FAIRY TALES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIFE PATTERNS

ABSTRACT:
The Education field is more geared towards prevention than cure. The author offers to consider that fairy tales provide children with different relationship models: some positive and some negative. She proposes a positive Triangle of Social Roles, as opposed to Karpman's Drama Triangle, which is based on Life Scripts and focused on negative psychological roles. Depending on whether they are backed up with an OK position or not, social roles can lead to either personal growth and autonomy or to failure.

Introduction

Fairy tales have a place of their own in Literature as a popular variant of myths. As such, they were a focus of interest for the founders of Transactional Analysis (1) and they are still relevant for Psychologists and Educators. One can interpret them as a metaphor of social life.

When they are told to little children, they contribute to their education by teaching them social roles and shaping their Scripts. In this perspective I propose to complete the Drama Triangle and the three Script Roles defined by Steve Karpman by their positive equivalent : the Triangle of Social Roles which works the same way. The issue raised is that difference in role behaviours between the psychological level and the social level. Indeed, fairy tales play a major part not only in the shaping of one's Script, but also in the educational practice of parents and of educators at the Nursery School. As a Transactional Analyst in the Educational field my approach is slightly different, depending on whether they belong to the Educational field which deals with learning processes or to the Clinical field.

I.   The point of view of Literature

<u>The specific place of fairy tales in Literature</u>
Fairy tales belong to the oral tradition. They have been transmitted in the rural world of ages. Contrary to the Greek Myths and the Animal Tales which have inspired the tales of Aesop and Jean de la Fontaine, only lately have they been given in written form. Charles Perrault selected some, which he wrote in verse for the attention of the Court of the King of France in the 17th century. The most famous are *Blue Beard*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*. In the 19th century, the Grimm brothers wrote a transcript of some tales from different parts of Germany together with their local versions. Those translations have been pooled with the common reading fund of European children. Among those are *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Pied Piper of the City of Hamelin*. Today, the stories that peoples of the world tell their children continue to be transcribed.

The Structure of the Tales:
The reference I use is the Russian specialist of Folklore, Vladimir Propp and his book *The Morphology of tales*, first published in 1928 (2). The translation into English is 1958 and publication is the US contributed to its fame among a broader audience.

Propp distinguishes seven roles in fairy tales, each one with its own sphere of action. Those roles are the Antagonist or Assailant, the Donor, the Auxiliary, the Princess or her Father, the Mandator, the Hero and the Fake Hero.

Each character has their own motivation. Those of the Hero are the purpose of the quest. Propp does not make them clear, but the reader of fairy tales will find them easily : physical survival (not being killed), economic survival (not starving to death), or psychological survival (escaping incest). The motivation can also be founding a couple, a family, discovering one's own identity, finding one's parents or brothers, being loved for one's real self. It can also be more simply the quest for power, symbolized by Princess or her Father the King.

Propp identifies 31 different functions of fairy tales. They are events that happen repetitively in most tales. The plot unfolds with successive ups and downs: balance follows chaos; the Hero, once in a weak position (down), goes successively through positions in which he dominates (up) or is dominated (down). We can recognise here the basic framework of all stories with a central hero. They are called stories of initiation.

II.   Psychological Aspects

The role of fairy tales on children
What all those stories have in common is to initiate children to social roles. They promote qualities that are all highly valued by our societies, such as courage, energy, solidarity and perseverance. They trigger deep emotions in the audience as well as in the reader, and teach wisdom. They contain a series of messages coming from the Parent Ego State of Mankind. Storytellers transmit them generation after generation for the benefit of young people who wonder what they can expect from Life. In days when many mothers died very young, and our societies had many orphans, those messages could be understood at different levels according to the kind of audience they had. They gave as many opportunities to teach life to little children, who could be bewitched by their fantasy dimension: speaking animals, magical attributes such as seven league boots or flying carpets. People of all age groups were brought back to the world of their childhood. They were listening to those stories from their Child Ego State, like a lesson of hope and trust in Mankind.

All those tales contain warning and support and insist on the danger of this world: terrifying or unpredictable characters; fake heroes who do not hesitate to deceive others and betray their own word; characters who are led by greed or a tasta for destruction. For adults listening to those stories, such dangers deal with

death, physical or psychological mutilation, losing one's own family or belongings. They describe heroes who at first are in a weak position, and then succeed and win over trials.

Bruno Bettelheim (3) studies tales in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, and focuses on the development of emotions and on the different stages of psychic life. Fairy tales talk surreptitiously to children about what they go through in their daily lives: tragic breaks within families, competition between brothers, ambivalent feelings for their parents.

How is it that they are so powerful?

Those stories were told during long winter evenings. Storytellers exercised their talent in quite a hypnotic atmosphere that made them more efficient. It is still the case when parents tell their children bedtime stories, or when an educator gathers small children in circle and reads a tale. Such moments favour the learning of emotions: the fear of a hypothetical danger, the anger when confronted to failure, the sadness of a loss, the joy of the final victory. The talent of the storyteller makes it all.

III.   The T.A. approach

Tales and scripts:

The first transactional Analysts, Eric Berne, Stephen Karpman and Fanita English in particular, pointed out the influence of tales on the Scripts of their clients. This influence can be partly explained by non-verbal devices proper to oral tales, be they improvised, told by hear, or read. With a loving glance at her child, a mother can imply: "this is all about you!", thus turning a simple comment into an attribution (4).

The Karpman concept:

In his article *"Fairy tales and Script Drama Analysis"* (5), Karpman talks about the influence of tales on young children's minds at a subconscious level.

He presents a diagram of the roles played by the characters connected in the tale. His hypothesis is that those roles fit the script of the person for whom this tale is his favourite.

In his job, a therapist deals with the characters of his client's favourite fairy tale, the same way he deals with his client's dreams. Just like each part of the dream tells something about the dreamer, every character or element of the tale, as the client has integrated them, talks about him or her. The client identifies with each character in turns, or gives them different roles in his or her own story. Tales are thus a key to solve impasses.

Among other ideas, Kapman's article contains four of them that are essential to my demonstration:
- All roles are interchangeable

- The drama (meaning action in Greek) is created by the emotional change of roles
- The roles can be reduced to three: Persecutor, Rescuer, Victim and all of them are negative roles.
- The shift from one role to another over time and the change of slots between the players, featured in a diagram with double arrows, correspond to the games unfolding over a limited amount of time, and to the unfolding of the Script over a lifetime. From this point of view, the shift of roles correspond to a Switch.

Once again we find the structure and functions of tales in the shifts that happen all along the plot from Up to Down and Down to Up positions. The victim is Down. The Persecutor (or assailant) or the Rescuer are Up. However, that concept differs from traditional tales as described above, due to the negative dimension of those roles. The Persecutor like the Assailant has negative dimensions. And tales are indeed full of aggressive and terrifying characters such as ogres and witches. But the reader finds it hard to imagine the Victim as responsible for its own misfortune, and the rescuer as harmful.

One can indeed be reluctant to see the godmother-fairies of tales as Rescuers in the way that Karpman defined them. It is precisely their social role to be a substitute for a dead or missing mother, and to allow their Goddaughter to get married by helping her to meet her future partner. Cinderella, secluded and treated like a maid in her father's house, is not likely to get married. Her Godmother helps her, thus giving her the means to be free, as people thought it ought to be like in the old days. Her intention is entirely good.

However, the whole process deserves more careful examination from the point of view of the Goddaughter's autonomy, since the help that the Godmother gives is of a magical nature. She summons her to come back from the ball before midnight without telling her why. She seems to expect total obedience as the one expected from small children, instead of inviting Cinderella to develop her own autonomy. It is a good example to illustrate what can happen between educators an pupils.

In fact, all the behaviours that correspond to those roles have to do with responsibility and autonomy. In a Script behaving pattern, people refuse to be responsible and blame it either on someone else or on Fate. Roles in the Script imply a specific life position with oneself, others and the world:

+- for the Persecutor, +- for the Rescuer; and -+ or – for the Victim.

Autonomous behaviours show a ++ life position, built from enlightened confidence in oneself, others and the world.

It is therefore interesting to examine in what ways someone's behaviour can be perceived as a typical of a rescuer, Persecutor or Victim, and how different it is from the one an autonomous person would have in an Up or Down position.

Interactivity is another interesting aspect of Karpman's concept: there can be no Victim without a Persecutor or a Rescuer, nor a Rescuer or Persecutor without a Victim. The +- position is complementary to the -+ one. The responsibility of each party is engaged in the specific interaction of the Game and in the shifts from one role to another.

This concept has mainly been applied to Psychological Games, replacing the G formula. Its considerable success went together with a slight shift in meaning. The habit of putting a Negative Controlling Parent Ego State behind the Persecutor, a Negative Nurturing Parent Ego State behind the rescuer, and a Negative Adapted Child Ego State behind the Victim, has restricted the number of ways this concept can be used. It was a way of evading the reflexion of roles. By no means can roles be mixed up with Ego State. It is true of psychological roles as well as of social roles.

IV. Implementation and practice

How to use Karpman's concept in the social field.

T.A. literature describes lots of scripts of people who are deeply perturbed. They have drawn negative conclusions of their favourite fairy tales or do not know how to use the positive sides of them. However, when we work with those concepts in the field of Education and Training, the people we meet have a rather banal Script (4).

Fairy tales can be studied in the Social field from the point of view of the shift from help to rescue, from instructions to persecution, and from weakness to the position of Victim. That is the meaning of my work and practice in the field of education. I focus my reflection on two differences: the difference between the role and the person, and the difference between a contract linked to a social role and the illusion of all-mightiness or total helplessness. Such illusions can be detected when people say: "If my pupil does not learn anything, it has to be because I did something wrong. A good teacher must know how to motivate his pupils!" or, "With that many pupils in a class, you spend your time making discipline! What do you want me to do with pupils who cannot even read! ". It sounds like a fairy tale with her magic wand turned into a helpless frog.

Moreover, without denying the tragic side of certain fairy tales, I prefer to consider them as script canvasses that can be used in the learning process and development of the person. I therefore fully subscribe to Fanita English's description of Scripts as rugs, on the weft of which one can afterwards design one's own story. The messages of the fairy tale can be explored from the point of view of the client's personal issues and of the permissions he or she needs to be able to progress.

Fairy tales in the life learning process:

The conclusion of tales is that throughout the different periods of their lives – and within one day – human beings experience successive positions in which they alternatively dominate or are dominated. I avoid the opposition between dominating and dominated, which I think should be used only for the Power Games described by Claude Steiner (5). I prefer the concept of Up and Down positions, which does not have any negative connotation. It comes from Jay Haley (6), working with Milton Erickson and member of Gregory Bateson's team in Palo Alto. This notion is also present in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (7). The authors make the distinction between two levels in a message: the content, and the definition of the relationship (what Transactional Analysts call the process). For example, when Cinderella's godmother tells her to go to the ball and to come back before midnight, the content of the message deals with the ball and the time of her return. At a level of the definition of the relationship, she takes the initiative, puts herself in the Up position, in that case, that the Mandator who gives an order and invites her goddaughter to take the Down position, which is complementary to hers.

When a frog asks the hero for help, it puts itself in the Down position and invites the hero to take the complementary position, which is the Up position, in order to test his capacity to help others. It's the frog itself that defines the relationship between the two of them, and chooses her position. The other one can accept or of initiate another definition of the relationship, as, for example, making fun of the frog. The various characters of the tale thus induce the hero to experiment Up and Down positions until his final victory. The fake heroes who do not accept to take risks, will fail in their endeavours.

Therefore, tales propose a model to learn positive social roles. In an Up position, there are two options: to be the one who guides, commands, invests with a mission, puts other characters to the test; or to be the one who helps, gives, rescues, nurtures, and cares for others. Those two roles call up the two functional dimensions of the Parent Ego State, without mixing up with them, though. In the Down position, we find the one who benefits from the help or the guidance, and will rather call up the Adapted Child or the Free Child Ego States.

Learning social roles:

Young children learn those roles at home or at school. Those two places allow them to experiment Up and Down positions, while being guided and nurtured, but also invited to help others and transmit their knowledge to their younger fellows. The tragedy of handicapped children lies in the fact that most of the time, they stay in a Down position. My hypothesis is that self confidence is generated when one has the opportunity of experiencing the Up position, and of

being in contact with one's pride to guide or to help others. Freinet's educational approach relies on that principle (8).

The Up position is therefore not reserved to the roles of Persecutors and Rescuers, and the Down position to that of Victim. In tales just as in real life, there are constant role shifts. However, such roles are positive when they correspond to a regular change of position from one role to another. They are negative when they imply discounts or the set up of a stereotyped kind of relationship.

I think it is therefore useful to make the distinction between the Drama Triangle on the one hand, in which people shift form one Script role to another, and on the other hand, a triangle that I have created, based on the same model, that of "social learning processes". In the latter, people successively experience Up and Down positions, while staying OK.

In the Up position, we find two possible roles: that of the Mandator or Guide (called Mentor in ancient times), just as in tales, or that of the Donator or Helper. In the Down position, we find the Beneficiary who benefits form the help or the guidance. This triangle could be drawn as follows:

Up position   Up position
THE GUIDE   THE HELPER
Or the Mandator   Or the Donator

THE BENEFICIARY
Down position
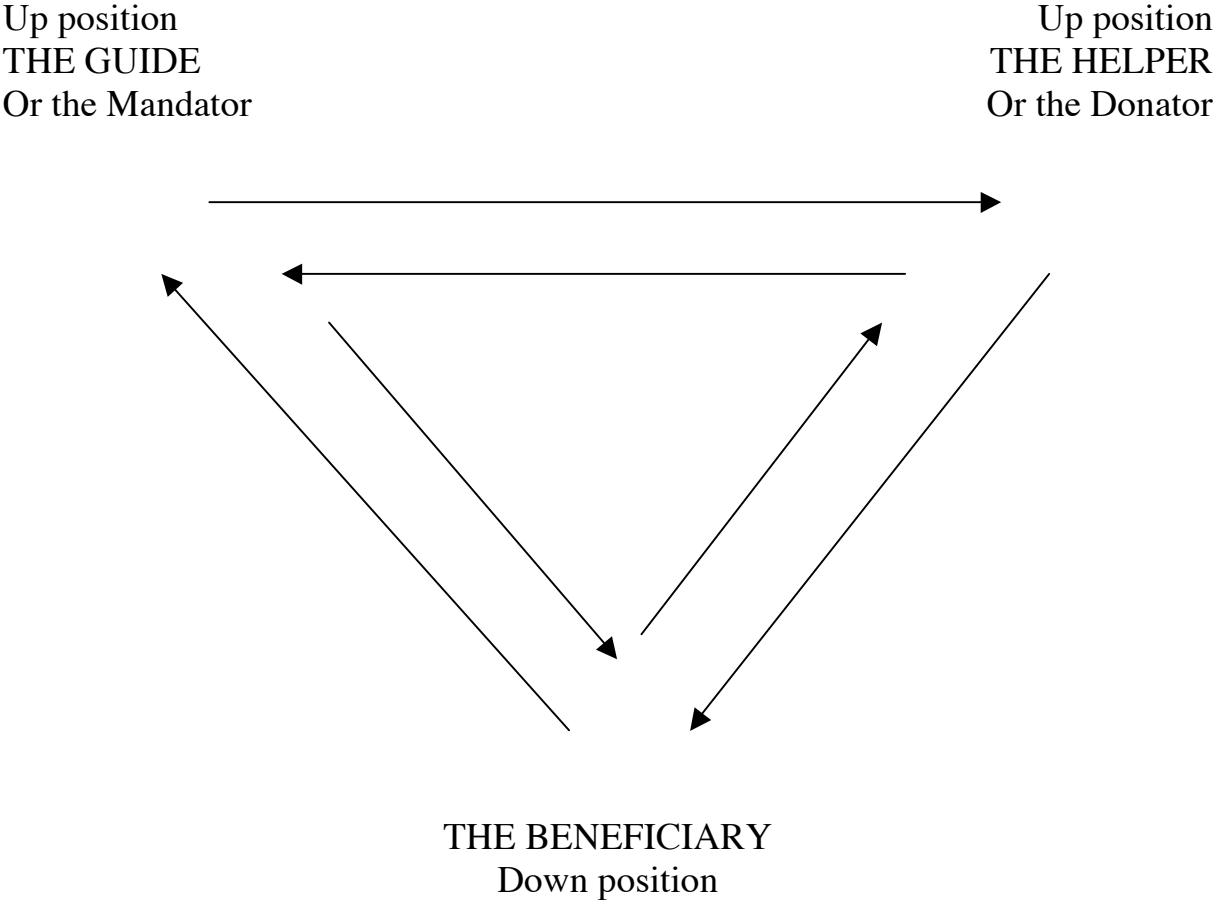
Illustration:

In their daily lives, adults are in an Up position in front of their young kids. They shift to a Down position when, at an older age, they become physically dependant on them. But they can, in certain domains like money or culture, stay in an Up position. If they use that position to support and help their families, they operate in the Triangle of Social Roles. But as soon as they use it to control them, they start operating as Persecutors in the Drama Triangle. The behaviour they choose is not linked to the position in the relationship, but to the life position activated in the relationship.

In professional life, just as in family life, unequal relationships are frequent: mother with child, father with child, employer with employee, doctor with patient, teacher with pupils. When people operate with full awareness if their role, and when they trust their own competence and that of others, there is synergy. Each party knows that positions are not fixed and will rotate, that it's all about social roles. The head of a department or the CEO of a company, who are Up in front of their employees, shift to the Down position on their dentist's chair or in front of the Director's of their children's school.

Certain roles are complementary and equal, like Prince and Princess, Father and Mother in front of their kids, employees, tennis partners. In a democracy, such roles are increasingly present.

I believe that roles are learnt from early childhood with the positive experience of the different positions in the relationship, be it at home or at school.

Conclusion:

The content of tales therefore depicts the biological life and the social life with their ups and downs. All of us have taken from the collective imagination what we believe is linked with what we experienced at the age when we decided our scripts. But this imagination also contains its opposite side. It's up to each one of us to find out in this wealth, what we need to change in our Script for the building of which we used the representations we had of our future lives when we were kids depending on adults.

Just like storytellers in the old days, educators, journalists, thinkers, and all those who work in the field of communication, pass on to younger generations, not only what they know, but also who they are. They should benefit from identifying their Script. Among other responsibilities, they have the responsibility to give hope to young people, showing them an open world in which everyone can build a life of one's own. Open yes, but two conditions : they should build up on experience, and develop social skills such as mutual help, perseverance and energy. If they pay the price, they will deserve to have one of those noble jobs that transmit knowledge and wisdom.

Bibliography

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2.   Vladimir Propp: *Morphology of tales* 1928 and 1958 for its English translation. Le Seuil.

3.   Bruno Bettelheim: *The Uses of Enchantment*. Laffont 1976

4.   Claude Steiner : *Scripts people live*. *T.A. of Life Scripts*, NY Grove Press 1974 (90-93 & chap. 7)

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