

# Stages of transformation: folklore elements in children's novels

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**Résumé:** *L'auteur remet en question, dans le domaine de la littérature pour la jeunesse, le recours à la distinction entre "réalisme" et "fantaisie": l'examen de plusieurs oeuvres canadiennes jugées "réalistes" révèle, en effet, la présence et la permanence des mythes et des contes de fées et ce, même dans les récits en apparence les plus fidèles à la réalité sociale.*

One of many misunderstandings about children's literature results from the very strict division, mainly for educational purposes, of children's books into "realistic fiction" and "fantasy"—categories that you will find in almost any reference source, including Egoff and Saltman's *The new republic of childhood* and Saltman's *Modern Canadian children's books*. These categories persist even though all literature is realistic in the sense that it portrays some form of human reality, while at the same time all literature is non-realistic in the sense that it reflects the writer's personal, subjective view of reality rather than any objective reality at all. I would like to illustrate this somewhat provocative statement by a brief look at several Canadian children's novels, some of which have fantastic elements, while others by all standards are considered "realistic." Closer scrutiny reveals, however, that these "realistic" novels also possess some essential features of myth, fairy tale or fantasy.

My principal argument is that children's literature at large stands much closer to myth, folklore and fairy tale than to the "traditional" or "canonical" forms of mainstream literature, these latter terms taken from the Russian semiotician Yury Lotman. While mainstream Western literature has, in its present state, made a considerable deviation from the conventional use of traditional genres, children's literature today is making its very first steps towards a relative freedom from the rigid canon. Critical approaches to children's literature will also have to change. There are some preconceived opinions about children's literature: many opponents accuse it of being *a priori* inferior to adult literature because of its presumably meagre artistic devices, limited themes, and simple language. (See, for instance, characteristics of children's fiction in Perry Nodelman's *The pleasures of children's literature* 190.) However, if we approach children's literature with other critical instruments and, in the first place, with a broader mind, we can on the contrary discover its amazing depth.

I will focus on two of the many different aspects of folklore elements within

contemporary children's novels: *the main character* and *the folklore narrative structure*. I would also have liked to contemplate occasional folkloric elements which in the context of a "realistic" novel are often unnoticed or ignored; however, space limits will not allow me to explore this in any depth.

The typical folktale protagonist is a deprived child, that is, a youngest son or daughter, a child of unknown origin, what some folklore scholars call "a low hero." The folktale narrative brings this protagonist into power, allowing him or her to triumph over those who at first seem cleverer and better equipped. Already in classical mainstream novels, like *Jane Eyre* or *Oliver Twist*, we can easily recognize the folktale pattern. Also, early children's novels, like Hector Malot's *Sans famille*, make use of what may be called the Cinderella-motif. An amazingly large number of children's literature protagonists are deprived or neglected in some way, hence the prevalence of foundlings or orphans. Furthermore, if a child character does have a family, the prerequisite of a narrative is still the absence, physical or emotional, of parents or guardians, *absence* being the first and most important initial formula in a folktale. In this manner, *Anne of Green Gables* and *Jacob Two-Two* are equally heirs of the folktale hero.

The orphan as an archetype, or an abandoned child, is probably the most common protagonist of children's literature. Originally, this reflects the situation of a young tribesman exposed to the hardships and loneliness of the ritual trial. In contemporary novels for children, the abandonment can be reduced to the parents being simply away for work, or the child merely can be sent away for a holiday (Mad in Joan Clark's *The moons of Madeleine*) or be undergoing a convalescence (Meg in Cora Taylor's *The doll*), or the parents' absence can be expanded into a death (Rose in Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*) or transformed into parental emotional absence (as in *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang*).

The character of Mordecai Richler's book is introduced in a typical folktale manner: "Once there was a boy ..." Almost at once we also learn that "all the other children in the house were taller and much more capable than he was" (Richler 1) as well as that "His brother and sisters didn't want him. His mother didn't need him" (Richler 6). The younger sibling's final triumph over the older ones is a recognizable pattern from folktales. Jacob is, of course, a trickster, a fool, a Tom Thumb. It may seem far-fetched, but his name even seems a phonetical allusion to both Jack (the giant-killer) and Tom Thumb.

A trickster in folktales copes with his adversaries not by means of his physical strength or dexterity, but rather by his wits. Jacob's predecessor, the child who caused The Hooded Fang so much trouble, wins over him with laughter—the most powerful weapon of childhood. Jacob wins by his observance (he has noticed that The Hooded Fang avoids stepping on cracks, for one thing), his clever penetration into The Hooded Fang's most vulnerable secret: that he, in fact, is not as dreadful as he pretends to be and is himself an outgrown child.

Significantly, Jacob wins over the adult world, "the big people," as Richler prefers to name them; adulthood in this book for very young children symboli-

cally represents the alien, the unknown and frightening—the evil Other World of the folktale. The opposition between Jacob and the Hooded Fang reminds one of the combat between Jack and the giants. Like all trickster stories, from *Tom Thumb* to *Pippi Longstocking*, *Jacob Two-Two* is highly anti-authoritative, which accounts for its great appeal to children, one of many relatively powerless groups in our society.

Julie, in Cora Taylor's novel of that name, is a character who, although apparently originating from folklore, is a further transformation of the traditional folklore character. She is what is sometimes called "an alien child," although she is evidently born into an ordinary family. The figure of the alien child, possessing special powers (Peter Pan is one example), goes back to the figure of the witch in folktale, that is, someone belonging to the Other World. Traditionally, representatives of the Other World cannot be protagonists in a story, for apparent reasons—they were the young person's adversaries, or occasionally helpers, during initiation. In giving her protagonist supernatural powers, Cora Taylor takes a definite step away from the essential principal of the folktale, at the same time keeping the idea of the underprivileged child. Julie's special gift is as much a handicap as superior intellectual capacity in some purely realistic children's novels is a source of mistrust, and even hatred, from the outside world.

The underprivileged situation of the child, which I see as a folklore element, is the motive that powers many novels, for instance *False face* by Welwyn Wilton Katz. Laney's parents have recently divorced, Tom's father has died; and of course Tom, of Indian descent, is an outsider in the white community. The hero-princess relation of the folktale is transformed in the novel into a cross-gender friendship where each child is stronger in some way and enables the other to overcome the identity crisis.

Even in novels that altogether lack magical or supernatural events, we can see the folklore hero in the protagonist. I have mentioned *Anne of Green Gables*; in order not to be totally anachronistic, I will give a more recent example, Michael in Kevin Major's *Hold fast*. The death of Michael's parents—the ultimate folklore "absence"—opens the door into a new stage of insight in the boy's life. In Major's other novels the characters are marginalized by the disintegration of the family (*Far from shore*; *Dear Bruce Springsteen*) or the sense of being special and chosen (*Diana: my autobiography*). The characters of all of these novels, like the folktale protagonist, stand on a threshold, and the narrative itself describes the process of forcing the threshold, either failing or winning.

The narrative structure of most folktales has a close connection to the concept of the protagonist. As shown in Vladimir Propp's studies of folklore, this structure most probably reflects rites of passage that folktales were originally based on. If the hero of the story is a young tribesman undergoing the rite of passage, then the narrative itself must be a description of this initiation. Thus, one of the most common narrative structures of a folktale is that of a quest. The

hero leaves home in search of something: a treasure, a kidnapped princess or simply luck.

Naturally, the quest pattern is most tangible in genres and modes of children's literature which have generic links with myth and folktale, as in fantasy, for instance. In *The moons of Madeleine*, a strongly feminist fantasy novel by Joan Clark, "Mad" is able, with the help of a magic amulet, to enter the Other World, and the quest consists in finding Sacred Stones and going through the Sacred Cave. This quest corresponds to her attempts at saving her grandmother in the real world. As in most fantasy texts for children, the plot may also be interpreted in two ways: as a fantasy adventure, and as an exploration of self, a cave being one of the major images in psychoanalysis.

Likewise science fiction, a side branch of the folktale-into-fantasy evolution, shows a striking similarity in structure with folktales. In Monica Hughes' *Isis* trilogy, for instance, we can easily recognize the quest motif, the struggle between good and evil, and other folktale elements.

In light of this quest motif, let us again look at what happens to "Jacob Two-Two." Running an errand for his father (king father of the folktale!) is the first quest the little boy undertakes, the first time he leaves the security of his home—something that he has always longed to do, since he knows that sooner or later the initiation must begin. Entering the grocery shop, a modern transformation of Aladdin's treasure cave, he enters the world that has as yet been forbidden. He also meets the guardian of the cave, Mr Copper the greengrocer, who is characteristically portrayed in a grotesque shape—"pear shaped," with "ears big as cauliflower leaves"—somewhat like Arcimboldo's vegetable figures. Failing the first trial, Jacob is put into prison (we will here ignore the obvious fact that Jacob's adventures are part of a dream or make believe). There he is given a new assignment by "The Infamous Two," who thus combine the Proppian roles of helpers and dispatchers. Jacob's further transportation, to Slimers' Isle, is an indispensable part of the folktale structure, where the ultimate meeting with the enemy awaits. The hero's imprisonment is a significant part of the folktale narrative, and the disappearance of the first hope (Mr Fox steals the bleeper) belongs to it. Although help is provided from the outside world, it is still Jacob's victory when he finally learns to act. Trickster, or Tom Thumb, is transformed into hero. He has passed his trial and completed his quest.

Now, *Jacob Two-Two* is of course marvellously ironic and plays consciously with the easily-recognizable narrative pattern. Moreover, it does not directly follow the folktale pattern, but rather the plot of one trivial story (thriller, criminal or adventure novel), which in its turn is based on the folktale narrative structure. The artificiality of the narrative is evident, and the "cracks" are very easy to discover, even for a non-sophisticated reader who has never heard of "deconstruction."

Although in Richler's book we find a certain psychological reason for the character's evolution, his motivation is more external; deprived of his freedom,

he must struggle to get free. The quest is initiated, as in folktales, by some outer force. However, in many novels the plot itself develops out of the child's inner need. In Cora Taylor's time-shift fantasy *The doll* there is actually no reason for Meg's going into the past. She has no assignment there, as most time-travellers in fantasy have (compare Rose's quest for Will in Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*). The plot may seem poorly motivated, unless we apprehend it as an inner journey. The experience of family life in the past, with hardships demanding solidarity of the family members, enables Meg to re-evaluate her own situation. Her involvement with the past is also described rather as trance than as actual displacement. She is "Meg" right through, although her family calls her Morag. Time-travel adventure also becomes an identity quest: Meg learns about her ancestors and can better realize her own place in life. In *The root cellar* Rose's perilous excursions into the past can also be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms, as an exploration of her own mind.

To recognize the quest motif in "realistic" stories is more complicated. Of course it is present in numerous "treasure seeker" adventure novels, but then it can be debated whether adventure novels are realistic at all, with their very strong air of formula fiction. In *False face*, treasure-seeking is an adventure, rather than fantasy motif, and the magical powers of the two Indian masks are never explicitly mentioned.

In stories of everyday realism, however, we can single out searching for things or persons as a recurrent narrative structure. One Canadian children's classic, *The incredible journey* by Sheila Burnford, although pretending to be a realistic animal story, is nothing but a mythical quest narrative. We can debate whether the essential element of the quest—the evolution of the protagonist—is present in the story, but the folklore pattern of the plot is evident, especially in the happy reunion.

A much more subtle version of the quest is searching for a missing relative, especially a father (in Kevin Major's *Dear Bruce Springsteen*, for instance), or a father substitute. The quest is the mechanism of the plot even if it is sometimes disguised as something else. Most often it also becomes a quest into oneself.

I would even venture to see this pattern in a broader way yet, as a quest for knowledge, a rite of passage bringing the protagonist from a state of childhood towards adulthood and maturity. The quest does not have to be completed, and often cannot be completed, especially in a book for and about younger children, but, examined in the manner I suggest, the texts can very definitely point in the direction of adulthood.

In *False face*, the adventure plot is nothing but a disguise for the two protagonists' inner quests, their investigation of self. The external landscapes of the novel correspond to the strange inner landscapes of the two teenagers entering adult life. The masks become a kind of catalyst starting off the maturity process. Also, in Taylor's novel, Julie's gift is merely an instrument in her self-discovery, a life decision, a choice. Unlike her "wise old woman," granny

Goderich, Julie refuses to accept fate, instead she takes to action. Again, symbolically, it is the crossing of a threshold into adulthood.

Terry in *Dear Bruce Springsteen* does not really come to terms with his parents' divorce and especially his mother's new boyfriend, but after a brief visit to his father he has moved a good way towards reconciliation. The quest is over, and he does not need a substitute father any more.

In this light, I see books like *False face, Holdfast* and *Dear Bruce Springsteen*, as symbolical depictions of a "rite of passage," comparable with the folktale pattern of "Go there I don't know where, bring that I don't know what." Michael's escape in *Holdfast* is equivalent to the folklore character's entering the magic forest. The purpose is, in both cases, maturity and better knowledge. Eventually, the inner quest pattern is transformed into something existential, a quest into the meaning of life. But its origin is still in the folktale.

As my Swedish colleague Eva Löfgren shows in her study of Astrid Lindgren's books about Master detective Bill Bentsson, these seemingly realistic stories can be easily analyzed in terms of mythical, archetypal patterns like that of St. George and the dragon or the princess in the tower. In her doctoral dissertation *Schoolmates of the long-ago* Eva Löfgren discovers similar narrative patterns in boarding-school stories for girls. I think it can also be rewarding to look at many so-called realistic texts from this perspective, since this, among other things, liberates us from judging their verisimilitude. Realism and verisimilitude are not the same, but many critics ignore this fact.

We can thus speak very roughly of three stages of transformation of folktale patterns in contemporary novels for children and young people. At the first, manifest in such totally diverse texts as *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* and *The moons of Madeleine*, the author more or less closely follows the narrative structure of folk or fairy tale but modifies it to suit certain purposes: for instance, irony and satire in Richler's book, female emancipation in Joan Clark's. At the second stage, the deeper level of rite of passage, or quest for knowledge, becomes the cornerstone of the story. The narrative may have some magical or supernatural elements—for instance, the doll in Cora Taylor's novel or the masks in *False face*—which, unlike a similar artifact in *The moons of Madeleine*, leave the reader undecided about whether it is indeed magic at work. This hesitation allows for a greater degree of sophistication, since the readers are supposed to come with explanations of their own. Finally, we arrive at the last stage, which by many scholars would probably not be recognized as a folktale transformation at all, since no formal folklore elements are present, as in Kevin Major's novels of adolescence. However, the main character—an abandoned child in a very broad sense—and the quest plot allow us to see the origins of these books in folklore as well.

By way of conclusion I would like to emphasize once again the necessity to abandon the very restricted view of children's literature modes as having separate, clearly defined categories. Fantasy novels can often convey the same

ideas and messages as the best socially-committed, realistic stories. And realistic novels contain folklore elements, which in no way make them less realistic, but on the contrary, can add to their psychological and artistic dimensions. Incidentally, mainstream literature has escaped from a criticism based on rigid "genre" categories; it is time that children's literature criticism should take a wider view, too.

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