

# ANNALES

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## UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF TRADITIONAL FAIRY TALES IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT – TEACHING FOR CRITICAL THINKING

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to develop a model for critical reading of traditional fairy tales, which will enable the understanding of their meanings in contemporary educational context from a gender perspective. We have posed the following research questions: Why is the fairy tale so important in education and how does it influence the reader? What kind of ideology do fairy tales present? Which fairy tales (traditional or non-traditional) should one read during education, and how should their critical reading be arranged? We have used the method of theoretical analysis, followed by the historical method, and finally, the morphological analysis of the selected fairy tale. The model of critical reading has been developed using the fairy tale titled Baš-čelik, published in Vuk Karadžić's collection in 1870, as a case study. It has been shown that texts tend to hyperbolically affirm the cult of heroism. Research indicates that such stories could be read in schools with the aim of understanding their semantic structure from a feminist perspective, while accentuating the construction of characters reduced to very few qualities that ideally conform to the heterosexual pattern. The model for critical reading of such stories, based on reader-response theory, has been developed in this paper.*

**Keywords:** non-traditional fairy tale, critical reading, understanding the meaning, research-based reading, traditional fairy tale

## COMPRENDERE IL SIGNIFICATO DELLE FIABE TRADIZIONALI NEL CONTESTO EDUCATIVO CONTEMPORANEO – INSEGNAMENTO PER IL PENSIERO CRITICO

### SINTESI

*Lo scopo di questo articolo è quello di sviluppare un modello per la lettura critica delle fiabe tradizionali, che consentirà la comprensione dei loro significati nel contesto educativo contemporaneo da una prospettiva di genere. Abbiamo posto le seguenti domande di ricerca: Perché la fiaba è così importante nell'educazione e come influenza il lettore? Che tipo di ideologia fanno fiabe presenti? Quali fiabe (tradizionali o non tradizionali) si dovrebbero leggere durante l'istruzione e come dovrebbero essere organizzate le loro letture critiche? Abbiamo utilizzato il metodo dell'analisi teorica, seguito dal metodo storico, e infine l'analisi morfologica della fiaba selezionata. Il modello della lettura critica è stato sviluppato utilizzando la fiaba intitolata Baš-čelik, pubblicata nella collezione di Vuk Karadžić nel 1870, come caso di studio. È stato dimostrato che i testi tendono ad affermare iperbolicamente il culto dell'eroismo. La ricerca indica che tali storie potrebbero essere lette nelle scuole con l'obiettivo di comprendere la loro struttura semantica da una prospettiva femminista, accentuando la costruzione di personaggi ridotti a pochissime qualità che idealmente si conformano al modello eterosessuale. Il modello per la lettura critica di tali storie, basato sulla teoria lettore-risposta, è stato sviluppato in questo articolo.*

**Parole chiave:** fiaba non tradizionale, lettura critica, comprensione del significato, lettura basata sulla ricerca, fiaba tradizionale

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this paper, it is necessary to describe what we mean by the term fairy tale. As Jack Zipes emphasizes, “the literary fairy tale developed as an appropriation of a particular oral storytelling tradition that gave birth to the wonder tale, often called the *Zaubermärchen* (magic tale) or the *conte merveilleux* (marvelous tale)” (Zipes, 2000, 44–45). The term ‘marvelous tale’ best corresponds to our understanding of this story, as it is compatible with the characterization of the ‘strange’ event depicted in the fairy tale (the marvelous), as defined by Tzvetan Todorov (1973, 41) with a clear distinction from related concepts such as ‘the fantastic’ and ‘the uncanny’. The marvelous is “also a feature of the myth. A fairy tale differs from the myth by the fact that marvelous in it is deritualized and desacralized” (Vučković, 2018, 313). Nevertheless, since the term ‘marvelous tale’ is not common in literature, especially considering that in collections,<sup>1</sup> reading textbooks, or picture books containing marvelous content, the term fairy tale (*bajka*) is predominantly used today, we have opted for this general name (fairy tale), comprising all stories that contain the phenomenon of the marvelous, regardless of whether they are authored or folk tales.<sup>2</sup> If we were to use only the term folk tale (*narodna priča*), we would risk imprecision – at least genre-wise – because in this group, alongside fairy tales, there are other forms such as fables, legends, humorous stories, etc. Therefore, the term fairy tale in this paper encompasses both oral wonder tales<sup>3</sup> and literary fairy tales,<sup>4</sup> as we primarily consider it genre-wise, indicating the character of the depicted event. In support of such a definition, we can refer to Graham Anderson’s study *Fairy Tale in the Ancient World* (2000), in which the author uses the same term to encompass stories of the *marvelous* nature dating back to the period before the Common Era. Furthermore, in most South Slavic languages, the term fairy tale is used as a common name for both folk and authored texts that tell of marvelous events (Vuković, 1996, 162–188). The stories we analyse in this paper mostly correspond to the category of ‘tales of magic’ (300–749) from the ATU index (Aarne-Thompson-Uther is an international motif-based classification of folk tales). Considering that the ATU index contains about 2400 types of folk tales, grouped into seven categories, it is clear that the term folk tale encompasses all of them, which is

another reason to distinguish the group of stories that involve a marvelous event under the term fairy tale.

Fairy tales tackle both personal and social phenomena, and relationships between males and females; in other words, fairy tales are often focused on the relations which develop between princes and princesses. In the abundant corpus of fairy tales from around the world, both by known authors and from the oral tradition, there are stories with traditional, patriarchal features, as well as texts with emancipatory traits (Zipes, 1986). The first group of stories should be read with the task of understanding their deeper meaning from different perspectives. Their particular value lies in the fact that they show to young readers the ideology of their time, and describe the relations which existed in those times. The second group of fairy tales is often called disruptive stories, which refers to stories “that challenge and go beyond conventional and limiting traditional storylines about race, gender and class through presenting unexpected characterisations, plots, outcomes or details – for example, feminist fairy tales, or stories where the protagonists belong to visible minorities” (Yeoman, 1999, 427). They should be read during upbringing with the purpose of enabling the mindset to grow.

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the importance of reading the traditional fairy tale in the process of education, which is founded on the possibilities of a critical approach to the interpretation of the story. Our research perspective is derived from literature teaching methodology, or literary pedagogy. We used morphological analysis in the case of a typical traditional folk story – *Baščelik* (*The Head of Steel*) – to depict the manner in which the patriarchal values creating and maintaining the myth of heroism function in the story. We started with a number of research questions: Why is the fairy tale so important in education and how does it influence the reader? What kind of ideology do fairy tales present? Which fairy tales (traditional or non-traditional) should one read during education, and how should their critical reading be arranged?

The paper first defines the literary nature of the fairy tale and briefly outlines its historical development. Relevant critique of the didactic value of the fairy tale and the way in which children receive this story are also described. After that, the work places emphasis on male and female protagonists, who are often described in the tale by means of a series of fascinatingly similar attributes. These are considered

1 For example, although the collection *The Collected Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales of Giuseppe Pitre* (Zipes & Russo, 2009), contains exclusively stories collected from the people (folk tales), the title itself creates a distinction between fairy tales and others.

2 The title of Propp’s book *Morphology of the Folktale* (2009), translated from Russian to Serbo-Croatian by Petar Vujičić for the first edition 1982 (Propp, 2012) is *Morfologija bajke*.

3 The term ‘wonder tale’ is not genre-sensitive enough for the purposes of this paper, as in fantasy for the children – to which fairy tales belong (Vuković, 1996, 162–188) – various wonders happen. For more details, please refer to the subchapter *Fairy tales in literary theory and history* in this paper or cf. Vuković (1996). For the etymological origin and the discursive meaning of related notions cf. Trautnik (2020, 958–960).

4 In both groups, there are stories with traditional and non-traditional characteristics.



by Propp (2009) under the scope of (a) hero-seeker and (b) princess (a sought-for person) and her father. Thus, certain characters express gender relations in a fairy tale and represent guidelines which can model critical reading. The hero-seeker is predominantly a male character of the heroic type, whose task it is to conquer, enslave, kill a monster, etc.,<sup>5</sup> while the princess is a helpless female, often an underdeveloped literary character, simply featuring the values of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987, 183–190). The method we apply to the chosen fairy tale – *The Head of Steel* – is explained in the rest of the article and is based on Propp's (2009) morphological approach. It corresponds to a feminist perspective and offers possibilities for teaching interpretation. Implications for teaching and conclusions follow.

#### FAIRY TALES IN LITERARY THEORY AND HISTORY

The fairy tale is an old and remarkably fruitful story. Over the centuries, stories with strikingly different ideological patterns were created (Zipes, 2000). In the rich corpus of fairy tales, one may find both those with an emancipatory role, even among those crafted a long time ago (oral wonder tales), as well as those whose themes could be interpreted as conservative in contemporary terms (Bacchilega, 1997, 9). Moreover, retellings or adaptations of fairy tales would often shift the stories' ideologies, moving from emancipatory themes towards more conservative perspectives. For example, the Disney Princess edition, consisting of ten stories (*Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010)), is essentially based on "consistently problematic representations of gender, class, and race" (Wohlwend, 2012, 594). One example of this is Andersen's tale *The Little Mermaid*. In his version, the heroine displays genuine emancipatory tendencies, expressing a yearning to transcend the confines of the familiar. This impulse is driven by two great motivations: spiritual (to obtain the immortal human soul) and romantic (to win a prince's love). By contrast, Disney's adaptation reduces her motivation to a romantic need, which undoubtedly constitutes a moral simplification, as shown by Walter Hastings (1993, 90).

Having emerged a long time ago, through the deritualization and desacralization of the myth, the fairy tale appears to be a result of oral tradition belonging to fantasy literature for children (Vuković, 1996, 162–167). Novo Vuković (1996, 161–188) examines oral and authored fairy tales within the framework of the chapter 'Fantastic Prose', and he precisely makes a distinction between fantastic prose genres – after

pointing out the diversity in terminology and the frequent imprecisions it causes – according to the genre principle with explicit reference to Tzvetan Todorov's study (Vuković, 1996, 164). In the realm of fantasy literature, various kinds of miracles occur – boundless travels through time and space, transformations, battles against supernatural beings, and many other events defying the laws of reality. However, a miracle taking place in a fairy tale has a specific character – it does not seek a realistic transformation, i.e. the reader accepts it without attempting to explain its nature. Tzvetan Todorov (1973, 41, 87) labelled such a miracle, typical of the fairy tale, with the term *the marvelous* (*les merveilleux*). While other types of fantasy might be explained by some kind of logic (dream, delirium, frenzy, hallucinations, and other altered states of consciousness), *the marvelous* occurring in the fairy tale is utterly inexplicable and accepted by the reader as such. The reader does not think about the way in which Snow White's step-mother's mirror 'sees' who the most beautiful person in the world is – it merely happens, and is accepted as magic. Magical occurrences take place in numerous variations: metamorphosis, metempsychosis, resurrection, exorcism (Vuković, 1996, 165). The realm of *the marvelous* is identified by the reader as a parallel universe in relation to the real world (Todorov, 1973, 87). There is no misunderstanding or interference between the two worlds (the reader's world and the fairy tale world). In the process of reception, the fairy tale easily attains "the impossible unity, suggesting to the reader to believe without truly believing" (Todorov, 1973, 87). Therefore, if we start from Todorov's theory where *differentia specifica* of this story is recognized, we may consider the fairy tale to be a story about marvelous events.

Fairy tales are most commonly classified into folk or oral and authorial or literary tales, although many have traits of both those types (Vuković, 1996, 163, 176). For example, the majority of fairy tales in the Grimm Brothers' collection originate in folklore, whereby the Grimms did shape and write down the theretofore oral tales (Antonijević, 2023, 109–111; Vuković, 1996, 180–181). It is also important to note that not all folk tales are fairy tales (Samardžija, 1997), which is also evident from the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) index. Only such folk tales as can be described with the term *les merveilleux*, according to Todorov (1973), are treated as fairy tales in this paper.

There are several inconsistent theories about the origin of fairy tales (Vuković, 1996, 165–167). Knowledge about fairy tales created before the invention of printing is based on mere assumptions and has no reliable sources (Zipes, 2000, 46). Conversely, knowledge on printed or literary fairy tales is far more reliable.

5 For the discussion about the dragon slayer fairytale matrix cf. Darovec (2021) and Tratnik (2022a).



Thus, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, who published his collection, *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Pleasant Nights*, 1550–1553), is mentioned as the first fairy tale writer in Europe (Zipes, 2006, 59). Another important fairy tale writer from Italy was Giambattista Basile, who published *Lo cunto de li cunti* (*The Tale of Tales*, 1634–1636).

The fairy tale earned its place among the literary genres in France in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Zipes (2006, 67–68) points out that there is strong evidence that Straparola's and Basile's collections were known to French fairy tale writers from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, many female authors wrote fairy tales, such as Madame d'Aulnoy, Henriette-Julie de Murat, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. The fairy tales they told in French salons were intended for the aristocratic class, as is the case with the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, published in 1697 in the collection entitled *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Times Past*) (Zipes, 2006, 72–73). Perrault's tales taught lessons in morality. The potential for fairy tales to convey moral lessons did not go unnoticed by the above French female authors, who in most cases worked as governesses and teachers, and perceived the fairy tale as a powerful didactic tool (Zipes, 2006, 77; Tratnik, 2022b).

After France, the fairy tale expanded its influence to Germany. The Grimm Brothers' collection *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*) was published in two volumes in 1812 and 1815 (Vuković, 1996, 180–181). Taking into consideration that the Grimm Brothers mentioned children as their audience in the very title, numerous terrifying scenes in the tales soon received severe criticism. As a result, by 1819 the authors had already published the second edition, toning down such scenes and leaving out whole stories that were impossible to adapt for younger audiences (Vučković, 2018, 323). Shortly after the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, the first texts of Hans Christian Andersen started emerging, starting in 1835. Though carrying some notable authorial interventions by the collectors, the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales still originated from folk sources (Antonijević, 2023, 109–111). By contrast, the majority of Andersen's fairy tales attained an authentic authorial mode, and many of them omit patriarchal gender patterns (Vučković, 2018, 317).

Apart from the above authors, many collectors throughout Europe, driven by Romanticism and its predilection to folk literary heritage, recorded various forms of folk literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Vuković, 1996, 179–180). In today's Italy, this task was carried out by Thomas Frederick Crane (1844–1927), Laura Gonzenbach (1842–1878), and Giuseppe Pitre (1841–1916), among others; in the areas inhabited by

South Slavs – Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864); in today's Russia – Alexander Afanasyev (1826–1871), etc. (Vuković, 1996; Zipes, 2000). Rich collections of folk art were published through their work. Along other genres, these collections include numerous wonder tales. Research shows that the motivational structures of folk tales are strikingly similar, which can be at least partially explained by the so-called principle of transferability, which was introduced by Vladimir Propp (2009). Furthermore, Propp (2009) started his important research after noticing the fascinating wealth of motifs among folk tales, which essentially covers the incredible internal, i.e. morphological similarity and repeatability.

The authorial interventions by collectors are a regular feature of the collections of folk tradition from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Zipes & Russo, 2009, 14), raising the question: is there any clear demarcation line between the oral (folk) and authorial (literary) fairy tale? Jack Zipes (2006, 42–48) asserts that there are no final boundaries between the folk (oral) and literary fairy tale, as there are intersections from the very beginning. In the stage of oral tradition, stories were spread by retelling and were transformed during communication – they tended to acquire something new and lose something old in the process. At the moment of their being written down by collectors, their relative longevity was established.<sup>6</sup> However, the main period when oral stories were collected and written down (mostly in 19<sup>th</sup> century) was not marked by today's codes on the conservation of the original and on avoiding the adaptation for the purpose of maintaining authenticity (Vuković, 1996, 180). Instead, the collectors freely added and omitted content in fairy tales whenever they deemed it necessary (Antonijević, 2023, 109–111). For example, Vuk Karadžić had the primary objective of reforming the language and its standard use, while the collection of folk literary works served to support that project. Thus, his opinion that “when writing short stories, one should think and adjust the words (again, not according to one's own taste, but according to the characteristics of the Serbian language)” (Karadžić Stefanović, 1987, 47–48) is completely understandable in order to avoid excesses, and to allow both the learned to read and the laymen to listen.

To further pinpoint the definition of the fairy tale, which this paper considers a text with *les merveilleux* elements, we will also mention Karadžić's classification of stories into *male* and *female*. According to the author, “female stories are those where all sorts of wonders are described, things that cannot be (and in all likelihood, only they can be called a *gatka* [...]); whereas male stories are without wonders, and one could say that things described in them could truly

6 Tratnik showed how fairy tale versions change depending on the cultural context of production and reception (cf. Tratnik, 2023a).

happen” (Karadžić Stefanović, 1987, 48). Therefore, fairy tales would be female stories.

Classical popular fairy tales have practically hundreds of versions (Zipes, 2000; 2006, 1–41). What we know today about any popular fairy tale, such as *Cinderella*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White*, is a result of the interference of many stories with the same or similar titles. However, though all these fairy tales have many versions, their widely known plots are mostly a combination derived from the stories by Perrault, brothers Grimm, and the Disney production which provided a new, film-like form for the fairy tale in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zipes, 2006, 140–141).

This paper underscores the difference between two groups of traditional fairy tales:

1. The modern literary fairy tale canon is predominantly formed by the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, the Grimms, Disney and Andersen, at least in the western world. Though authorized, all fairy tales by the mentioned writers – with the exception of Andersen’s fairy tales – originate from folk sources (Vuković, 1996, 178, 180, 184–188). Fairy tales by Perrault, the Grimms and Disney have mostly been considered as stories which norm the patriarchy and do not have an emancipatory role (Parsons, 2004, 137–138).
2. Folk tales (which contain the ‘marvelous’ category), which have an important role in children’s education. These stories are included in collections edited during the period of Romanticism, and they often, though not always, display traditional patterns. This paper focuses on the latter group.

It is important to pinpoint that the fairy tale is not a sexist narrative in and of itself. In the rich tradition from across the world, there are many stories of this genre with an emancipatory role, even in the collections of folk tales (Zipes & Russo, 2009, 26). However, there are fairy tales with different substance; it is important to read them in class with the tasks of achieving an aesthetic experience and of reaching a critical understanding of past and (future) society as well.

#### THE TRADITIONAL WORLD OF FAIRY TALES – THE IDEOLOGY OF HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE HEROIC MYTH

The traditional, patriarchal social order in which men dominate the family and society (Sultana, 2012, 3) is founded on a heterosexual matrix as a model that is the result of a binary gender pattern (Butler, 1990). Gender has a performative character, as pointed out by Butler (1990), which means that an individual performs certain types of behaviour before the eyes of society. Those types of behaviour that are normed are affirmed and repeated, while other types of behaviour are suspended. The resulting heterosexual matrix is simply obtained by combining hegemonic masculinity and

emphasized femininity as conspicuous binary gender characteristics (Connell, 1987, 183–190). Many heroes in fairy tales, especially folk tales, embody the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity – they fight monsters and dragons, surmount vast expanses and subjugate everything in their way. Their princesses have traits of emphasized femininity – they are beautiful, quiet, vulnerable, require protection, etc.

Based on the concept of ecofeminism, Margery Hourihan’s (1997) study *Deconstructing the Hero* identifies the layer of connotations underlying many popular stories, where a white European male is glorified as a hero. The hero’s task is to master women, other beings and nature, as Hourihan (1997, 57–95) states. The heroic myth associates the man-hero with civilization and common sense, while it places the woman into the context of emotions and uncultivated conduct (Hourihan, 1997, 51, 175), which suits patriarchal ideology. The research conclusions indicate that literature targeted at young readers, spanning from myths and fairy tales to adventure narratives, often promotes a world steeped in patriarchal traditional values. It is a world where stark gender, racial, class and other differences appear, in which everything is subjugated to the white masculine domination of the Westerners (Hourihan, 1997, 57–95).

Though she embarks from a completely different theoretical position – ecofeminism, Hourihan (1997) effectively follows a similar trajectory to that on which Joseph Campbell (2004) created his monomyth theory. This theory describes the hero’s journey of a civilized white man who, driven by an adventurous spirit, sets off to distant and unknown regions. While travelling, he goes through an initiation, receives help from higher powers, succeeds in all his ideas and endeavours, and his return to his homeland is touted as the hero’s return (Campbell, 2004). The fairy tale is genealogically related to the myth and hence it fits into Campbell’s theory.

It is possible to further affirm the close connection between the fairy tale and the heroic myth, with another significant study on the construction or morphology of the folk tale, which was described by Vladimir Propp (2009) from a formalist-structuralist position. While examining folk tales from Afanasyev’s collection, Propp (2009, 25–65) detected 31 functions (function is the action which generates the plot) that make it possible to define the structure of any folk tale. In Propp’s theory, characters do not have a particularly important role, because they represent a variable category and are interchangeable, but the functions they carry are invariable. Propp (2009) labels characters as *dramatis personae* functioning within the seven scopes of action. In Propp’s theory, the scope of action of a hero is certainly important, if not the most important. The hero may either be a hero-seeker or a hero-victim. No fairy tale has both types of the hero. Male *dramatis personae*

are much more frequently heroes in fairy tales (Propp, 2009), while female characters are either victims, or what Hourihan calls 'trophy-brides' (Hourihan, 1997, 51), the term referring to an undeveloped female character exclusively placed in the position of a trophy to be awarded to the brave male hero.

#### RECOGNIZING AND DENYING THE FAIRY TALE AS A DIDACTIC TOOL

Fairy tales started to be recognised as a powerful didactic tool at the time of their popularity in the French court and the aristocracy in general, and become more prevalent as such in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Brothers Grimm explicitly identified children as the target audience (Vučković, 2018, 322–323).

Vuković (1996, 171–176) stated that in different periods there were doubts about the didactic value of fairy tales, a position shared by Maria Nikolajeva, who points out that "fairy tales, with their seemingly explicit morals, are highly problematic" (2014, 183). Nikolajeva (2014) cites examples in which the heroes of fairy tales break basic rules, steal, cheat, lie and kill without much consideration, while the main thread of the story justifies such actions if they are committed by a seemingly positive character. Critics have drawn attention to the difficulties regarding children's reactions to violent scenes in fairy tales, and have also pointed out that these stories can potentially detach children from reality (Vuković, 1996, 171–176).

Probably the strongest trend in fairy tale criticism, crucial for this paper, originates from feminist-oriented researchers, and may be initially introduced by Zipes' opinion that the fairy tale is maintained and replicated "by a cultural industry that favours patriarchal and reactionary notions of gender, ethnicity, behaviour, and social class" (Zipes, 2006, 2). Zipes (2006, 103, 204, 229–233) considers the fairy tale from a sociological point of view as a powerful means which supports and sustains the patriarchal ideology.

Criticism aimed at the patriarchal ideology of the fairy tale commenced with the first wave of feminism. Feminism being a virtually spectral phenomenon today, here it is important to define the type of feminist position that we are taking in this paper. Feminism is "the system of ideas and political practices based on the principle that women are human beings equal to men" (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2011, 223). It is a layered phenomenon that had developed for a long period of time towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it also adopted the concept of intersectionality. It means that, along with the issue of gender, it includes other identity features as well, and supports equality among all, regardless of any personal characteristics (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2011, 223).

Feminist-oriented researchers were not against reading fairy tales; they perceived it as a powerful

means of education, but also re-education. In this sense, they thought it necessary to retell classic fairy tales, along with a change in characterization of female and male characters; furthermore, they also thought it desirable to write completely new fairy tales. One of the examples of retelling classical texts is the collection entitled *Don't Bet on the Prince* (Zipes, 1986) containing feminist versions of many well-known fairy tales. Feminist ideas provided for the emergence of the so-called disruptive fairy tales, some of which are a type of retelling, and some are original.

Of course, it is important to recall the existence of numerous perspectives for interpreting fairy tales in science and education, "that are Jungian, Marxist, sociopolitical, dialectical, historical, text-historical, feminist, gender-related, mythological, and economic, with both affirmative and critical assessments" (Murphy, 2000, 7). The approach employed by this paper is but one possible way, not disputing the validity of other, different interpretations.

#### THE ROLE OF THE FAIRY TALE IN EDUCATION AND THE MANNER IN WHICH CHILDREN RECEIVE IT

Considerable research has been carried out on the role of literature in the social, emotional and conative development of personality since the beginning of this century, particularly from the perspective of cognitive criticism. It has been confirmed "that literature affects our beliefs and opinions" (Nikolajeva, 2014, 5), which is largely the result of the function of mirror neurons, because "cognitive criticism, supported by neuroscience, has shown that the brain, through recently discovered mirror neurons, reacts to fictional worlds (descriptions, events, characters) as if they were real" (Nikolajeva, 2014, 8). Stories have a strong educational effect and therefore directly influence the formation of a person's character, owing to the fact that they are interesting, understandable, easy to remember, and most of them provide some kind of optimism (Nodelman, 2008, 81). Moreover, the child-reader embarks on the adventure of reading rather sympathetically, in that they need to identify with literary characters that they experience in a powerful and realistic manner (Nodelman, 2008, 36). Taking that into account, reading fiction may help us understand the real world better, but such understanding will indeed depend on the reading material that we choose, as well as on the reader's skill to consider the text inquisitively, critically and problematically. Namely, cultural codes and patterns, social values and prejudices, negative opinions and stereotypes are transmitted to young generations through stories and become an integral part of their personalities.

Children's literature has a special role in the preservation and transmission of culture and tradition, as well as in the formation and maintenance



of social norms (Hourihan, 1997, 235–238; Zipes, 2006, 28, 148, 166; Vučković, 2018, 316–317).<sup>7</sup> The most prominent role of fairy tales is their impact on socialization, as they are commonly listened to and read during early childhood. The meanings embedded in these tales are absorbed by children, subsequently evolving into their steadfast and nearly immutable points of view, as supported by research (Davies, 1989; Westland, 1993; Yeoman, 1999; Parsons, 2004; Kostas, 2018; Adriany, 2019). The aforementioned research shows that children early adopt the gender discourse and other norms in traditional stories, and that their devotion to that discourse grows with age, which is particularly true for boys (Davies, 1989; Kostas, 2018). Furthermore, the mentioned research was performed in various parts of the world – Australia, European and American states, Indonesia – and its results are worryingly similar. Through stories, and fairy tales in particular, children partly confirm existing experiences, and partly acquire new experiences with a frame of reference that was named by Judith Butler (1990) as the *heterosexual matrix*, whose binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity are clearly defined with the terms of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* by Raewyn Connell (1987, 183–190). This frame represents a basic construction as a foundation for the patriarchy as a social ideology responsible for traditionalism, i.e. for maintaining the position of a white man as master over other beings and entire nature (Hourihan, 1997, 38–44).

Stories affect the way in which children perceive themselves and other people and understand the concepts of goodness, justice, truth, beauty, etc. Pre-school girls from Vina Adriany's (2019, 735–736) study described female beauty according to the appearance of Disney's princesses, which is an edition of fairy tales popular worldwide. The fact that Disney's princesses do not resemble adult women from their surroundings did not affect the girls in the mentioned research (Adriany, 2019, 736).

## METHOD

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on the importance of reading traditional fairy tales during education, which is founded on the potential for critically approaching the interpretation of the story. Bearing in mind that this is not an absolutely novel objective, we underline that in the numerous works we consulted, which were cited in this paper, we have encountered a wide variety of types of critical reading. Yet, we have not come across an approach grounded in reader-response theory, particularly with reference to the specific program derived from that theory (Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking),

complemented by our incorporation of research-based reading. This, however modest, constitutes the original contribution of the paper.

In order to achieve this goal, we started with two tasks:

1. Establishing the traditional features of the selected fairy tale;
2. Creating a model of its critical reading.

We opted for Propp's structuralist method as a way to establish traditional features of the fairy tale, and the critical reading of the story relies on reader-response criticism (Iser, 1978; Jauss, 1982) and follows after *Discussion*.

Vladimir Propp (2009) developed the model of a meta-tale, which is an abstract structure capable of interpolating any existing story of such kind. The meta-tale develops as a story with 31 functions, where a function represents "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (Propp, 2009, 21). Characters or *dramatis personae* are a variable category; they alternate and perform their functions according to the established schedule.

Propp (2009) described functions and their sub-groups; each function has a marker and an abbreviated name, all of which is accompanied by examples from Afanasyev's tales. Thus the construction of the meta-tale is formed by the following functions: absence (β), interdiction (γ), violation (δ), reconnaissance (ε), delivery (ζ), trickery (η), complicity (θ), villainy (A) or lack (a), mediation (B), beginning counteraction (C), departure (†), first function of the donor (D), the hero's reaction (E), provision of a magical agent (F), guidance (G), struggle (H), branding (I), victory (J), liquidation of lack (K), return (↓), pursuit (Pr), rescue (Rs), unrecognized arrival (o), unfounded claims (L), difficult task (M), solution (N), recognition (Q), exposure (Ex), transfiguration (T), punishment (U), wedding (W) (Propp, 2009, 25–65).

The plot commences from the eighth function, so that the function of villainy or lack generates the storyline. Propp's definition of the folk tale relates to that function: "Morphologically, a tale (*skázka*) may be termed any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack (a), through intermediary functions to marriage (W\*), or to other functions employed as a denouement" (Propp, 2009, 92). Propp (2009) noticed that a single story may contain several instances of villainy or lack, so that each part of the story from the occurrence of villainy to its compensation is called a move. The moves within the same story may be combined in various ways. They might flow successively or simultaneously, or a single move might be interpolated within a wider one, etc.

<sup>7</sup> Fairy tales and folktales are also important tools to build communities (cf. Tratnik, 2023b). Folktales in particular transmit cognitive matrices from one generation to the next (cf. Horvat, 2022).

Real stories regularly differ from theoretical models, i.e. fairy tales did not emerge from ideal structural features posed by Propp for the meta-tale. Not all tales have all functions; on the contrary, there are series of functions absent from specific examples. In addition, there is frequent trebling, i.e. the same procedure repeats three times in variants: (a) every time successfully, (b) twice with a negative outcome, the third time with a positive one, (c) in accordance with the grading sequence (Propp, 2009). Some functions might be assimilated (included in other actions) or they might be recognized with a double morphological meaning (Propp, 2009, 66, 69). Functions frequently have a negative outcome; for instance, if the hero does not respond positively to the donor's temptation, he does not acquire a magical means. Therefore, the morphological analysis of folk tales is substantially complicated given the abundance of singularities contained in these stories. What helps to define the function more precisely is its consequences and it is the fundamental criterion that is necessary to follow in the morphological analysis.

Characters in tales function within seven ranges of action according to Propp's (2009) theory: villain, donor, helper, princess (a sought-for person) and her father, hero and false hero. The main character is a hero-seeker or a hero-victim. The wonder or fairy tale always follows the path of a single hero. Male characters dominate among hero-seekers, while female characters are dominantly defined as trophy-brides or victims (Propp, 2009). In that sense, Propp's approach may be used to depict a heroic venture of a hero-seeker.

#### METHOD LIMITATIONS

According to some researchers (Hammond, 2011, 47–52), Propp did not describe the morphological analysis in detail; as a result, his descriptions of functions might be unclear to those who are not quite familiar with Afanasyev's tales, which were the corpus for Propp's analysis. In the article *Structural and Historical Study of the Fairy Tale*, published as an addendum to some editions of the book *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp provided an explanation for inaccuracies in the English translation of the book, which were a cause for some of the complaints it received (Propp, 2012). This obstacle was overcome by the fact that the authors of this paper are well-acquainted with the corpus of the fairy tales analysed by Propp. In addition, MIT's instructions (Finlayson, 2012, 18–25) were very helpful in the analysis.

The most important objection to Propp's morphology is that it is of a significantly formalist nature and that it does not deal with the semantics of the stories enough, and especially that it does not provide the interpretation of the tale in the social and cultural contexts (Zipes, 2000, 16). This particular problem is

addressed in *Discussion* in that the results have been considered within the context of the previous theoretical hypotheses.

Propp's theory is not new. On the contrary, it dates back to the first half of the previous century. However, newer research by Mikita Suprunčuk (2022) and Žarko Trebješanin (2022) is also based on Propp's approach, which was also deemed valid by Antonijević (2023, 126–128). Suprunčuk believes that Propp's morphology is "incredible in terms of its beauty, and unusually valuable for its universality of generalisations" (Suprunčuk, 2022, 14). Trebješanin (2022) wrote about the morphological functions and *dramatis personae*, addressing the psychological questions with which the fairy tale assists children during the process of socialisation. This aspect of communication between a child and the fairy tale is indeed the closest, albeit not identical, to our perspective. Uther (2009, 25) is another who claims that Propp's influence lives on, a viewpoint confirmed by studies focused on the development of software for creating stories based on Propp's theory (Hammond, 2011, 81–117; Finlayson, 2012, 19–25). These trends are hugely important for education science, particularly for literature teaching methodology at the present moment when artificial intelligence is becoming an unknown that needs to be thoroughly understood and utilised promptly. Propp's morphology has not been adequately employed in studies on education, to the authors' best knowledge.

#### MATERIAL

Vuk Stefanović Karadžić compiled two rich collections of folk tales, the first of which was published in 1853, and the second in 1870. The second collection contains 19 long-form folk tales. Among other stories, this category includes well-known fairy tales, such as *Biberče (Peppercorn)* and *Baš-čelik (The Head of Steel)*. The stories, like those from the first collection, were collected from different regions inhabited by South Slavic peoples, so some of them were also recorded in the territory of today's Montenegro. We chose the fairy tale *Baš-čelik*, or *The Head of Steel* (Turkish word *baş* for "head" and *çelik* for "steel"), from that collection for our analysis. Regarding this story, Kilibarda (2012, 199) points out that it belongs to the fairy tales collected in the territory of Montenegro. In terms of his characteristics, *Baš-čelik* himself resembles *Košćej the Immortal*, the evil sorcerer from East Slavic folk tales.

#### RESULTS

The initial situation is depicted at the beginning of the story, where the reader discovers that the emperor has three sons and three daughters. This instantly signifies the prominence of number three. Its symbolism is made obvious through several times in the text.

Move I: On his deathbed, the emperor makes an interdiction ( $\gamma$ ) to his sons, ordering them to marry off their sisters to the first suitors who come forward. He then dies, which represents the function of the so-called intensified absention ( $\beta$ ). One night, some kind of force appears and demands the eldest sister to be his wife. Two older brothers violate their father's interdiction (violation –  $\delta$ ), which places their conduct into the classical morphological structure of the fairy tale (interdiction and its violation). However, the youngest brother does not violate his father's interdiction and gives his sister to the unknown groom. The appearance of the unknown groom and the reaction of the youngest prince are later recognized as the donor function (*first function of the donor* where the hero is being questioned, interrogated, assaulted, etc. and is therefore being prepared to obtain a magical medium or a sidekick – D, *the hero's reaction*, where the hero reacts to the deeds of the future donor – E), because the young man has gained a magical ally (provision of a magical agent – F). The acts triple and we have identical reactions of the three brothers repeated three times. When the three sisters have been married, the brothers feel that they miss them (a), which is the point where the plot proper starts. They decide to set off on a quest, which they do together, so we have a series of functions of the plot – mediation (B), beginning counteraction (C), departure ( $\uparrow$ ).

While travelling, the brothers spend a night beside a lake where dragons live. They spend three nights by the lake, so every night one of the brothers, the one who keeps watch, struggles (H) with a dragon and achieves victory (J). The dragons grow increasingly terrifying, and the youngest brother naturally proves to be the bravest, because he wins over the most terrifying dragon. During his struggle, the fire next to his brothers is extinguished, which is a new lack (a) providing a series of events for the young man to embark on. They have already started another move (Move II) before the problem of lack from the first move has been resolved (the sisters have not been found yet), which means that the first move does not end here.

Move II: Unrelated to the events previously described, there is a city rampaged by giants-cannibals who kidnap local people every day, take them to a cave and eat them, which is the function of villainy (A). While solving the lack of fire (a), the youngest prince comes across the giants' cave and stays with them. He is informed about their misdeeds and decides to confront them (mediation – B, beginning counteraction – C). During the giants' assault on the town, the young man succeeds in achieving a victory (J) through his cleverness in direct struggle (H) one-on-one.

After that, the young man visits an almost deserted town, where he encounters a sleeping princess with a snake slyly approaching her. The prince kills the snake with his tiny knife, pinning it against the wall, which

finally liquidates the troubles from Move II (K), and swears on his knife, proclaiming that it should only be taken out from the wall by his hand, which represents branding (I). In a series of events through which the characters go, the emperor of the town finds out who saved his town and his daughter, and the ultimate proof is the sworn knife which serves as a means of recognition (Q) of the real hero. The saviour is given the emperor's daughter to be his wife and remains in town as the emperor's equal (the hero gets married and ascends the imperial throne – W).

Move III: The emperor goes for a short journey (absention  $\beta$ ) and he gives the keys to many premises to his son-in-law, but forbids ( $\gamma$ ) him to enter one of them, which the young man does not obey (violation –  $\delta$ ). In that room he encounters Baš-čelik, a paladin in immense shackles; near him there is water, but he cannot drink. Baš-čelik asks the young man for water, the young man gives it to him, which is repeated three times (the functions of trickery –  $\eta$  and complicity –  $\theta$ ). However, they are at the same time three donor functions (DEF), because every time Baš-čelik gives a new life to the young man. When Baš-čelik has drunk water for the third time, he breaks the shackles, spreads his wings, grabs the prince's wife and takes her away, constituting villainy (A). The young man reports to the emperor and leaves with a firm decision to confront the villain (mediation – B, beginning counteraction – C and departure  $\uparrow$ ).

Travelling the world, the young man finds his sisters, through which he liquidates the lack that had taken him on the journey in the first move. At the same time, it represents the end of the first move, because the basic element of the plot has been solved (the first move ending). In addition, he finally meets his brothers-in-law (the emperors of dragons, hawks and eagles), each of whom presents him with a feather that he can use to call them when in trouble (here we are informed on the third donor function from the first move).

Continuing his journey, the prince finds his wife and attempts to flee (Pr) with her three times, but the function of rescue is not materialized, i.e. rescue – Rs has a negative index. Baš-čelik catches them every time and every time the young man loses one of the lives gifted to him by the villain, until his own life is finally taken by Baš-čelik. His brothers-in-law, the magical agents, rescue him with life-giving water. The final struggle (H) is, however, in cleverness: the prince tells his wife to ask Baš-čelik where his power lies. She succeeds in her intention and finds out that Baš-čelik's power lies high in a mountain, where there is a fox; in the fox is a heart, in the heart is a bird, and the bird holds his power. With the help of his brothers-in-law, the prince manages to reach his opponent's power, which brings him victory (J). He takes his wife back, liquidating the lack (K), and regains his marriage and the crown (W).



## DISCUSSION

The fairy tale *The Head of Steel* has a strikingly complicated structure, which is to a certain extent clearer with a morphological approach. The story seems to have a number of digressions and/or episodes, if analysed without Propp's terminology. Using Propp's morphological approach, we see that the story has three moves, or that its dramatic composition contains three plots. The story tracks a hero-seeker, who searches for several 'objects' – in the first move he searches for his sisters, in the second move for the villains who rampaged the town of another emperor, and in the third move for his wife who has been kidnapped. Only in the third move does he resolve the search from the first move by finding his sisters.

The first move of the story, especially its beginning, depicts a typical patriarchal family in which the head of the house (the emperor) pronounces his last will on his deathbed. He exclusively entrusts to his sons the directive on how their sisters should be married (the event takes place without the daughters' presence). The youngest prince, predestined to be a hero, is the only one to fully respect his father's will. Despite the fact that some horrendous force claims his sisters, he irrevocably fulfils his duty imposed by the head of the family on his deathbed. Thus, in the beginning, he is presented as loyal to the values of the patriarchy and worthy of assuming the role of the future master of the family.

Specific morphological circumstances occur in the very first move – the same doings could be interpreted in numerous ways; some functions have double morphological meanings. The prince's reaction to the appearance of the future brothers-in-law is an obvious example. On the one hand, it is a non-violation of the prohibition in the classical sequence of the fairy tale, i.e. a negative realization of one of the introductory functions. On the other, these are typical donor functions because after the trial (evidenced in the testing of his loyalty to his father's testament) the young man proves himself worthy of obtaining magical agents. In addition, in this move, we encounter the initial instance of trebling as the three brothers-in-law arrive. The trebling recurs in other moves as well (the confrontation with three dragons, three water-givings to Baš-čelik, and the loss of three lives), presenting symbolism that could be linked to the Christian significance of the number three.

In the first move, the brothers struggle with the lake dragons, which is seemingly irrelevant for the development of central events. However, that struggle is essentially quite important in the function of characterization – the older brothers are brave as well, and skilled in fighting dragons, but the youngest

is the most skilful and bravest, because the dragon he fights is the most horrendous. Moreover, the youngest prince appears to be caring when guarding his brothers' sleep, for he sets off to look for fire that was extinguished by water while he was struggling with the dragon.

The second move starts even before the prince enters the central part of the storyline. Giants-cannibals kidnapped the local people from another emperor's town. The prince discovers this by accident, when he comes across the cave where they live. Without any external plea or request, he decides to rescue the unknown locals and manages to kill the giants. In addition, the young man kills the snake threatening the princess's life. Thus the prince defeats other uncivilized, inhuman beings after the struggle with the dragon, and fulfils all conditions to marry the princess given to him as an award, and to attain the position equal to that of an emperor. However, his quests are not yet over; he still has to find his sisters and get into yet another fight – the struggle with the sorcerer whose power is hidden outside himself. That struggle develops in the third move.

No matter how loyal he is to the values of patriarchy and obedient to the head of the family, which he proves at the very beginning of the story, the prince is still young, inexperienced and curious. He violates his father-in-law's prohibition to enter the room where the sorcerer Baš-čelik is shackled. When communicating with Baš-čelik and responding to his plea for water, the young man is deceived on the one hand (he provides his opponent with strength), but at the same time he is merciful (he gives water to the thirsty one). In that complex reaction there is another double morphological meaning. In the continuation of the storyline, the young man finally finds his sisters and brothers-in-law while searching for his kidnapped wife, and acquires the magical agents that he earned in the first move. In the merciless fight against Baš-čelik, the prince loses the lives he was given and is finally killed. His brothers-in-law revive him with miraculous water, after which he finally acquires the true heroic status as described by Joseph Campbell (2004) relating to the hero's journey that includes dwelling in the world of the dead. After that stage of the hero's journey, the prince becomes much cleverer – he realizes that he has to fight Baš-čelik by outwitting him. When his wife finds out the location of the power of Baš-čelik, he strikes at that power, defeats it, regains his wife and the imperial throne. Therefore, the whole story is a great hero's journey in which a young member of a patriarchal society undergoes initiation (Campbell, 2004). He fights various monsters, defeats all of them successfully and, having matured, becomes worthy of being the guardian of the patriarchal order – he marries and ascends the throne. To make his heroism even

more conspicuous, his brothers resemble him – they are also heroes without traits of dishonesty or deceit. However, from the very beginning they lack one characteristic essential in the patriarchal order – they are not ready to respect their father's last will. Thus, our protagonist is the typical image of the hero that Hourihan (1997) writes about.

We observe the characteristics of the main character's features of hegemonic masculinity. There are practically no female characters, all the girls are in the function of a bride-symbol. If *Cinderella* is, as boys often say, a *female* text, then *The Head of Steel* is a pure *male* text. The analysis of the fairy tale has shown its concordance with the theses of Hourihan (1997) and the monomyth (Campbell, 2004), while the morphological approach (Propp, 2009) has made it possible to observe the journey and struggle of the hero-seeker, which is the basis for the educational interpretation of this traditional fairy tale.

Given the mentioned limitations of this method, in particular the fact that stories are not 'ideal' forms – like some natural phenomena – in order to establish their morphology, we are cognizant of the fact that the presented morphological structure may be discussed further. In fact, Propp himself (2009, 69) discussed the transfer of functions or double morphological meaning. In spite of this, the above analysis may be used as the foundation for research-based reading of the fairy tale in teaching. While interpreting any story, including fairy tales, during teaching, the elaborated positions and opinions of readers (students) are respected, and the diversity of those positions and opinions founded in parts of the text is completely valid in the context of the reception theory (Jauss, 1982), and reader-response theory (Iser, 1978).

All ideas contained in this chapter need to be activated in the educational interpretation of the fairy tale, to the extent allowed by the age and prior knowledge of the students who read the fairy tale. It is our estimation that a story with this structure can be understood by students aged twelve or more. During analysis in class, Propp's cards can be used (Hammond, 2011, 121).

#### THE CRITICAL READING OF THE FAIRY TALE IN THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

Researchers have confirmed that it is equally important to read completely new, disruptive fairy tales in the process of education (Davies, 1989), but it is also important to endeavour to understand the meaning of traditional fairy tales (Walderkine, 1984, 182–184). From the methodical point of view, reading with the task of critically understanding the textual reality is particularly important in education, as described in the programme Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking – RWCT (Crawford et al., 2005). By reading traditional texts that contain the ideology of the patriarchy, and

given the task to problematically discover individual and social roles and relations and their (dis)agreement with the modern perspective, students develop critical thinking skills. It goes without saying that it is not desirable to impose opinions unacceptable for students, aiming to uphold the pluralism of ideas and thoughts.

In contemporary literature teaching, the interpretation of the text is founded on the active participation of the reader in decoding the meaning of the text, which is explained by the reception theory (Jauss, 1982) or reader-response criticism (Iser, 1978). This theory postulates two important concepts that are being introduced in all activities in the process of education. These concepts are *the horizon of expectation*, formed on the basis of students' previous knowledge and experiences; *aesthetic distance*, as a new value or a new insight provided to the reader by the work. The theoretical concept essentially implies that, before reading a story with children, we should talk to them about their experiences and their previous knowledge, i.e. to primarily evoke the horizon of their expectations (the phase of *evocation*), and then read the story with research tasks which enable students to understand meanings (the phase of *understanding the meaning*), and finally to critically estimate the aesthetic distance and identify conceptual and other values of the text (the phase of *reflection*). The sequence of phases – evocation, understanding the meaning, reflection, or the ERR system – has been derived on the basis of reader-response criticism. Special techniques and strategies have been created (Crawford et al., 2005) to ensure the reader's active role.

The RWCT programme involves a series of techniques and strategies ensuring an active role of the reader, such as: know – want to know – learn (KWL chart), brainstorming, reading in sequences, Venn's diagram, paired reading, question-board, think-pair-share, semantic map, character map, directed reading activity, read with text coding, jigsaw (cooperative learning technique), etc. (Crawford et al., 2005). For example, reading in sequences utilises the technique of 'cuts' in the same way that Scheherazade tells stories in *One Thousand and One Nights*.

As for the fairy tale used as our example, it is necessary to activate students' previous knowledge in the phase of evocation, which is possible with the technique of associations or by making some kind of graphic knowledge organizer, such as a semantic map (e.g. mind map). During the first stage, students discuss familiar characteristics of fairy tales, either in pairs or in small groups, remember the heroes, and provide hypotheses about the content of the text based on its title. Since a fairy tale with a complex structure such as *The Head of Steel* should, in our opinion, be introduced to students only when they reach the stage of formal logical thinking (around the age of twelve), by that point students are already familiar with many

fairy tales. During the creation of a semantic map of fairy tales, they will, with the help of the teacher, note down the main characteristics of those tales, such as: time and place, relations between good and evil, typical beginnings and so-called happy endings, main and secondary characters, the dramatic structure of events, etc. In fact, the identification of the dramatic structure of events in a fairy tale could be used as an introduction to Propp's cards (cards with illustrations of heroes in various functions), which will help students understand certain events in terms of their significance for the continuation of the plot (understanding functions and their consequences). When the students create the semantic maps, a discussion on them will follow, and assumptions will be made about the fairy tale *The Head of Steel*, which they will read later on. The students' assumptions, i.e. their predictions, are used exclusively to spark the readers' interest.

What follows is the stage of reading the fairy tale with a deeper understanding, which requires corresponding research questions to be prepared in advance. Research-based reading is founded on such questions and tasks, which are given to students before reading to direct their attention to the key elements of the text (Nikolić, 2006, 272–283). These questions should draw readers' particular attention to the parts of the text that could be the starting points for understanding the meaning of the traditional ideological layer, in the case of the approach used in this work. If we want to attain students' critical thinking, then the questions should by no means be suggestive and superficial. Instead, each question must encourage learning by comprehension (Vilotijević, 2000). Some readers will be faster in discerning and understanding connotations, while others will remain loyal to the traditional discourse. Generally speaking, students are likely to react in various ways, and in the subsequent stage, it is necessary to structure the discussion so that it allows for peer learning and possesses the fundamental qualities of the social and constructivist paradigm of learning (Vilotijević, 2000). Research questions may be as follows:

1. The youngest prince is the only one who obeys his father without any dispute, while his brothers are more inclined to act against their father's will. Whose act do you like better? State the arguments to support the act you chose.
2. Consider the role of the sisters in the story. To what extent and in what manner do they participate in the events?
3. The brothers go off in search of their sisters. During the journey, they have an adventure with dragons. Based on what previous events do you expect the youngest prince to defeat the most dangerous dragon?

4. While looking for fire, the emperor's youngest son comes across a cave of cannibals and joins them with the intention of killing them. Think about how he felt among them – did he feel fear for his life? What parts of the text support your opinion?
5. After he has killed the cannibals, saved the princess and performed other heroic deeds, the youngest prince marries the princess. Do you think the princess wanted to marry him? Did he want that marriage? Elaborate on your opinion.
6. The emperor gave his son-in-law the keys to many rooms, but he warned him not to enter one of them. The prince did not obey. Would you expect that?
7. The prince gives water to Baš-čelik and the latter regains his strength to finally break the shackles, grab the prince's wife, and kidnap her. How does the prince feel at that moment? Does he regret his actions or not?
8. While searching for his wife, the prince finds his sisters and brothers-in-law, and realizes that he has acquired magical and very powerful allies. On what basis could we have previously known that the sisters were married to powerful persons? Give at least two arguments.
9. While struggling with Baš-čelik, the prince first loses the three lives gifted to him, and then his own. His brothers-in-law revive him with miraculous water, which is not surprising in this and similar stories. Explain why we are not surprised that the prince came back to life.
10. In the end, the prince defeats Baš-čelik and solves all the problems. Describe in detail all the qualities that he showed in different situations.
11. Compare the prince to his brothers. What characteristics do they have in common, and how do they differ from one another?
12. What female characters are mentioned in the story? Describe their role in the events and identify their characteristics.
13. This story contains many messages/ideas. What messages do you perceive? What could these messages mean in everyday life?
14. What messages do you agree with? What messages do you disagree with? Elaborate on what ideas of the story you would apply in everyday life.

The above questions are in the function of deep inspection of the gender perspective in the fairy tale, which we discussed in the theoretical section of this paper. Depending on teaching objectives and the defined outcomes of learning, other elements and layers of the fairy tale can and should be identified.

Apart from the above questions, students may also be given Propp's cards (with the explanation of their meaning), with the task to compare them to important events and determine which card corresponds to which



event. After reading, a discussion takes place about those series of cards, any potential individual mistakes are corrected, and the order of the cards, i.e. functions, is synchronized.

After the students read the story for themselves and respond to the given questions and tasks, this is followed by a discussion of the text where students provide their insights, thoughts and ideas. It is necessary to check whether everybody has understood the content of the text, then listen to their initial responses to the research questions, and finally, organize a pros and cons discussion related to several topics (it is advisable to divide the class into smaller groups):

- a. State the arguments for and against the youngest prince's behaviour.
- b. State the arguments for and against the female characters' roles in this text.
- c. State the arguments for and against the overall characterization of male and female characters in the text *The Head of Steel*.

After the discussion in small groups, once the arguments have been provided, an additional discussion on a third topic could be developed at class level, which might represent the final stage of reflection.

Since reception theory implies that the finale of every reading process should be directed towards a new creation, it is possible to give students the following tasks in that particular creative stage:

1. Retell the story from the perspective of the sisters.
2. Retell the story by exchanging the roles of male and female characters.
3. Write the continuation of the story in which the sisters and the prince's wife embark on adventures.

Students are expected to write tasks that are widely different in all, including ideological, terms. Their reading, analysis and discussion on them may contribute to the development of critical thinking through the understanding and acknowledgment of perspectives of the tasks' authors.

## CONCLUSION

Besides the indisputable need to read disruptive or non-traditional fairy tales in the process of education, it is also important to read texts which contain fully traditional and patriarchal patterns. The task of understanding the meaning of the text in the corresponding social, cultural and historical context represents a

problem-solving and research demand. By fulfilling it, students develop critical thinking skills. The fairy tale has an undeniable didactic value, but the manner in which it is read in education must be approached in a critical tone. Omitting traditional stories from the reading material may be construed as concealing the conditions of reality and circumstances inherited by patriarchal ideology. If they were interpreted in an uncritical fashion, without understanding of meanings and discerning social, gender, class and other stereotypes and prejudices, it could be detrimental, because it would lead to the uncritical adoption of the superficial message of the fairy tale, which mostly comes down to *They married and lived happily ever after*. Therefore, fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White* "may have acted to confirm the wisdom of a safely unquestioning passivity for their underclass audience that helped preserve the social structures that kept the underclass in its place and under the control of its wealthier and more powerful masters" (Nodelman, 2008, 48). In conclusion, the uncritical absorption of the meaning of such stories has the potential to affect children and educate them in the spirit of subjugation, or in the spirit advocating the hegemonic masculinity of white man. Stories become integral to children's lives, shaping their worldview and influencing the way they perceive reality. This, in turn, extends their impact on society.

Reader-response criticism is a theoretical framework that enables the reception of the story in education to be carried out in three stages: evocation, understanding the meaning, and reflection. It is necessary to activate students in these stages to read carefully, provide arguments and discern denotative and connotative meanings. Such an approach particularly accentuates the exchange of ideas and thoughts with other readers through discussions about what has been read. In addition, the active role of the reader implies associating the literary with everyday life experience, especially in the phase of reflection. In that phase, students are encouraged to express their own insights into reality through their literary experience.

We have explained the concept of reading traditional fairy tales in education, which has been demonstrated on the selected textual example, and corresponds with the case study. The entire procedure can be extrapolated, without many restrictions, to other fairy tales within the corpus of folk or literary stories, after it has been confirmed that these stories contain traditional aspects.

## RAZUMETI POMEN LJUDSKIH PRAVLJIC V KONTEKSTU SODOBNEGA UČENJA – UČITI ZA KRITIČNO RAZMIŠLJANJE

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### POVZETEK

Namen tega prispevka je razviti model kritičnega branja ljudskih pravljic kar bi omogočalo razumevanje le-teh v sodobnem učnem kontekstu, posebej v luči koncepta razumevanja spolov. Postavili smo si naslednje raziskovalno vprašanje: Zakaj so pravljice tako pomembne pri poučevanju in kako vplivajo na bralca? Kakšno ideologijo nosijo pravljice? Katere pravljice (ljudske ali sodobne) naj posameznik bere v času učenja in kako naj bo kritično mišljenje zastavljeno? Uporabili smo metodo teoretične analize, katero smo dopolnili s historično metodo in na koncu smo opravili še celostno analizo izbrane pravljice. Izbrana pravljica je pripoved z naslovom Baš-čelik, ki jo je objavil v svoji zbirki leta 1870 Vuk Karadžić. Pokazalo se je, da tekst utrjuje pojem heroizma. Raziskava je pokazala, da so tovrstne zgodbe lahko v šolah brane kot primeri semantične forme feminističnega perspektive, medtem ko izpostavljajo karakterje zreducirane na le nekaj klasičnih heteroseksualnih vzorcev. Model kritičnega raziskovanja tovrstnih besedil je bil razdelan v pričujočem članku in temelji na vzpostavljenem odnosu branje-odgovor. Teoretični pristop k kritičnemu branju izhaja iz teorije literarne recepcije in zasnovan po tridelni strukturi programa Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking: evocation-understanding the meaning – reflection. Ker je poudarek prispevka na razumevanju spolnih vzorcev tradicionalnega besedila, je v bralnem modelu predlagan sistem raziskovalnih vprašanj in nalog, ki bralce usmerjajo na tiste dele besedila, ki vsebujejo konotativne, predvsem pa denotativne pomene, ki so pomembni za učno interpretacijo.

**Ključne besede:** ljudske pravljice, netradicionalne pravljice, kritično branje, razumevanje pomena

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