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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed children's compositions from grades 1-4 in Slovenian schools. Children described real places within the framework of an experientially provable world, which is empirically available to them within the limits of their abilities and possibilities. Irreal places were described inventively without the support of experience, although some elements of imitation can be observed. When describing irreal places, children autonomously discover the world through their imagination. The concept can be realistically understood as creative writing on the children's part. In choosing their topics and way of verbal and artistic expression, they strongly leaned on reality experienced through their senses and on authentic presentation. In these compositions: the central literary character is a contemporary urban child; time and place of action are defined; the scene is set either in the family or school environment during spare time; the story presents only sections of the child's everyday life--his contacts with the familiar and non-familiar places and their inhabitants, his adventures in discovering new places. Compositions are about the child's mostly positive, seldom negative experiences. They are short, chronologically following a linear form and narrated in the first-person, from the child's point of view, with an individualized central character, and frequently depict events on holiday, on a trip, and in school. Children show a greater measure of inventiveness and imagination when describing irreal places than when discussing real ones. For the latter they seem to lack the experience, while the former are of greater interest to them because of their innate curiosity and love of discovering new and unknown objects. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/NKA)

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by Milena Blazic

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Real and Irreal Places in Children's Compositions - Result of a Survey

Milena Blazic

Abstract

Children described real places within the framework of an experientially provable world, which is empirically available to them within the limits of their abilities and possibilities. Irreal places were described inventively without the support of experience, although some elements of imitation can be observed. When describing irreal places, children autonomously discover the world through their imagination. The concept can be realistically understood as creative writing on the part of the children. In choosing their topics and the way of verbal and art expression, they strongly leaned on reality experienced through their senses and on authentic presentation. The central literary character in these compositions is a contemporary urban child. Time and place of action are defined, the scene is set either in the family or school environment, during spare time (court yard, playground, school). New irreal places offer the child opportunities for intensive experience. In their compositions the story presents only sections of the child's everyday life, his contacts with the familiar and non-familiar places and their inhabitants, his adventures in discovering new places. Compositions are about child's mostly positive and seldom negative experiences. They are short, chronologically following a linear form, and narrated in the first person, from the child's point of view. The central child character is individualised. The narrative most frequently depicts events happening on holiday, on a journey or trip and in school. Children show a much greater measure of inventiveness and imagination when describing irreal places than when talking about the real ones. For the latter they seem to lack the experience while the former are of greater interest to them because of their innate curiosity and love of discovering new and unknown objects. Some elements are certainly the product of imitation - nevertheless, child's imagination is truly the source of purest invention.

Key words:

real and irreal places (water, earth, space), children's compositions, analysis of characteristics

Concept:

The analysis of children's compositions from 1st to 4th grade primary school (from 7 to 11 yrs) tries to show how children describe experiences - real and imaginary -, unreal places, (under water, on earth, in space), as well as their inhabitants. The paper analyses children's texts and emphasises the essential characteristics of children's imagination during their fairy tale and their realistic stage. Children's compositions were collected in Slovene schools in the spring of 1995. About one thousand children's compositions from 1st to 4th graders were collected, two hundred and fifty from each class. Children wrote these compositions during Slovene lessons. Following the school interpretation model¹, they had read literary texts during the first hour² (creative input)³ while during the second hour they themselves wrote and illustrated texts about a similar topic (creative output).⁴

Developmental and Literary Characteristics of Children Representing 1st to 4th Year Primary School Pupils (from 7 to 11 yrs)

Children's literary interests develop in three phases:⁵

- the fairy tale stage, from 4/5 yrs to 8/9 yrs,
- the realistic stage, from 9/10 yrs to 12/13 yrs and
- the transitional stage, from 12/13 yrs to 14/15 yrs.

The Fairy Tale Stage

The child feels close to the fairy tale, because his world is similar to the world of child's play and through the use of imagination everything is possible in both of them. The child intensely experiences the fairy tale and accepts it emotionally. It represents his favourite literary kind. During pre-school years he enjoys listening to fairy tales while in the lower classes of primary school he likes reading them and experiences them as real. Fairy tales (folk tales, classic tales and contemporary fairy tales) engage child's imagination, fantasy and emotions. During the pre-school period (4/5 yrs to 6/7 yrs), the child still believes in fairy tales while during the school period in the 1st, 2nd and partly 3rd grade (7/8 yrs to 8/9 yrs), he already distinguishes between what is possible and what not. Nevertheless, during this time he still needs fairy tales, but now they have to be more demanding and extensive, which means that the child's taste grows with age. Characteristic for this stage is the personification of toys, animals, nature and things. Child's reading interests start changing around the age of 9/10 yrs when he begins to change developmentally and opens up to the real world and the realistic style, which gradually takes precedence over his interest for the fairy tale fantasy world.

The Realistic Stage

The realistic stage begins at about the age of 9/10 yrs and lasts until 12/13 yrs, from the 3rd to 5th grade of primary school. Now child's curiosity is directed towards the real world surrounding him. He prefers literature where place and time are exactly defined. Everything happens at the level of reality, miracles are not possible anymore. The main character of the story preferred at this stage is his peer with whom he can also identify. The young reader likes a story with a lot of action, dialogues and adventures. Its main character is a child who can cope with all possible situations by himself, because he is clever, skilful and inventive. Child's curiosity is directed especially towards the present, which can sometimes tie on with the past and at other times with the future. Events must be experientially realistic. At this stage, humorous literature becomes very popular. The child also becomes attached to his peer friends, peer groups start forming, friendship (among peers, with older people, with an animal - dog) becomes an important and popular theme. The main character may be a group character or even the group itself with an outstanding individual. The child wants to read stories that can happen in reality as such, are more exciting and adventurous, possessing elements of a detective story, and having above all a lot of action and witty dialogues. Therefore this phase is also called the Robinson stage. Now the child's interest starts shifting towards half-literary (travelogues) and non-literary (lexicons, encyclopaedias, etc.) texts.

1. Real Places and Visible Cities in Children's Composition

1.1. Time and place

In compositions, time and place of happening are defined (Ljubljana, Hawaii, Africa), they really exist and the child can objectively and experientially write about them in a poetical way (Hawaii - the golden coast). The majority of stories take place at home, in school, on the playground, in a wood or on a street with a name. Time is always defined: in the morning, after school, in the evening, etc. The child also describes real places where toys and things become alive: a tree (Town in Trees), for example. The opposite can equally be observed - imaginary beings entering real places (Jumper, the dinosaur, coming into the nursery and playing with the child). He might describe a real place in the future where, for example, holidays would be getting marks, flowers would be walking around, the horse would be flying etc. Frequently, a real place is described which is then transformed into a town of sweets with chocolate houses, an ice-cream garden, a mat of chocolate with nuts, where everything is free. These real places are inhabited by fairy tale beings; the wood (under a beech, in the hollow of a tree, under a red toadstool) is full of fairies, dwarfs and goblins.

Near a spring or by the stream there lives a nymph. Whatever the place, for the child it is real, regardless of whether it represents the starting point of the story or its framework. The same could be said of time. Before or after the time jump or the central plot, time runs normally. Before and after the imagination jump, time and place are like in our world, which is at the same time also the child's social world.

1.2. Literary characters

Literary characters are individual children with names (Maya, Tine, Jane, Miha...), who are curious, playful and positive heroes. In real towns there live imaginary beings (ice cream eater), fairy tale beings (goblin Tuft), dwarfs (Jumper and Dasher), a girl dwarf (Barbie) and a fairy. When describing personified characters in the real world, the child frequently gives them names; when he himself travels into imagination, the literary characters become types without names (spaceman, water sprite, sea queen). Animals always play a positive role. They are friendly, kind (dog, cat, bear), and have names (Piko the dog, Maca the cat). The child takes pity on personified animals such as a dinosaur, because the animal has to eat vegetables, is all alone and clumsy, has problems with Slovene, likes maths - in short, everything the child is required to do comes through this personification in form of compassion. In this way, a literary character becomes the child's mirror. Literary characters, like puppets, are child's peers (they are 9 years old, clever, friendly and always willing to help). Personified nature (wind, cloud, flower) also plays a positive role. It is always beautiful, kind, and an eternal children's ally. The child writes poetically about the reality and about personified literary characters. If he visits the unreal world, he is always treated like a lord (is offered a piece of cake, some juice, ice-cream). The child always allows a person from the imaginary world to play with him, might even lend him his toys. To a dragon, child's toys are a novelty, since they don't exist in the imaginary world. Negative characteristics are attributed to adults (hunter, fruit-grower), school or school marks. Stories take place within the family circle (with parents appearing only at the beginning and the end of the story), in the company of animals, on a journey, or during a visit (to a friend, in school). Regarding time and place, we can on one hand draw a parallel with the everyday world, while on the other hand, we can observe personification of the beautiful and the good, as well as the classic fairy tale division of good and evil. The characters bear personal and ethical characteristics.

1.3 The structure of compositions

The structure of compositions consists of three parts (introduction, body, and conclusion) and is one-dimensional - the happening takes place in reality, we seldom find two-dimensional real life compositions. In children's compositions two realities only rarely exist alongside one another: the actual child's world and the imaginary world in the real world: the world of enamoured roses, child's animals, his personified toys. The adult world seems distant, the child feels closer to the animal world and the world of toys, which for him can easily exist alongside one another. He seldom describes two parallel worlds simultaneously: his real world (Miha and Valesa, who are in love) and the world of enamoured plants (the tulip and the rose). Structurally, the child's world most frequently lies within the context of the real world.

1.4. The motive for the jump from the irreal into the real (child's) world

The motive for the jump from the irreal into the real (child's) world is a coincidence: a dragon might accidentally pay a child a visit, the child might accidentally meet a fairy. In other cases the child clearly marks the boundaries, with a fence of human bones, for example, between his world and the world of the caveman. The former is the more usual way, while the latter example with the fence already signifies growing up and moving away from the fairy tale world into the adult world. Once the child starts becoming aware of boundaries, he begins growing up and losing his spontaneity, childishness and inventiveness.

1.5 The theme

Themes described by the child are taken from his experiential world, his animals, the world of play (toys), school and nature (wind, cloud, plants), which he likes to personify. These themes all belong to the child's world, while everything beyond seems uninteresting. And if an element of the adult world does appear, which occurs very rarely, it signifies something incomprehensible and negative (hunters killing animals, the fruit-grower cutting down trees).

2. Irreal Places and Invisible Cities in Children's Compositions

2.1 Time and place

In children's imaginative compositions time and place of events are not strictly defined, neither geographically nor in time. Spatial concepts are usually very general, like the world, the sea, rivers, space etc. The place described has been made up by the child, therefore he experiences it subjectively and with great intensity. It is a direct opposite of real places - what is clearly defined there, is described here only in general. In the compositions about water towns, the children describe two types of water places: in the sea and in the river and only rarely do they combine them: only when, for example, the water sprite by mistake wanders into the sea. The sea town is described by the child as a place glittering with crystals, pearls and corals; the bridge is made from whale's ribs; concerts take place in a theatre called Grand Shell; there is also a sea discotheque and free ice cream, cars walk, cats talk, etc. In describing space, child's imagination takes wings and he is more inventive than when describing imaginary places under water and on land. Stories in space happen on the Moon, on the Blue Planet, on Mars or just somewhere in space. Texts about space can be divided into the following types: in the first group the child describes space as if it were a place on earth: with houses, school, shop, play-ground, etc. In the second type of compositions, space is seen as a palace of the future, where one comes across rockets, space ships, flying saucers, etc. In the third type, space is presented as a place with chocolate or candy houses, with a sea of orange juice where toys are free. In the fourth type there are towns where things are simply upside down: sweets grow on trees, umbrellas get married, people don't die, etc. The fifth type describes space towns as places of freedom: no brushing of teeth, a place of eternal entertainment, animals speaking, no school. Space is most open for imagination, while water and earth act only as some generally foreseeable environment. Child's fantasy is aroused most by limitless space.

2.2. Literary characters

Literary characters in compositions are types (spacemen, Martians, a water sprite, a king...), fictitious beings, toys come alive, objects and nature (wind, cloud), fairy tale beings. In general, all these characters are positive, kind and playful. Negative characters are usually adults, the water sprite

and the caveman. Adults stay in the real world and cannot enter the fantasy world, because they are negative, do not understand children and do not let them play. There is an interesting duality in the character of the water sprite as a green man with a red belt, covered with scales. For one half of the children he is a negative character (he stinks, eats children, does not like them, does not allow them to play), for the other half he is a positive character (funny, rich, saviour of children, afraid of school, writing a dictation). Sea heroes are regarded as more positive beings than water beings and when the former see a child in the sea kingdom, they ask what kind of a fish he might be. The sea world, which seems more familiar to the children than the rest of the water world, is the home of the sea inhabitants (fish, dolphins, whales). Sea inhabitants are very hospitable and always willing to receive the child (the Whale family, for example, offers the child walnut biscuits). Here it is necessary to mention that the majority of children spends holidays at the seaside, which could be the reason why the sea is considered to be such a wonderful place. Another interesting element in children's compositions is evil, usually represented by what is familiar to them (like adults). The child does not think of the water sprite, spaceman, or caveman as basically negative. Literary characters from space are strange beings with antennas on their heads, having three to five arms, short legs, most frequently they are green with twelve fingers, dreaming about Venus and always friendly (they help children repair a broken down rocket). Children give them names such as the Blue Boy (an inhabitant of the Blue Planet), Clever Dickee (a spaceman), Oscar (a Martian). Then there are robots (Flika Floka) and little robots (Bulbee, Frankie). They have six eyes and speak their own language, which the child naturally understands. For the child communicating with them is simple, while for the adult it can mean an unsurmountable problem. He might even ask the child to translate space language for him. Children find all animals interesting. It is only later on that they start to see some of them as beautiful and others as ugly, which is the result of educational prejudices. This genuine enthusiasm over life in whichever form can well be observed in the contact with the beings from space - the child values communication above everything else. What applies to the characters of the irreal world, is also true of the characters of the real world, with one distinction, in that the fantasy beings represent to a child a quality or a characteristic which usually does not correlate with its appearance. Their appearance is more of a sensation, a thrill, a bombastic imaginative invention, the core of which is inherent to the child. The child does not fear fictitious beings, he understands their language and they visit each other - things an adult cannot accomplish anymore.

2.3. The structure of composition

The structure of these stories is also in three parts (introduction, body, conclusion) and has two dimensions - the level of happening is twofold. There is reality and irreality. The child is describing two worlds: the experiential and the imaginary one. The first type of texts is a transition from the real to the irreal world: the second type, which is not as usual, describes the transition from the irreal to the real world, when, for example, the water sprite visits the child for his birthday, or comes to school, to the playground. The third type describes two parallel worlds (the real and irreal one), where the literary characters pay each other visits. At the end of these stories, the imaginary person might leave the child's experiential world or the child might leave the imaginary world, therefore he is sad, but upon coming home is again happy. The framework of the story typical of all texts describing an imaginary place is made up of three parts and is two-dimensional. The introductory and the closing part form the skeleton of the story, where there is unity of time and place of action. The middle part, which is the body or the core of the story, happens at another level - in imagination. The child sometimes describes both worlds, which contain common elements: the child visits spacemen or, vice versa, spacemen visit the child. A typical beginning of children's imaginative texts is: One day... , One evening... , One night... . A typical ending is: ...then I went home, ...at that moment the clock ran, ...I hope we meet again, and ...thus my story ends. The story itself is the central event, which is experienced by the main character - a child, from the child's point of view. When, at the end of the story, the child takes leave of the water sprite, the Martian or some other imaginary character, they give each other presents. As a point of interest it should be mentioned that the child keeps the concrete present as a memory (a gold coin, a white stone, gold toys, a shell) in the real world. The set up is enriched with transitions from parallel and various other worlds.

2.4. The motives for jumping from the real into the irreal world

The motives for jumping from the real into the irreal world are: boredom, an unsolvable real problem, curiosity, distress the wish to play (the child goes to space to play), or the breaking of rules (swimming in deep water). Once the child has succeeded in solving the problem, satisfied his wish and curiosity, or fulfilled his task, he can return to the real world, where worried parents happily welcome him. The boundaries between the real and the irreal world can either be: physical (a stone, a

ladder, a wave), abstract (dreams), classic magical objects (spells, dust, a potion, a flying carpet, a goldfish), unusual objects (a dandelion blowball, speaking fire, a flying cigar - the Martian vehicle), and contemporary ones (a rocket, a robot, a flying saucer, a bicycle, a magic jump, the Samurai sword, a space taxi). The boundaries of the irreal world clearly define what the child has recognised as being irreal, which he is also able to distinguish from the real world. Just as obvious is the child's wish to hold on to this irreal world. For this reason he invents laws the imaginary world obeys, which are of course irreal and hence not subjected to the logic of the real world. Here the child is not constructing a world within a world (as in real places), but a world alongside another world.

2.5. The themes

The themes children choose are toys coming alive, animals coming alive, plants, nature, child's journey to the imaginary world, or a visit of an imaginary person to the child's experiential world. The story takes place at the level of a miracle and is presented from the child's point of view and in a child's way, where everything is possible. In numerous texts the child solves an imaginary assignment. The texts describe child's imaginary world, his imaginary adventures or dreams. The story is told almost without exception in the first person or through the mouth of the child. Only seldom it is narrated in the third person. The exception is when the main character is a toy came alive, an object or a natural phenomenon. Children's composition can also carry a message addressed implicitly to the adults, who do not permit children to play enough. The child is fighting for his world, the world which in turn is fighting a losing battle with the commercial world of adults. He is aware of this duality and can express it explicitly - the solution lies in his - child's world. For comfort he takes back to the adult world his imagination or at least a memory of it (a white pebble, a shell, a gold coin). This compromise of the two worlds (memory of the imaginary world) can soothe child's fears and help him survive the stresses of the grown-up world. He can achieve this by taking a trip into imagination. At least at the symbolic level, the child has contact with himself, with the myths and legends of long ago. They all help him to soften the transition from childhood to adulthood and thus enable him to maintain a healthy balance between the adult world and the world of children - child's optimism is namely boundless.

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Notes:

¹ Krakar-Vogel, Boža. *Skice za književno didaktiko (Sketches of Literary Didactics)*, ZRSŠ (Slovene Board of Education and Sport), Ljubljana, 1991.

² Boris A. Novak: *Clouds, Clothes, and Forms*

Boris A. Novak: *Fairy Tale*

Dane Zajc: *The Little Flying House*

Ela Peroci: *My Umbrella Can Become a Balloon*

Ela Peroci: *The Slippermaker Cat*

France Prešeren: *The Water Man*

Franjo Frančič: *Fairy Tale of Love between the Tulip and the Rose*

Gianni Rodari: *Space Taxi; Ice Cream Palace*

Hans Christian Andersen: *The Little Sea Fairy*

Ivanka Mestnik: *A Journey to the Blue Planet*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm: *Hansel and Gretel*

Kajetan Kovač: *Star Sailor*

Leopold Suhadolčan: *Dinosaur Piko*

Majda Koren: *Anti-Rain Broth*

Marcus Pfister: *Rainbow Fish*

Marjan Prosen: *Lyre*

Martin Waddell: *Mommy, Where Are You?*

Miha Mate: *Escaped Skipping Ropes*

Miha Remec: *The Little Girl in Space*

Niko Grafenauer: Bird Telephone

Pavel Golia: Georgie

Pavle Rožnik: Dog and Cat

Polonca Kovač: B - Story

Slovene fairy tale: Hedgehog Jake

Slovene fairy tale: About the Peasant and the Water Man

Slovene fairy tale: Water Man

Svetlana Makarovič: Katie from the Spring

Svetlana Makarovič: Rabbit Goes to the Moon

Vid Pečjak: Little Andrew and the Three Beings from Mars

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