

## **Conférence de l'ICPIC : Philosophize with children thanks to literature. Read to grow and think.**

**Edwige Chirouter**, Maîtresse de Conférences en sciences de l'éducation, Université de Nantes, France

This is an analysis of three years of practice with the same pupils in a primary school in France

### **Introduction**

I am going to present a summary of my research thesis about the link between "Philosophy with children in French primary schools and children's and juvenile literature": in other words how storyreading and storytelling enable very young children to learn how to philosophize.

In France, the teaching of philosophy only comes by the end of the academic cursus (around the age of 16 or 17), the "practice" of philosophy with children therefore remains at an experimental level.

In my research study, I started from the following idea: it is never too early to start raising philosophical questions. From the age of three, when astonished by the surrounding world - I quote Aristote - children wonder and raise ever-lasting questions about life, death, human relationships, ethics and the politic.

According to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the child would be "par excellence" the one who acts innocent and asks the question about the "why" and the essence of things with naivety and intensity. To answer these children's question, the use of teaching philosophy to children has been developed in France for the last twenty years.

In the meanwhile, nowadays, -as we witness a growing trend to philosophize with children - we see that contemporary juvenile literature seems to have taken into account children's metaphysical wonders. Since the early sixties, our contemporary western society, thanks to the contributions of psychology and psychoanalysis, has fully acknowledged young children as "thinking beings" who need to be guided in their existential and intellectual progression. So called "children's or juvenile literature" is always the mirror of the way an era of time figures out what childhood is like.

When a society considers the child as ignorant, mindless, or as a little "thing" who needs to be protected from the outside world and from adult's concerns - and this view has prevailed in our western world until very recently - we can only produce sweet, insipid or moralizing stories, without any depth and literary or philosophical sophistication.

In fact, the growth and the popularization of psychology and psychoanalysis since the sixties as they picture the child as a thinking being who can have existential anguishes and wonders allowed by the end of the twentieth century the development of a new ambitious literature that tackles deep and serious issues.

In 1976, thanks to the success of "The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales" B. Bettelheim popularized the Freudian view of the child - as a "polymorphous perverse" who is not innocent at all. This persuades a lot of educators that children can have existential anguishes and moreover that they are able to unconsciously interpret the underlying message of a story - or a tale - in order to improve their vision of the world and of life.

Nowadays, writers like Claude Ponti, Tomi Ungerer or Anthony Browne offer their young readers subtle and deep stories. In addition to the publishing of these wonderful albums, or of numerous adaptations of myths, tales or fables, we have seen for the last few years on the edition market for young readers, series of "short manuals of philosophy" symptomatic of this new awareness of the philosophizing child.

So, educators - like parents or teachers - who want to guide children into the beautiful and difficult way to thinking and self-knowledge have today a wonderful range of beautiful and rich stories available.

Here is the plan of my lecture :

At first from a general and philosophical point of view: what is the thinking of literature? We will see how literature is a particularly relevant mediation to learn to think. Literature is defined as a "thinking experience" and "a meeting" with the reader.

Then, I will demonstrate that children's and juvenile literature has a strong philosophical impact and enables the start of teaching and learning to philosophize with young children.

## I/ What is the thinking of literature?

### A) Literature as an experience in thinking

During the second half of the twentieth century, Paul Ricoeur, a philosopher, rethought the concept of literature and its strong links with philosophy.

Fictions or narratives - Ricoeur calls them "living metaphors" - because they represent numerous opportunities of exemplary and meaningful experiences - are a self-contained space for thinking.

Through a novel, I can live experiences I would never have in real life. Fictions writings are therefore, not only imaginative, they have a model function too, with unsuspected dimensions linked to reality.

This way literature is an experience that is, at the same time, authentic, unique and universal and through which men will be able to face reality. So, the imaginative world is like a huge laboratory in which men can: shape, design and redesign again and again scenarios, dilemmas, issues which are working on their minds. Freed from the limitations of our empiric world and from the laws of physics - one can become invisible (like Gyges or Harry Potter) -, even freed from the laws of ethics and justice -

one can commit a murder - fiction allows me to live, by proxy, what I would never be able to experience in real life.

"The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil" wrote Paul Ricoeur in "Oneself as another".

Children do not have any difficulty with the exemplary value of literature. They perfectly understand the strength of its value as a literary reference, probably because there is an intimate, internal and deep correlation between the children's world and fictions and imaginative worlds.

For example, children can rely on literary reference to discuss: during a lesson dealing with the idea of "growing up", one of my pupils - aged 9- Florian picks up Peter Pan character to deny the idea that "growing up" is fine:

"Some people do not want to grow up, because, they are like Peter Pan - he doesn't want to grow up. Some people do not want to grow up because they say that when you grow up you have too many responsibilities".

This worldwide representation of the fear of growing up enables him to argue against the idea. It can be regarded as an "objection". Even if the chosen example is only a fiction character it doesn't depreciate the idea. The reference to this mythical and symbolic character who, embodies a common desire to the universal human condition, is nevertheless regarded as all-truth.

## B) Literature is a meeting between a person and a piece of work

In 1976, through the success of his "The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales" B. Bettelheim convinced a lot of educators that children encounter big existential anguishes and that they need strong and deep stories to help them grow harmoniously and find their place in the world. What is more, orally transmitted fairy tales deal in a clever way, that is to say in a symbolic, implicit and moreover non-moralizing way with these issues.

The young reader can spontaneously and unconsciously figure out that these ancestral stories do not depict a mere historical reality but that the underlying message is symbolic - and that it has to be interpreted.

These universal stories are the metaphor of interior conflicts, anguishes, desires which are part of the child's condition- the fear of being abandoned, of starving, the rivalry between brothers and sisters, between mother and daughter, the everlasting conflict between the principle of pleasure and the principle of reality, the complexity of human feelings - hatred mingled with love - They directly "speak" to children's unconscious because they embody their tensions, their fears, the anguish they feel in their every day life all along their development.

Universal frightening characters like ogres, witches, wolves, enable the child to externalize and to channel its primitive fears. The child empathizes with the character who is able to overcome the trials of life and succeeds in its fulfillment and its autonomy.

Fairy tales, then lead the children to a better understanding of what is happening in them, at an unconscious level, to go beyond their conflicts, to hope in their future and thus to grow up. Beyond ancestral stories like tales, children's and juvenile contemporary literature provides a large range of aids to develop our pupils' reflexive skills.

Let's say that for the last thirty years, children's and juvenile literature has really taken into account and in a serious way the children's metaphysical questioning. That is what I would like to demonstrate in my second part.

### III/ What is the thinking of juvenile literature?

Let's see now the adaptation of this general discourse about literature as a thinking experience on the very specific world of childhood and children's and juvenile literature.

#### A) The current craze for "philosophizing with children" among editors

We can classify the abundance of publications with a philosophical aim into three very distinct categories:

On the one hand stories (albums, novels, comics, poems, myths, tales, and fables) that deal with metaphysical matters metaphorically. Then, another category would be halfway between pure fiction and the school book. And on the other hand "philosophy booklets for children"

- Stories with a strong philosophical dimension.

It seems that there are no taboos nowadays. One can find books about death, love, homosexuality, politics, differences, violence, injustice, misery and so on... Here, I am only underlining a strong trend of our contemporary creation and edition. The great number of publications on the market shows the great concern about taking into account children's philosophical questioning and about helping them into their progression through meaningful stories.

In this profusion, I want to quickly name two very important writers in that field who are known all over the world:

Tomi Ungerer: "Moon man", about difference, prejudice and injustice.

Maurice Sendak: "Max and the maxi monsters". Very famous classic in contemporary literature on the link between fiction, the ambiguity of growing up, the strength of the unconscious and of the imagination and our impulses. When published this book arose a scandal, it has become a classic today.

- After these stories, we have an intermediary type of works:

The worldwide success of "Sophie's world" published in France in 1995 (and about which he says he would have liked to write them) Jostein Gaarder's book has really highlighted the largely shared need for a true meaning and for philosophy. The author's challenge is to make so called "major writers" and major common currents of thought in the history of philosophy accessible and understandable to young readers.

It is the challenge of the philosophical educability, which is made. It is really the challenge of a clever transposition of a subject too often regarded as only for "grown-ups", for adults.

Along with this successful launch, editor Albin Michel published his "Philo-fables" (in 2002) which encountered a real success. In these "Philo-fables" the authors adapt great myths, fables and legends taken from our universal patrimony to serve our youngsters' philosophical curiosity.

These "Philo fables" are in between the two types of works I categorized: one part with a mere story and a more didactic part that makes it look like a schoolbook.

I haven't mentioned M.Lipman's works yet, because they are not published in France. But, as far as I am concerned I would put them in the second category: in between the pure literary work and the didactic textbook.

- At last, the third type: philosophical books for children.

At the moment in France we witness an editorial "fashion": the one of "philosophy booklets" for children.

As far as the edition world is concerned in France the most famous ones are "Les goûters philo" edited by Milan Press. Michel Puech, philosophy teacher at The Sorbonne University and Brigitte Labbé suggest to examine a philosophical issue from all sides through a general reflection and through short but often pragmatic short stories to illustrate the concept (concepts like life and death, work and money, good and evil, beauty and ugliness).

Another example in France (I can't be exhaustive) "Les petits Platons" which sum up the life and the works of our major philosophers (Socrates, Kant, Lao Tseu, Diogenes, Marx and so on...).

Of course, the quality of the whole set of these existing works is very uneven. Either one can find publications or works labeled "Philo" (the right niche on the market at the moment) with a moralizing or poor content. Or one can find abstruse work which please the parents' narcissism more than they enrich the children's minds.

Nevertheless, this profusion has a positive value because it demonstrates that children's metaphysical wonders are nowadays taken into account.

## B) A three year experiment in philosophy with literature in a French primary school

In practical terms, how to rely on literature to philosophize. For my research thesis I followed the same class group for three years (third, fourth and fifth forms from the age of 8 to 11).

We had a philosophy lesson once a week, always based on the reading of albums. The lessons were filmed and transcribed.

I can conclude that for children, literature helps them to build a philosophical way of thinking because it really enables them to:

- Commit themselves into the reflection - the identification with the characters allows this inside necessity which is inherent to a deep and real authentic commitment into the thought. What I call the "screen or shield" of the character enables the pupils to take the floor in front of the group without opening up in a too intimate way, without using the "I". In the example I used about Peter Pan, I also think that the Peter Pan character enables Florian to enunciate his own anguishes towards the idea of growing up but with the protection of the emblematic character of Peter Pan.
- Problematize thanks to the links between the texts and the way the story gives examples and also counterexamples.
- Set a line of reasoning thanks to the "right to reality" (J. Bruner 2002), which seems to be obvious for children because their link to fiction and to the imaginary world is part of them. Again, I quote the example of Florian who refers to Peter Pan's character to express his disagreement with the entire research community who first seemed to agree on the fact that "everybody wants to grow up".
- Conceptualize - when children catch the thought of the text, they can build the frame of the concept; We can say that the "good gap" that literature builds between the too emotionally marked personal experience and the too abstract concept, enables a lot of young pupils to make the first step into the adventure of "thinking"

## As a conclusion

Because the child's mind runs on the magical trend, childhood is the golden age for the belief in an imaginary world. Childhood, literature and even philosophy meet because this wonderful, naive and total abandonment into the world of fiction doesn't occur because of a desire for getting away from reality, for amusement or for escaping. The child reads to find answers to its fundamental wonders. The child abandons himself hoping to find a meaning to its experience. Reading is also a quest to find oneself and to encounter oneself and meet the others. Literature can enable children to better understand the world, to make it understandable.

As we offer them meaningful stories, they will be able to go through the unforgettable experience of the initiatory first steps into the world of thought, intelligence and beauty. Children if we really listen to them, ask puzzling metaphysical questions. They give us the very original experience of the

astonishment when discovering the world and ask questions without any self-censorship. We must catch this curiosity to allow them to go further in their progression to gradually teach them how to think by themselves.

Literature is not only a mere entertainment that is why it goes far beyond the idea of pleasure. One can experience a lot of pleasure when reading a text that won't bring anything else than this good time while reading and that will be quickly forgotten. This is not only true for literature, it, generally, applies to art. One could conduct the same analysis about music, painting, and cinema. The work of art, here literature, has an initiatory effect; it is the alchemy of an unpredictable encounter, which enables me to make my life and the surrounding world truly meaningful.

For a lot of children, school is the only place where the encounter with these works of art is made possible. The only place for a possible journey that will enable them, with beauty and intelligence to discover themselves and to open up to the others.