cyrulnik, four great experts in resilience in the French speaking arena, include a broader discussion on different definitions as well as on the history and development of the term, pointing out to the remarkable differences in the approach to it in English speaking area, particularly in the USA, and the European—especially francophone—area. See “La resiliencia: estado de la cuestión,” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, op. cit., pp. 17–27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem p. 13, translation mine.

<sup>11</sup> B. Vera Poseck, B. Carbelo Baquero, M.L. Vecina Jiménez, “The Traumatic Experience from Positive Psychology: Resiliency and Post-Traumatic Growth,” op. cit., p. 3. For an efficient summary of the most important stages in the development of this concept as well as of the main authors and standpoints related with resilience see the abovementioned article by Beatriz Vera Poseck, Begoña Carbelo Baquero and María Luisa Vecina Jiménez.

which by most of them are called “factors”, although in some cases they use the denomination of “parts,” “competences,” “pillars,” etc. For the needs of this paper from among a number of lists and classifications I have considered the most useful to be the proposal made by an American psychiatrist of Spanish origin, Luis Rojas Marcos. In his book, *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*<sup>12</sup>, he speaks of the following pillars of resilience:

- (1) Affective Connections: being affectively linked to one or more individuals, for whom the subject is important and who matter to the subject.
- (2) Executive Functions: capacity of undertaking action with some level of efficiency.
- (3) Internal Control Centre: consciousness that one is, at least to a certain extent, the master of his or her own destiny and is capable of taking certain decisions in spite of sometimes highly limiting and extenuating circumstances.
- (4) Self-Esteem: perceiving oneself as worthy, valuable and being in possession of dignity, sometimes in spite of being mistreated, disregarded or disfavoured.
- (5) Positive Thinking: a “pillar” related with hope and optimism; being able to perceive the positive side even of some noticeably negative and distressing events.
- (6) Motives for Living: some external motivation or purpose which stirs up desire and strength so as to strive to attain it.<sup>13</sup>

In order to discern whether a literary text may be considered as an efficient (plausible, realistic) representation or *mimesis* of resilience I shall proceed with a comparative analysis of the text chosen as an example in this paper, namely *The Maiden Without Hands* by the Grimm brothers, contrasting it with Rojas Marcos’ pillars of resilience as behavioural and attitudinal patterns against which the conduct of the main character will be gauged.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> L. Rojas Marcos, *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*, Madrid 2010. The title of this book may be translated as: *Overcome Adversity: The Power of Resilience* (translated by the author of this article).

<sup>13</sup> See the chapter 3 “La resiliencia” in: L. Rojas Marcos, *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*, op. cit., pp. 59–98.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that that literary analysis from the perspective of resilience is only just beginning, especially regarding literary fiction, whereas

## *The Maiden Without Hands*—A brief summary of the plot

This tale does not belong to the most popular ones published by the famous German authors, unlike such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Frog King*, *Rapunzel*, *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, etc. This is perhaps due to the particularly crude and clear presence of the evil factor, personalized in the story by the figure of the devil.<sup>15</sup> Precisely due to the fact that this tale is relatively little known, it would be productive to summarize its plot. The story develops from the point in which a poor miller agrees to give to the devil (disguised as an old man) “what is behind his house”, in order to become rich. On the contrary to what he thinks it is not just an old apple tree but also his only daughter, who was just sweeping the court, whom he sells to the evil one. Yet the devil can’t take her

---

we already have a remarkable scientific literature on self-narration in the sense of expressing of one’s own trauma so as to face it and overcome it more efficiently. Authors such as Stuart T. Hauser, Eve Golden, Joseph P. Allen, Rober A. Neimeyer, and Heidi Levitt among others highlight the outstanding potential of self-narration in psychotherapy of a post-traumatic shock. Nonetheless, very few trials of theorization, classification and practical application of this term to literary analysis have been carried out by the present moment. Special recognition should be accorded to Angelo Gianfrancesco who, in spite of not being in possession of literary theory methodological resources—due to the fact of belonging to the area of psychiatry—makes a remarkably successful effort to classify the “resilient” literary narrations, splitting them into the following three categories, all of them related with the literary motive of a hurt childhood: famous fairy tales and folklore tales written between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century by authors such as Perrault or Grimm; 19<sup>th</sup> century novels such as *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens or *The Child* by Jules Verne and thirdly certain autobiographies, such as those written by Thomas Platter and Valentin Jameray-Duval. (See A. Gianfrancesco, “¿Una literature de resiliencia? Intento de definición,” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, op. cit., pp. 28–29). Furthermore such trials of theorization on resilience as literary approach are to be mentioned: Mary Humphrey’s *Bounce Back!: Resiliency Strategies Through Children’s Literature*, in which she offers a practical and very useful proposal of lesson plans created in order to fostering five competencies of resilience with the use of picture books and intermediate level novels.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, however, that most of Grimm’s tales included a large number of quite cruel facts and behaviours; similarly, there are continuous references to God and prayer. Both things have been generally removed from the contemporary versions of most of the tales. Possibly the problem with *The Maiden Without Hands* is that it would be hardly possible to maintain its plot without those references, as we shall see later on, and therefore it is not an easy text to be edited in accordance with the current criteria of *softness* and political correction.



due to her purity and innocence, even though the miller goes as far as chopping off her hands, which are too clean for the devil to take her, on the latter's demand. He still can't take her as she is too pure; but she doesn't want to stay with her parents any more as she realized that their "love" for her was superficial and apparent and they were unwilling to bear any sacrifice for her in times of trial. That is how her long journey starts.<sup>16</sup> I will not give the details of it, only just some basic events: She meets a prince who falls in love with her because of her goodness and he marries her; a malicious intrigue of the devil obliges her to run away from the palace with her little child and hide in the woods for seven years. Her husband searches for her with great determination "without tasting food or drink" during all this time. Meanwhile her hands grow back again. Eventually she is found by her husband yet he does not recognize her as she has her hands back. Only when she shows him her silver hands, which she had been using previously does he recognize her and now finally a happy end is possible.

### The pillars of resilience in *The Maiden Without Hands*

I mentioned at the beginning of this paper the controversy concerning the definition of the term resilience as well as a variety of more or less differing lists of factors, elements or pillars of resilience. However, all researchers and therapists agree on the fact that the factor of "the affective connections" is not only indispensable on their list but also it is the most important one. Rojas Marcos is not an exception.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, let us observe in what way this factor determines the behaviour of our protagonist. In the first place, before she has a chance to establish real and life transforming "affective connections" she is exposed to a traumatic breaking of a very close relationship, namely the one with her father (the mother is just an auxiliary character here without any autonomous role in the structure of the plot). Why does she decide to leave her home after an apparently

<sup>16</sup> The motive of the journey, as well as many others, such as the aggressor, the antagonist, the helper, etc., correspond in great measure to the Vladimir Propp's schedule included in his foundational work regarding the theory of the tales, i.e., *Morphology of the Folktale*.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Rojas Marcos, *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*, op. cit., pp. 64–67.

happy end of the initial sequence of the plot? It is true that she loses her hands but at least she does not have to accompany the devil to hell and the wealth, which her parents obtained thanks to her, remains at home as well, so she can have her share in its enjoyment. What is more, after such a “fortunate” outcome of this intrigue, her father promptly tells her: “I have gained great wealth through you. I shall take care of you in splendour as long as you live.”<sup>18</sup> Precisely the sequential connection of the two facts: gaining a fortune thanks to her and taking care of her later on (we might add an implicit “for return”) is what makes the maiden exclaim: “I cannot remain here. I will go away. Compassionate people will give me as much as I need.”<sup>19</sup> She realizes that the relationship with her father is based on a conditional love or, resorting to Aristotle, “a friendship of utility”<sup>20</sup> re-utilized by Saint Thomas Aquinas with the name of “concupiscent love.”<sup>21</sup> Let us recall that Aristotle does not reject this pattern of *friendship* on its own<sup>22</sup> considering it suitable in certain relations, especially meaning such relations as, for example, commercial ones.<sup>23</sup> A good service or a good product is granted a good pay for a change. We might say that the maiden is given an offer of a lifelong care from her father in compensation for having allowed the devil to chop off

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Grimm, W. Grimm, *The Girl Without Hands*, transl. D.L. Ashliman, 2001–2002, <<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm031.html>> (access: 12.09.2016), Source: J. Grimm, W. Grimm, “Das Mädchen ohne Hände,” in: *Kinder und Hausmärchen. Gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, vol. 1, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Göttingen 1857, pp. 162–168.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> As we read in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, “those who love each other because of utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a). This description fits perfectly the miller’s attitude towards his daughter, whom he offers to care for and sustains because she had made him rich and not because of herself. This kind of friendship, like the friendship of pleasure, is not true for Aristotle. In fact they are even called “friendship” only by analogy and not in a proper way.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Prima Secundae Partis, Question 26.

<sup>22</sup> He simply just states firmly that it is not a perfect friendship, in which the reason of the friendship is the loved person him or herself.

<sup>23</sup> “Friendship based on utility is for the commercially minded.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158a.

her hands—the price for her father’s deliverance from the eternal punishment in hell. Once she refuses to accept this offer, she is left exclusively with the negative part of the *deal*.

Nevertheless the miller’s offer of an interested (*commercial*) kind of *friendship* is unacceptable to the maiden due to the fact that she intuitively feels that it is radically inadequate in a relationship as close as that between the members of a family. Particularly it is expected from the parents to love their children according to the pattern of the perfect and virtuous friendship (Aristotle) or the benevolent love (Saint Thomas).<sup>24</sup> So, the problem in this situation is not that the pattern of love utilized by the father is wrong on its own but that it is applied to a wrong kind of relationship. In other words, the maiden realizes that her father loves her in a conditional, commercial way and she desires to be loved according to an unconditional, highly benevolent and sacrificial pattern of love. She knows that she is ready to love in the same way (in fact she demonstrated it by allowing the devil to cut off her hands in order to save her father) and she has a strong internal conviction that such a kind of love in a mutual<sup>25</sup> sense is possible. She intuitively feels that she can find this reciprocity if she is strong and courageous enough to get out of her relative comfort zone (her father promising to take care of her) and strive for a greater happiness. Spontaneously she discovers that in order to be happy before she has to be brave and take the risk of breaking the vicious circle of ambiguous attitudes and partial love relations. She expresses this conviction precisely when she says, as mentioned before, that she will find compassionate people who will give her as much as she needs. Now we know that what she needs is not of a material kind (she has already been offered that by her father), but she needs that very thing which her father failed to give her: unconditional love.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> A very interesting question emerges here of whether this kind of friendship is also the adequate one in the relationship between teachers and their students. It is certainly worth encouraging a discussion between the teachers as a form of preparation before they introduce the activities related with the book in their own classes. However, I will not deal with this question in this paper as it would exceed the framework of its objectives.

<sup>25</sup> Note that, according to Aristotle, the reciprocity is one of the conditions of a virtuous friendship. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1158a.

<sup>26</sup> As we can read in the previously mentioned work by Gianfrancesco, most of the infantile or juvenile characters who are subject to degrading conditions in their family or substitutive family milieu become run-aways, and, in fact,

It is precisely the decision to abandon her home in which her desire of virtuous love has been so painfully frustrated to be the first sign of the acquisition of a resilient attitude in front of adversity. This decision may be associated with what Rojas Marcos calls “the internal centre of control.” The fact that she is capable of taking a decision of her own against the will of her treacherous father and against the odds makes her face a terrible risk and a great challenge of having to survive without hands and anybody’s help, on her own, in the cold and cruel world but, at the same time, this act of free will allows her to acquire a firm belief that she has some influence upon her life and she is capable at least of trying to shape her destiny instead of being just a passive object of somebody else’s will and deals, like, for example, that between her father and the devil.

At the same time the firm conviction that she will find “compassionate people [who] will give her as much as she needs” can be referred to in terms of another pillar of resilience, namely, “positive thinking”, a term closely linked with optimism. However, her optimism will be put to a serious trial; it is so because before she comes across somebody who will show her love and respect, she has to overcome the distressing problem of being provided the very basic needs, such as food, which realistically shows them to be very difficult due to the fact that she is handless. Nevertheless at that point the process of resilience is already activated and the discovery of one of the pillars of resilience will bring about that of another one and so forth. In order to obtain food, she discovers what Rojas Marcos calls “the executive functions”, i.e., the capacity of doing things, for which in general human beings use hands, in some other alternative way.<sup>27</sup> As we can

---

this is the way they start their difficult and risky (and yet ultimately successful) struggle for self-affirmation and happiness, a process in the course of which they consolidate themselves as resilient characters. We may observe a similar pattern in some of the famous authors of biographies, such as Tim Guénard, whose self-narration “Plus fort que la haine” has been used by many psychologists and psychiatrists as a paradigmatic example of a resilient reaction to some particularly damaging traumas.

<sup>27</sup> Note a number of real extraordinary cases of people who manage to carry out some extraordinary actions and functions in spite of not having hands (and sometimes legs) such as John Foppe, Nick Vujicic or Tony Meléndez. By the way, all of them are perfect exemplars of resilience, whose example is undoubtedly a powerful inspiration for many young people and adults all around the world.

read when she came across the king's garden she discovered there was a gap in the garden hedge. So "she went inside, found a fruit tree, shook it with her body until the apples fell to the ground, bent over and picked them up with her teeth, and ate them."<sup>28</sup> This is how she discovers something that many traumatized or somehow destabilized, disfavoured or handicapped children (and adults often too) will have to discover as well, i.e., that she can manage to overcome her difficulties and cope with her problems, even if she lacks some very basic and apparently indispensable resources, which most of the fellow human beings do possess and, by the way, often take for granted.

### Religion versus resilience

It is important to point out that this episode (taking the pear with her mouth) is only described in the Grimm's first and simpler version of this story published in 1812. The second, revised edition, published in 1819, describes the solution of the hunger challenge in terms of supernatural intervention of an angel who joins the maiden as a result of her prayer to God. Although Rojas Marcos does not include religious faith as one of the pillars of resilience as well himself as other researchers, generally express a conviction about a positive influence of the religious faith upon the resilience potential of individuals and communities. We see this influence very clearly in the Grimm's story, particularly in the 1819 version. But even in the 1812 version, which is noticeably less "supernatural", when asked by the king whether she is human or a divine-spiritual being, she answers: "I am not a spirit, but a poor human who has been abandoned by everyone except God."<sup>29</sup> The conviction that some supernatural power looks after the universe in general, and after an individual human being in particular, certainly reinforces the capacity to face difficulties with more confidence and optimism.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, as in the case of Grimm's characters,

<sup>28</sup> J. Grimm, W. Grimm, *The Girl Without Hands*, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> As Rojas Marcos states: "religions are, in general, an expression of the natural optimism of the mankind. Also, as they give sacred meaning to life, they reinforce the motivation to survive," L. Rojas Marcos, *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*, op. cit., p. 91 (the translation from Spanish is mine). See also J. Chouinard, "Résilience, spiritualité et réadaptation," *Frontières* 2009–2010, vol. 22, no. 1–2, pp. 89–92.

including the maiden without hands, the particular type of religious background is that of Christianity, in which God is a person, the fact which allows a high number of the characters to establish a personal relationship with Him. This is precisely the case of the *girl*<sup>31</sup> who considers God as someone she can interact with, as it may be proved in the above-mention quotation in which she expresses her conviction of being taken care of by the person of God. Therefore, as we can observe using the example of the protagonist, while we refer to the personal, provident and benevolent God type religions, it helps the resilient individual to be able to establish affective connections with God and look into the future with more hope and confidence, thus becoming more decisive and capable of facing risk and taking action. Thus is the case of the girl without hands, who finds affective reinforcement in the spiritual person of God even before she finds affective connections with fellow human beings.

### Affective connections within virtuous friendship: clue to resilience and happiness

This very point of the plot is exactly the moment in which finally human affective connections appear on the stage. The king utters the following answer to the maiden: “Even if you have been abandoned by the whole world, I will not abandon you.”<sup>32</sup> Through this expression of unconditional love, the king, according to the terminology of resilience, becomes “a tutor of resilience”<sup>33</sup> for her. Thanks to his attitude of acceptance and benevolent devotion she realizes that she is worthy of being loved, in spite of all her wounds and traumatism symbolized by her chopped off hands. That triggers the appearance

---

<sup>31</sup> Note that in the 1819 version, as we already mentioned before, there is another personal spiritual being, who interacts with the protagonist, that is to say the angel.

<sup>32</sup> J. Grimm, W. Grimm, *The Girl Without Hands*, op. cit.

<sup>33</sup> This term indicates the person(s) who appears on the way of a traumatized individual and helps them find motives to start struggling to overcome their hardship. Apart from professionals who are trained to carry out this task anybody may become, consciously or not, a tutor of resilience for a fellow man. For an exhaustive analysis of this phenomenon see J.L. Rubio, G. Puig, *Tutores de resiliencia. Dame un punto de apoyo y moveré Mi mundo*, Barcelona 2015.

of another pillar of resilience, namely, the self-esteem, which enables her to accept the king's love and respond to it. This acceleration of resilient attitudes and overcoming of the internal bonds leads immediately (again according to the specific poetics of a tale) to a marriage.

Yet, they will not live happily ever after, as a reader might expect at this point of the plot. New complications and extenuating trials will fall upon the protagonists and very particularly on the maiden. The devil will try to destroy their marriage through a cruel intrigue (by falsifying letters, he makes the maiden believe that the king wants to kill her and her child) but their extraordinary fortitude will make them endure all the long lasting trials and obtain the eventual triumph over the evil power. What seems to be important to point out is the fact that again in those terrible challenges and difficulties which they face in the second part of the narration, the main pillar on which they build their fortitude (or their resilience) is again the factor of the affective connections. The maiden has enough strength to leave the palace, run away to the forest and survive there for seven years because of her tender love for her son, whom she wants to save at any price. (She has to ask her mother-in-law, another character with whom she has "affective connections", to help her tie the child to her back). Apart from the affective connections we might undoubtedly apply here another pillar of resilience enumerated by Rojas Marcos, that is to say "the motives for living". The maiden must fight for survival overcoming the ordeal she has again found herself in but this time not exclusively because of herself but also because of her son whose life and wellbeing has become one of her major motives for living. Again we see here attitudes and actions in which echo such factors of resilience as the internal centre of control and executive functions or generally speaking those elements of the attitude which express in a practical sense the denial of the passive approach to the dramatic events but, on the contrary, deciding to take one's destiny into one's own hands and struggle hard in spite of the narrow odds. In turn, the king, once again demonstrates his commitment and the firmness of his affective connection to his family as he decides to search day and night for as long as necessary (predictably, as it tends to happen in a tale, it will be the magic number of seven years) until he finds his beloved one and their son. Now the happy end eventually is possible, and the distresses and devilish intrigues are finished. So,



it is the triumph of love (affective connections) which gives enough strength (resilience) to the main characters so as to break the spell of the devil and the pitiful example of an egoistic father.

### Conclusions: overcoming determinism in philosophy and education with the use of literary classics

The extraordinary pedagogical potential of this literary narration whose interpretation I have just proposed, as well as many other literary stories, seems to invite educators to use them in order to find some concrete applicability of the story's contents to the moral upbringing of their students. They will probably observe that most of the factors of resilience enumerated above are perfectly applicable in the process of transmission of skills and attitudes to their students and that the use of the stories can be surprisingly efficient in the task of fostering these attitudes and virtues among their students.

As we said before, the maiden and the king triumph over the spell of the devil as well as over the negative example of the miller. This final outcome of the tale certainly has some very important philosophical and pedagogical implications from the point of view of the role of resilience in the evaluation of the process of growth and development of children and adults. The spell of the devil may be interpreted as a deterministic and fatalistic vision of the fate, destiny etc., as some sort of a mysterious, occult, often malign power which directs our lives and forges our destiny in a tragic way in the sense that we can scarcely have any influence on it. It is true that we do not choose our parents—and many other crucial aspects of our lives—but it would be untrue to maintain that we necessarily have to repeat their mistakes or reproduce their vices. The fact that in this text this deterministic spell is broken (on the contrary to her father the maiden chooses the virtuous kind of love as a pattern of conduct in her family relations and she struggles to be faithful to this choice with an outstanding determination) constitutes a literary dramatization of the anthropological vision, according to which, man may maintain a remarkable margin of freedom and capacity of action and choice in spite of the severe circumstances he may find himself confronted with.



In order to put the finishing touch to this analysis we may conclude that *The Girl Without Hands* by the Grimm brothers, as well as many other tales and different literary narrations, constitute an extraordinarily acute and rhetorically efficient *mimetization* of the virtue of fortitude and the capacity of resilience. Therefore, it may be utilized as a means of transmitting not only the knowledge about resilience (*mimesis*) but also the vicarious experience of it with the possibility of the subsequent arising of the desire of imitating it and thus fostering resilience among children.<sup>34</sup> It is certainly a task for the educators to trigger their creativity, communicative and motivational skill in order to work out specific strategies of fostering resilience through folklore tales and other narrations. It would go beyond the methodological framework of this paper to consider those specific strategies; that is why I limited myself only to giving one highly successful example of such a practical strategy, i.e., David Carr's project, which, by the way, was one of the main inspirations for me to write this paper. In conclusion, I hope to have succeeded in highlighting the importance of the continuous efforts of all the actors involved in the process of education so as to capitalize on the extraordinary opportunity that many literary narrations offer regarding the acquisition of resilience and other fundamental attitudes and virtues, thanks to which our children and youth will be stronger persons and better students and have more tools to manage a happy existence, in spite of all possible and, to a certain point, inevitable adversities, traumas and pains.

## Bibliography

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. by D. Ross, Oxford University Press, New York 2009.
- Arthur J., Harrison T., Carr D., Kristjánsson K., Davison I., "Knightly Virtues: Enhancing Virtue Literacy through Stories. Research Report," 12 September, 2016, <<http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/KVPDF/KnightlyVirtuesReport.pdf>>.

---

<sup>34</sup> We might call this process as "catharsis by elevation." See my article: K. Kazmierczak, "Los conceptos de mimesis y catarsis en el análisis literario. El ejemplo de *Macbeth*," in: *Educando a través de la palabra hoy: aportaciones sobre teoría y didáctica de la lengua y la literatura*, eds. K. Kazmierczak, M.T. Signes, Vigo 2014, pp. 135–148.

- Carr D., Harrison T., *Educating Character through Stories*, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2015.
- Chouinard J., “Résilience, spiritualité et réadaptation,” *Frontières* 2009–2010, vol. 22, no. 1–2, pp. 89–92.
- Craig T.S., *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude: Aquinas in the Dialogue with the Psychosocial Sciences*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 2011.
- Fuchs E., “¿Van unidas ética y resiliencia?” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, ed. M. Manciaux, transl. from French: F. González del Campo Román, Gedisa, Barcelona 2010, pp. 285–289.
- Gianfrancesco A., “¿Una literatura de resiliencia? Intento de definición,” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, ed. M. Manciaux, transl. from French: F. González del Campo Román, Gedisa, Barcelona 2010, pp. 28–44.
- Grimm J., Grimm W., *The Girl Without Hands*, transl. D.L. Ashliman, 2001–2002, <<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm031.html>>. Source: J. Grimm, W. Grimm, “Das Mädchen ohne Hände,” in: *Kinder und Hausmärchen. Gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, vol. 1, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Göttingen 1857, pp. 162–168.
- Guénard T., *Stronger Than Hate: Struggling to Forgive*, Templegate Publishers, Springfield (IL) 2003.
- Guénard T., *Plus fort que la haine, J’ai Lu*, Paris 2000.
- Hauser S.T., Golden E., Allen J.P., “Narrative in the Study of Resilience,” *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 2006, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 205–227.
- Humphrey M., *Bounce Back!: Resiliency Strategies Through Children’s Literature*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara (CA) 2008.
- Kazmierczak M., “Los conceptos de mimesis y catarsis en el análisis literario. El ejemplo de *Macbeth*,” in: *Educando a través de la palabra hoy: aportaciones sobre teoría y didáctica de la lengua y la literatura*, eds. M. Kazmierczak, M.T. Signes, Editorial Academia del Hispanismo, Vigo 2014, pp. 135–148.
- MacIntyre A., *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana (IL) 2007.
- La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, ed. M. Manciaux, transl. from French: F. González del Campo Román, Gedisa, Barcelona 2010.
- Neimeyer R.A., Levitt H., “Coping and Coherence: A Narrative Perspective on Resilience,” in: *Effective People*, ed. C.R. Snyder, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 47–53.
- Ní Raghallaigh M., Gilligan R., “Active Survival in the Lives of Unaccompanied Minors: Coping Strategies, Resilience, and the Relevance of Religion,” *Child and Family Social Work* 2010, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 226–237, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00663.x>>.
- Propp V., *Morphology of the Folktale*, transl. by L. Scott, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, University of Texas Press, Austin (TX) 1968.
- Ricoeur P. *Temps et récit*, 3 vols, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1983–1985.

- Rojas Marcos L., *Superar la adversidad. El poder de la resiliencia*, Epasa, Madrid 2010.
- Rubio J.L., Puig G., *Tutores de resiliencia. Dame un punto de apoyo y moveré Mi mundo*, Gedisa, Barcelona 2015.
- St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Benziger Bros edition, transl. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York 1947.
- Tomkiewicz S., “El buen uso de la resiliencia: cuando la resiliencia sustituye a la fatalidad,” in: *La resiliencia: resistir y rehacerse*, ed. M. Manciaux, transl. from French: F. González del Campo Román, Gedisa, Barcelona 2010, pp. 289–300.
- Turu M., *Propuesta metodológica de análisis literario neoaristotélico. Ejemplos de aplicación en “La vida es sueño” de Calderón de la Barca, “Macbeth” de Shakespeare y “El día de la ira” de Brandstaetter*, Tesis en Red, Barcelona 2016.
- Vera Poseck B., Carbelo Baquero B., Vecina Jiménez M.L., “The Traumatic Experience from Positive Psychology: Resiliency and Post-Traumatic Growth,” *Papeles del Psicólogo* 2006, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 40–49.

#### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:

Dr Marcin Kazmierczak  
 University Abat Oliba CEU, Barcelona, Spain  
 kaz@uao.es