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ANTICENSORSHIP READINGS BY FICTIONAL CHARACTERS IN GREEK AND WORLD CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Children's Literature critics have already studied adult efforts to guide children by censoring the books they read. They have not as yet dealt with fictional characters' resistance to censorship. This essay will endeavour to make up somewhat for this deficiency, in the hope that it will provide a stimulus for further study. In this paper we observe and compare the reading preferences of fictional heroes in texts that are well known in international Children's Literature, as well as in its Greek counterpart, from the viewpoint of psychoanalytic theory (defence mechanisms, pleasure principle, etc.) A comparison of the fictional readers in these texts shows that in world Children's Literature, fictional heroes are obliged to study their lessons but would prefer to spend their time playing. On the contrary, in Greek Children's Literature, boys and girls frequently resist the censorship imposed by adults on their reading habits, because reading fiction satisfies them.

Key words: Anticensorship, fictional readers, Greek and world Children's Literature

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-20th century, the theories of reception aesthetics and reader response (Jauss, Iser, Fish), as a new paradigm, shifted interest in reading from the text to the reader, who is regarded as imparting meaning to the text. This process depends on the horizon of the reader's anticipation, his ability to fill in notional gaps and the "interpretive community" to which he belongs. Critics who support the reader-response theory believe that the reader alone is responsible for discovering the meaning of the text. For this reason, literary theory has turned its interest to the way in which a real reader is made (Appleyard, Cochran-Smith etc.).

Joseph A. Appleyard¹ studies "the reader as hero and heroine", investigates: a) the books children read, and finds that they read a wide range of plot-oriented stories from fairy tales and animal fables to mysteries, heroic fantasies, realistic historical tales, adventure stories in exotic settings or crime solving (60); b) the characters, who "are presented almost entirely in action and dialogue" (74) and "in terms of a few distinctive traits and many incidents (76), and discusses whether the heroes preferred by readers are simple or complex, flat or stereotyped, noting that idealised characters "may not be ideal" (77); c) treating fiction and information as different functions, he distinguishes two types of reading: reading out of a sense of duty, and reading for fun, and notes that obligatory reading is associated with school by pupils and students of all ages, while reading for pleasure is usually romantic fiction, travel or autobiography; d) he concludes that cognitive and affective development parallel the movement from one stage of the development process to the next. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, in her book *The Making of a Reader*, having studied the dimensions of story-reading based on what we know and what we need to know, proceeds to make a reader through an approach to story-reading.

Both Appleyard and Cochran-Smith study the way in which a real reader is made. On the contrary, in the present study, we observe authors creating fictional readers in texts of global and Greek children's and young people's literature and investigate the factors that oblige them to read.

WORKING METHOD

Studying texts for children and young people, we ascertained that fictional heroes often read. This was why we decided to investigate whether their reading serves the story, advances the plot, or is of a didactic nature in an effort to foster love of reading, in conjunction with what and how they read and whether adults approve of what their children are reading. Having noted the cases in which the fictional characters read mainly fiction, we created two categories. The first, using as criterion the book recommended by adults (external factor), depicts the relationship between the adult who issues the command to read and the fictional child who receives it. Here we have created two sub-categories. In the first are the fictional characters who resist in such a way that they appear to censure the books recommended by adults; and in the second are those who comply with the adults' recommendations in order to be rewarded or to avoid being punished. We

¹ S.J. Appleyard. *Becoming a Reader. The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*, Eds. Cambridge UP, Boston, 1991, pp. 57-93.

find such characters, i.e. who read the texts suggested to them by adults without complaint, primarily in international children's literature.

The second category, with the internal factor as criterion, includes those who read without any recommendation from adults. These fictional characters, who can be found chiefly in Greek children's stories with a few instances from world literature (Alcott's *Little Women*), read whatever books they want. We studied these fictional readers on a psychoanalytic basis rather than in reference to the reader-response theory used by Appleyard and Cochran-Smith. We explored the insights provided by psychoanalysis into the fictional characters who read literary and other texts and what it is that makes them read. The purpose of all these instances of reading is to portray the fictional character (child or young adult) as a certain type of person: imaginative, intelligent, active (and one who possibly resists whatever adults try and make him or her read); in short, a human being with a distinct personality.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A WORKING CONTEXT

To date, studies in children's literature have investigated the censorship of children's books based on historical and political conditions and social dictates, but have not considered the reading needs of fictional characters. This is why we are attempting to interpret fictional characters' reading of literary and other texts using the insights of psychoanalysis and, in particular, Freudian defence mechanisms.

Sigmund Freud was the first to use the term defence mechanisms (1894); later his daughter Anna clarified and conceptualised her father's theory (1936). The purpose of these mechanisms is to protect the person (and therefore the fictional reader) by helping him or her to deal with reality in a sensible way. They are defined as unconscious mechanisms that aim to reduce the anxiety arising from three different factors: i) the id impulses that are in conflict with one another; ii) the id impulses that conflict with superego values and beliefs; and iii) an external threat to the ego.

Defence mechanisms protect the ego from awareness of difficult or painful feelings, facts and ideas. Of all these mechanisms, we use only those that help us understand the reasons why many fictional characters read: denial, repression, dissociation, regression, rationalisation, overcompensation or reaction formation and identification. The mechanism of anticipation, as an expression of the Freudian pleasure principle, increases the desire to read. Anticipation creates the conditions required for the act of reading, and for the child-reader to derive personal gratification and social power.

EXTERNAL FACTORS AS A REASON FOR READING

Reading by fictional characters is not a simple matter, but depends on a variety of factors, as is the case with real readers. The more general culture of the fictional reader, his family and social environment and goals play a decisive part in his desire to read a book. We realise that the factors obliging a hero to read can be either external or internal. The former are outside the fictional reader, but direct or oblige him to read, and they include adults whose aim is to teach children to read for pleasure. Investigating briefly the reading experience of fictional characters in this category as depicted in well-known books from world literature, we note that heroes tend to read what adults make them read without objection or censure. Thus, Alice's sister in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* uncomplainingly reads a book whose title and content are never identified. However, the social and cultural circumstances of the Victorian age oblige us to accept that this book has the typical features of contemporary children's books that promote the more general social trend to discipline children, especially girls, to the demands of the period. Alice's sister reads a book that has already been approved because she enjoys it (pleasure principle), even though it is not identified. On the contrary, Nils Holgerson, the main character in the novel by Selma Lagerlöf (1995), is forced by his parents to read the Gospel and the treatises of Luther as a punishment for not wanting to go to church. Nils reads because he is afraid, he does not resist his father nor censure him in order to avoid reading what his father imposes on him.

In many texts, fictional children read school textbooks primarily, to keep up with their schoolwork. This study is oppressive, even if the future of the character will be determined by whether or not he or she is admitted to university¹. In this case, reading activity is due to the coercive mechanisms deriving from the demands of the state, which makes admission to university dependent on long years of study and preparation. The reaction formation mechanism that operates in this case vindicates the schoolgirls in their class but does not help them become integrated into the society. The negative attitude toward studying on the part of the fictional schoolgirls attending St Clare's (Blyton) reflects their preference for playing instead of being obliged to study. On other occasions, although moving among books, the heroes of novels are not depicted as reading (Harry Potter series), with very few exceptions, such as Hermione. However it is implied that studying by the apprentice sorcerers in J.K. Rowling's novels is an exception and is included among both defence mechanisms and seeking recognition.

Mark Twain's hero Tom Sawyer, who does not usually study, is motivated by the reaction formation mechanism to acquire a Bible, as do his school mates who read because they like reading (pleasure principle). Nevertheless, even though no specific titles are mentioned, Tom Sawyer seems to have read plenty of stories about pirates and robbers. Perhaps he read the cheap popular editions his aunt might have had in her home, because he hated school.

Reading the *Nicholas* series by René Goscinny, one comes to similar conclusions. In Goscinny, as in Blyton and Rowling, schoolchildren are more interested in playing pranks than in reading or are depicted solely in classes in which the heroes are active (history). In other words, fictional characters read according to how interesting the book is (pleasure principle) and even though Goscinny's characters do not buy books, little Nicholas is against destroying them. Generally, the way in which books are handled shows that fictional characters treat them on the basis of their own needs (reaction formation mechanisms).

¹ E. Blyton. *Claudine at St. Clare's*, Eds. Methuen, London, 2000⁹.

In Greek children's literature, external factors seem to have less influence on children's reading. In these few cases, fictional characters read books in order to confront an enemy or to resolve problems that concern them. Therefore, reading is occasional and has instrumental value. In Alki Zei's book *Mov Umbrella* (Purple Umbrella), a secondary character named Benoit plays the reader, as does a real reader in Appleyard, by consulting the magazine *Le Bon Point amusant et strictif* whenever he is in trouble and has to deal with tricky situations. Benoit's resort to the magazine to solve his problems can easily be paralleled to the dependent relationship of the embryo on the mother. As the mother supplies the embryo with nourishment and security, so the fictional hero trusts *Bon Point* and consults it at difficult moments.

The examples cited here indicate that the writers of known international literature for children and young people depict children realistically, representing them, as demanded by childhood, as being full of vitality that is channelled into games and mischief-making. On the contrary, in Greek children's books, fictional characters are frequently depicted as reading to help them deal with problems in their lives.

INTERNAL FACTORS

Internal factors transfer the reasons for reading to the character. In Alcott's *Little Women* (2004), an example of international children's literature in which the characters read voluntarily, the heroines, on their own initiative, read the books given to them by their mother who does not make them read, but would like them to. Their conscience activates the defence mechanism that is manifested as a form of consent to read, so as not to displease their mother and precipitate family quarrels. Meg reads more than all the others because she enjoys it (pleasure principle) and also because it serves her own internal needs (reaction formation mechanism), as she associates her personal gratification with social power, *being with having*.

On the contrary, in many Greek books for children and young people, adults complain because their children select their own books, in protest against what adults want them to read, as is the case in Penelope Delta's book *O Mangas* (Street-wise youth) or in Loti Petrovich-Androutsopoulou's *Spiti gia Pente* (A house for five), in which the young heroes prefer to read comics instead of the Old Testament. The difference in reading choices between children and adults is a source of conflict between them, as are the children's efforts to avoid being directed and to mature by making their own personal choices. In particular, when anticensorship reading comes from a boy who objects to the books being imposed on him by his father, it is obvious that we are dealing with the resistance of the son to the father (Petrovich-Androutsopoulou, *Spiti gia pente*, the case of Aris). When the links connecting father and son have not been severed, self-defence mechanisms are activated that repress the family problems plaguing the character (repression mechanism), cause him to shut himself in his room (isolation), to react in a strange way (reaction mechanism) and to correct the situation by reading books (regression). Reading books provides the fictional reader with a way out of adverse family situations.

In a number of cases, characters read because they want to satisfy the author's ambitions or possibly unfulfilled childhood or youthful desires to read fiction. Such cases illustrate Freud's theory that the author's repressed childhood experiences are sublimated in artistic form and in the cultural experience of the fictional character and are manifested by his turning to literature. We realise further that the erotic instinct can also have artistic creation as an object of desire rather than the body. This is the intellectual libido that leads to creation. Argyro, the heroine in the novel of the same name by Nitsa Tzortzoglou, has been seriously injured by a hand grenade and has lost her arms; she studies because she wants to go into higher education. Her patience is remarkable. Deprivation of her arms does not stop her even from painting, and in fact she wins the national first prize for painting. The author intervenes in the emotional life of the disabled heroine, enabling her to remove adult prejudices, to become an educator and to transform her initially adverse internalised experience as a child with special needs into an inner need for reading and for social recognition. After the heroine's physical injury, her defence mechanisms are activated. Her family, friends and schoolmates support her. She overcomes her isolation, rationalises the situation and transforms her feeling of inferiority into creative activity. It is typical that in cases like these, fictional heroes freely select the books they read, and no question arises of either censorship or prohibition.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying texts of Greek and international children's literature, we can discern significant differences between them in terms of the reading activity of fictional heroes. In Greek texts addressed to children and young people, we frequently encounter fictional characters who read, in contrast to well-known international children's classics in which the heroes treat reading fiction and other books in a negative way. The limited reading activity of fictional characters in international children's literature may very likely constitute a conscious choice by the author. An initial assessment allows us to interpret the fact that the characters in these books read less or confine themselves to reading school books because it is required by the more general philosophy typical of children's literature in countries in which it is particularly popular (England, etc.), thus promoting its aesthetic rather than pedagogical objective. Moreover, its subject matter gives priority to adventure, magic and fantasy and to themes that do not favour reading by fictional characters. In classical children's authors such as Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis and Enid Blyton, what fictional heroes read does not play a significant role in either characterisation or plot development, nor does it constitute a structural feature.

On the contrary, in Greek children's and young people's books, reading has a different philosophy and different objectives, as it aims to increase reading for pleasure among Greek children. Authors of Greek children's books identify their fictional readers as being prepared to internalise stories fundamentally different from what their counterparts read in classical international children's literature, who appear, with few exceptions, to be hostile to reading. This does not imply a distinction between "good" and "bad" texts. The line between them is not the same as the boundary between the pleasurable and the tedious, even though Blyton's heroine finds reading tedious. However, there are many pleasures to be found in reading. In Greek children's literature, fictional readers find them, whereas in international classics of the genre, children prefer to play, free of all cares. Nor is it the line between didactic and anti-didactic, because all children's literature

today is as much didactic as anti-didactic. So children's literature is not didactic; it rather instructs through the pleasures of reading.

Thus it is clear that non-Greek authors have priorities different from those of their Greek counterparts. They do not deem it necessary for fictional characters to read books, despite the fact that children's literature is taught more systematically and occupies a significant position in the school curricula of these countries, as indicated by the various systems devised to describe reading: DEAR, USSR, SQUIRT¹ (1). In Greece, on the contrary, children's literature is not taught as a separate class, nor is time specifically allotted for the reading of fiction, and most schools do not even have a proper library. Teaching reading for pleasure is closely linked with the Greek language class and only occasionally does the curriculum specify the teaching of fiction for children and young people, and when it does, excerpts are almost always used. Indeed, when the teaching of fiction is being discussed, the proposal is often made that this class be taught in the form of play activity, in contrast to the guidelines provided by the authors of children's literature textbooks, who suggest that the texts be taught giving priority to the child-reader (reception theory/reader-response criticism).

All the texts discussed here, especially the Greek ones, exemplify a new type of covert didacticism that aims to emancipate the fictional child by anticensorship and by undermining the traditional bond with adults in the story. Reading by fictional characters is a new, subversive kind of pedagogy, whose purpose is to teach them to keep a critical distance by questioning a wide range of values, certainties and norms. All texts similar to those discussed here subvert adult authority and foster the initiative of the fictional characters who want to mature by following their own desires and inner needs and not by complying with adults' dictates. This desire activates defence mechanisms to a greater or lesser degree, according to the authority of the author. Thus, instead of being content with reading the books suggested or provided by adults, they disagree with the fictional adults and struggle to avoid being totally controlled by them.

Fictional readers, usually protagonists, are likely to be identified as "rebels" (with a few exceptions, such as that of Jo in *Little Women*) and their willingness to disobey their parents or teachers and to contravene the rules of the fictional universe are crucial to their world's continued survival. They survive by validating their own pleasures and by expressing their displeasure at domineering adults. One way to do this is by reading books of their own choice. Fictional adults are the masks of either the author or the society that requires children and teenagers to be disciplined and willing to do its bidding. They are characters who reproduce the society and the tyranny of adults over children.

As noted above, in the international children's literature we are investigating, fictional characters read less frequently or focus their attention mainly on their schoolwork. They prefer playing pranks and enjoying school life without studying. Authors describe childhood or the transition to adulthood and maturity in stories that are mainly based on adventure and fantasy, in which the heroes enjoy their childhood or adolescence and engage in activities associated with their age or interests. Whenever the characters in these texts read, they do so under the influence of external factors (as required by adults directly or by the state indirectly [Blyton]). The motives that lead to reading differentiate them from the fictional characters who read in Greek children's literature. In international children's and young people's literature, priority is given to the characters' living their childhood well, enjoying it and making the transition to adult life more smoothly. On the contrary, in Greek children's fiction, the heroes' childhood reflects the attitude prevalent in Greek society, i.e. children should read the books adults want them to read. This is why they frequently object, not to reading as such, but to adults' selection of what they read. Quite a few characters take refuge in reading fiction out of some inner need that we do not find in classical international books, with the exception of *Little Women*. Thus it is clear that if we compare Greek and international children's books, we will find in them that reading by fictional characters has a different nature and purpose.

The fact that fictional heroes read may simply be a device used by authors or it may record their own childhood or teenage experiences, and therefore is either autobiographical in nature or externalised as childhood desires that were ungratified for social or financial reasons. Children's books are extensions of their authors' ego, which may have been deprived in childhood of cultural products and of books in particular. This ego is reflected in characters that read fiction. Many authors intervene in the development of their characters and depict them not as reading simply to gain knowledge, but functioning in an anticensorship manner and rejecting the prejudices that adults attempt to instil in them through the texts they propose. In essence, adults impose books that they deem appropriate and reflect their own view of life. In particular, the intervention of the father in his effort to integrate the child into the family and to pass from *being* to *having* is seen as "painful" but "necessary".

Adults usually intervene in a censorship mood and recommend what the young heroes should read, because social customs impose control either to safeguard the family honour or because, in the adults' view, young family members must be protected from influences that are unsuitable to family and social ideals. We must also take into account that the cultural environment and the prevailing or imposed fictional culture affect significantly what the protagonist will read.

Greek authors consider it self-evident that children of school age do their homework, which is why fictional characters read schoolbooks in very few texts. They depict their heroes reading fiction, in order to turn potential real readers into active readers by cultivating their enjoyment of reading. Rarely do we find cases in which a Greek author will insist on the study of schoolbooks, as does Alki Zei in her book *Konta stis rayes* (Near the tracks), a novel about the life of Greek refugees in pre-revolutionary Russia. Here for the first time, children are portrayed reading banned books (pupils' resistance to censorship), which circulate secretly from one schoolbag to another in order to avoid confiscation by the ruling class that imposes the dominant ideology, and to initiate the children into the secrets of the forthcoming revolution.

This means that the ruling class, in order to impose its ideology, exercises strict censorship on or even prohibits children from reading books it regards as subversive, with the reasoning that children, being more credulous and malleable, are more likely to accept the ideology offered artfully by state functionaries. Children are not portrayed as easy prey to the censorship dispositions of the political regime and of adults, which they resist. These events take place in Russia in 1917, when dissidents are persecuted relentlessly. The same thing was to happen in Greece under the dictatorship of 4th August, when those in power, in order to impose their fascist ideology, burned the books they regarded

¹ A. Chambers. *The Reading Environment. How Adults Help Children Enjoy Books*, Eds. Thimble Press, Great Britain, 1999⁷.

as subversive. In Zei's *Kaplani tis vitrinas* (Wildcat under glass), the dictatorship burns the books it considers dangerous. To conceal its real purpose, the books are burned in conjunction with a local feast-day.

In Greek children's literature, censorship can be found frequently, on the pretext that books may be harmful when the prevailing ideology regards them as dangerous and subversive, or when adults do not regard what children read as beneficial. On the contrary, we did not encounter censorship dispositions of a political nature in the international children's literature we consulted. It is consoling however that, despite possible prohibitions by adults and especially by the prevailing ideology, fictional characters read and that their reading strikes a blow against attempted censorship. Of course, these are fictional characters and not real readers. But it is a fact that children who read are influenced in favour of reading fiction by their favourite heroes. It has likewise been proved that teachers can help develop children's love of reading by activating their minds and bringing pupils into contact with heroes who read specially selected texts.

However, children who object to adult censorship often develop initiatives and read according to their own personal needs or choices. This reaction is particularly important and constitutes a significant step towards maturity. These anticensorship readings are also observed when the dominant ideology intervenes and threatens. In such cases, fictional characters, ignoring any attempt at censorship, read covertly. On the contrary, in world literature, children or teenagers tend to comply and to read what adults impose on them without objecting or resisting. In any case, the stance of the fictional reader is dictated by his or her degree of maturity. As self-defined and autonomous personalities, these characters make their own choices on the basis of their own personal system of values. Here too we can see the pedagogical nature of texts in which fictional characters read, and it is shown that children's literature provides models for life and behaviour. The children themselves feel the need to read for various reasons, especially because reading books functions as an umbilical cord linking the fictional reader to intellectual life, as the umbilical cord links the embryo to biological life.

Nevertheless, that which differentiates the fictional reader from a hypothetical or real one is the decoding of the text. This decoding is suppressed in the fictional hero who confines himself solely to reading and rarely interprets or applies what he reads in practice or reaps any short-term practical benefit from it. The only certain thing is that this act identifies reading as a fundamentally human activity.

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