

Confronting Contemporary Educational Challenges Through Research

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Ioannis M. Katsillis (Editor)

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Challenges Through Research**

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University of Patras
Department of Education



International Conference on Educational Research

**CONFRONTING CONTEMPORARY
EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES
THROUGH RESEARCH**

**Patras, 30 June – 02 July 2017
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PROCEEDINGS

Editor: Ioannis M. Katsillis



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Narratology and Creative Writing in Primary Education

Efthymia G. Stavrogiannopoulou¹ & Dimitrios Politis²

ABSTRACT

Provided that Creative Writing along with the Theory of Literature, specifically Narratology, are regarded to be of special importance in educational research as well as in class practices, the main aim of this paper is to examine this connection in light of modern research issues and teaching needs, especially in Early Childhood Education. Initially, the theories of Vladimir Propp, Algirdas Greimas, Claude Bremond (from the field of French Narratology), and Marie-Laure Ryan (Possible Worlds Theory from the field of post-classical Narratology) are briefly introduced, as the construction of the proposed theoretical tool relies on them. A writing sample in the form of a tale, entitled "The seashell castle", is then presented; the tale was created by kindergarten pupils under the guidance of their teacher by using the proposed narratological tools, thus proving the connection mentioned above.

KEYWORDS: *Narratology, Creative Writing, Primary Education*

INTRODUCTION

Considering that the Theory of Literature, and especially Narratology, as well as Creative Writing are regarded as an interesting challenge in educational research, and while they are frequently used in the classes of Primary Education nowadays and enrich teaching practices, this paper focuses on the possibility of linking and using them in Primary Education and in Kindergarten through the presentation of a fairy tale. It is notable that this tale is the result of the creative writing of five pupils at the Nursery School of Marathias (Fokida prefecture, Central Greece) under the guidance of their teacher. The teacher was provided with a narrative tool that has been also used in analyzing Modern Greek Literature at a secondary education level. In the process of a theoretical review, before formatting our method and applying it in the class, we present below the theories from which such a tool has emerged.

THEORIES OF DEPARTURE

Vladimir Propp's *dramatis personae*

Initially, we studied the theory of Vladimir Propp. For a certain category of fairy tales, which he names "magical", Propp defines a series of 31 functions that remain unchanged and are performed by certain *dramatis personae*. He recognizes in each narrative seven *dramatis personae* (or roles): the villain, the donor/provider, the helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero/protagonist, and the false-hero (Propp, 1928/1968). The elements that change from fairytale to fairytale are the names of the *dramatis personae* and their properties, the places, the way in which a function is performed, and the circumstances under which it occurs. Propp's morphology is considered "a promising model of narrative for a children's story authoring tool, with the potential to give children a powerful mental model with which to construct stories" (Hammond, 2011, p. 3).

Algirdas J. Greimas' actantial model

Next, we dealt with the narratologist Algirdas J. Greimas, who relied on Propp's theory that influenced him. Greimas (1966) proposes a model with six actants that can be applied in every narrative, from Homer to the present day. "The six actants are divided into three oppositions, each of which forms an axis of the actantial description: the axis of desire (subject and object), the axis of power (helper and opponent), and the axis of knowledge (sender and receiver)" (Hébert, 2006, p. 49). This model strongly shows the affinity of Structuralism with Linguistics. The first pair (subject and object) refers directly to editorial structures, and the receiver reminds us of the editorial structure of the indirect object. However, it is rather difficult to find something parallel to the editorial structures for the second pair (helper and opponent) (Fořt, 2010). Greimas' actantial model has been suggested to "be used as a tool for better directing and organizing pupil's thoughts in the process of writing narratives" (Andonovska-Trajkovska & Cvetkova-Dimov, 2013). Below we suggest a tool enriched by Claude Bremond's and Marie-Laure Ryan's models.

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Claude Bremond's narratological model

One of the patrons of French Narratology, Claude Bremond, almost completely abandons the structuralist loyalty to Linguistics and creates a model with “agents” and “patients” whose situation changes in every narrative situation, either for better or for worse (Fořt, 2010). We have given particular importance to this theory, because this French semiologist has attempted to develop a model of general application suitable for all kinds of narrative, many elements of which, in our opinion, can be used in the classroom by the teacher who is required to teach Literary texts, either in Primary or Secondary Education. Bremond (1973) argues that the role encoding he proposes provides a universal reference framework for assessing the originality of each narrative. He says that one can't “hunt down” the meaning of a narrative without referring permanently to a system of roles and that the logic of roles is imposed everywhere and always as the sole principle of a coherent organization of the events within the plot. We could abstract the main points of Bremond's theoretical model as follows:

1. The structure of a narrative is based on a role arrangement. Fictional characters alternate in the basic roles of the “patient” and the “agent”. Each plot development affects multiple people at the same time in a different way. The main roles are linked to each other as well as to the processes (he proposes about fifty processes) (Bremond, 1966, 1973).
2. Fictional characters' motives can be: hedonic (aiming at direct pleasure), ethical/moral (motivated by the thought of duty), or pragmatic/realistic (motivated by a favourable calculation). The indication of the motives related to the act reveals the tendencies of the person's character. The feelings of the characters undergo evolution (Bremond, 1970, 1973).

Usually, at the beginning of a story, certain attributes (about age, gender, social status, appearance, etc.) are attributed to a hero. Some of them are descriptive, without any substantial contribution to the plot, while others could not be omitted, as they contribute to the plot in two ways: either getting influenced by the evolution of things or affecting the evolution itself. These attributes, therefore, characterize the heroes and enable them to play the role of “patient” or the “agent”. The story of the “patient” is often linked to the story of one or more “agents”. The fate of a person, who is considered to be a “patient”, depends on the initiatives he takes himself (as “agent”) or on the initiatives of other individuals who influence the subject. The “patient” may enjoy the benefits or get advantage of an improvement or protection process or end up as a victim, due to a process of degradation or deprivation, and he/she may have realized that he/she is in a satisfactory or non-satisfactory situation; he/she might as well never realize this (Bremond, 1966, 1973). Finally, Bremond “insisted on the importance of hypothetical events for the understanding of the behaviour of characters” (Ryan, 2005). Some aspects of Bremond's work resemble the Possible Worlds (PW) Theory below.

Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible Worlds Theory

Carrying through with the theoretical review in the process of this paper, we found Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible Worlds (PW) Theory very interesting and helpful in structuring a theoretical tool. Starting in the mid-70s, the Possible Worlds Theory got adapted to the imaginary world of narration by philosopher David Lewis as well as by a number of literature theorists, including Umberto Eco, Thomas Pavel, Lubomir Dolezel, and Marie-Laure Ryan (Ryan, 1992, 2005, 2012). These theorists “have developed a semantics of fictionality based on the idea that the semantic domain projected by the literary text is an alternative possible world that acts as actual the moment we are immersed in a fiction” (Vassilopoulou, 2007, p. 123).

There are applications of the Possible Worlds theory in the literary narrative, but the observations and concepts developed by its various supporters may now be considered to apply to narrations found in other media, such as theater, cinema, comics, or video games (Ryan, 2011, 2012).

Marie-Laure Ryan, like David Lewis, accepts the “principle of reality” (Walton's term) as fundamental to the phenomenology of reading. According to this principle, when readers construct imaginary worlds, they fill the gaps in the text (as Reader-Oriented Theories also state, especially that of Wolfgang Iser) with the assumption that the fictional world resembles their own experiential reality (Iser, 1978). This model can only be cancelled by the text itself. “All PWs are actual from the point of view of their inhabitants” (Ryan, 2005), and they do not differ from the real world (Partee, 1989).

Ryan (2007) believes that narrative can be described as a development of a network of interpersonal relationships. These relationships are determined by the actions of the participants; their thoughts, plans, goals, and feelings are hidden behind these actions. The power that pushes for action is the desire to solve problems. Inspired by Eco's view of the narrative text as “a machine for producing possible worlds (of the *fabula*, of the characters within the *fabula*, and of the reader outside the *fabula*)” (Eco, 1979, p. 246) as well as by models used in the field of Artificial Intelligence, Ryan considers the external events to which the narrator refers as the elements playing the role of the “Textual Actual World” (TAW). Around this centre, one observes the small systems formed by the subworlds of the characters (Ryan, 2012).

Each of these subworlds is centred on the world of knowledge of a certain character, including his/her representation for the whole system, that is, for the actual world as well as for the subworlds of the other characters. From the reader's point of view, the world of knowledge of the characters contains inaccurate images of the actual world of the narrative universe; in contrast, from each character's point of view, that image is the real world. The subworlds of the characters also include the world of desires and obligations, goals, dreams, and hallucinations (Ryan, 2007).

As the story unfolds, the distance between the different worlds of the system constantly fluctuates. Whenever a subjective world is not satisfied in the actual world, the narrative universe ends up in a collision state. The engine that enables the operation of the Narrative Machine is the effort of the characters to eliminate conflicts by reducing the distance between their subjective worlds and the actual world. In other words, the main purpose of the characters is to resolve any arising conflicts by aligning all their private worlds with the “Textual Actual World” (TAW). Conflicts may also exist between the subworlds of different characters. For example, the hero and the villain of a story are competitors, because they have incompatible worlds of desires; a character may face a conflict between the world of his desires and the world of his obligations and choose which one he will try to satisfy (Ryan, 2005).

Readers are not always able to fill in all the worlds of the narrative universe, but the better they complete them, the better they understand the logic of the story, and they remember the plot (Ryan, 2012). The worlds of which the narrative universe consists, according to Ryan, are:

- The (textual) actual world (TAW): what appears to be true and real in a story;
- The world of knowledge (K-world): what the characters know and believe about the actual world;
- The world of obligations (O-world): the commitments and prohibitions imposed on the characters by social rules and moral principles;
- The world of desires (W-world): the wishes and desires of the characters;
- The world of intentions: the plans and the goals of the characters (GP);
- The imaginary universes: the dreams and fantasies of the characters (F-worlds) (Martelli 2012; Ryan 2006; Vassilopoulou 2007).

Theorizing creative writing practices

Defining, in general, creative writing as “a mode of imaginative thought” (Wandor, 2008, p. 7), we leave behind the questioning of definitions not included in the objectives of this paper. Moreover, apart from the concepts and their definitions, there are many essential issues for someone to confront, e.g., an excessive increase of creative writing's popularity that today reaches the limits of “industry” and the question of if/should writing be taught, etc. The bibliography on these issues is really enormous, so we make do with some concise and basic ascertainties.

The reasons for the increasing diffusion of Creative Writing appear to be a lot and various. Juliet England (2009) tries to summarize them: the Internet, the extensive use of written reason, the need of spread of literacy and fighting of illiteracy, the wide circulation of books, etc. It is certain that the prominence of Creative Writing in our days has led to mass “production”, which often becomes perceptible in industry terms, and definitely, it is connected with economic profit. The last one perhaps can explain more effectively also the ascertainment that Creative Writing is faced more academically. The academic study,

in the second cycle and at postgraduate level, particularly in the past few years, undertakes the most serious and systematic handling of increasing demand (England, 2009). There are many MA programmes in Creative and Critical Writing in a lot of universities around the world, while many PhD theses are submitted on this topic (Kostelnik, 2010), which, however, once again cannot guarantee that the students will become achieved writers (England, 2009). Detecting the value and pitfalls of creative writing teaching, David Morley (2007, p. 251) points out that “the creative writing industry is a cartoon world, a cloud cuckoo land of fantasy accomplishment and vacuum-sealed reputation”. Thus comes back the diachronic question of how much creative writing can, finally, be taught (England, 2009).

Actually, the answers to the above question are many and differential. Jack Epps (2006, p. 103) marks that “What cannot be crafted is the talent, the soul of a writer”, while David Myers (2006, p. 3) underscores that “The idea of hiring writers to teach writing has never won unquestioned acceptance, nor has creative writing – the classroom subject – progressed much beyond apologizing for itself”. However, according to Lajos Egri (2004, p. 284), “If you know the principles, you will be a better craftsman and artist”. Summing up, in the words of David Morley (2007, p. 22), “Writing requires nerve, stamina and long listening – as well as talent, and editorial discrimination. ... Although learning creative writing can be fun, becoming and being a writer is a far more ruthless, wilder game”. Moreover:

Creative writing can be taught most effectively when students have some talent and vocation... If a teacher can shape the talent, and steer that vocation... then... creative writing should be taught as a craft. The whole point of teaching creative writing, however, is that students must learn to... guid[e] themselves (Morley, 2007, p. 8).

We assess that, finally, that's exactly the point, while Theory of Literature could help us effectively in organizing our thought and guiding the questioning of our writing. Besides, the whole issue seems to need a reliable and effective treatment, since the increasing dissemination of Creative Writing concerns also the school environment, that is, the school classes, where the teaching methods are enriched by the practices of Creative Writing and its enthusiastic reception of the school population.

TOWARDS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Trying to integrate the above theories in a handy methodological tool, our main preoccupation was that such a tool would not treat the characters as purely semiotic constructions in the way structuralism did, but as individuals endowed with inner situations, knowledge, and sets of beliefs, memories, attitudes, and intentions – in other words, consciousness, inwardness, and personality. Furthermore, this tool should not only be useful for the approach and analysis of literary texts but also as a creative writing tool. “Creativity is a fundamental property of human beings” (Mutanen, 2014, p. 67), and we think that teachers have to encourage their pupils to be creative and write their stories. So they “are standing in front of a very important task: to organize creative writing process” (Andonovska-Trajkovska, 2008, p. 1). We understand that “motivating for writing narratives in the elementary classroom is not an easy task for the teacher” (Andonovska-Trajkovska & Cvetkova-Dimov, 2013, p. 2); that's why we propose a methodological tool based on Narratology.

Thus, the proposed tool includes a list of ten questions/steps in the process of writing:

1. Where are we and when?
2. Who is the main character of the story? What are his/her features?
3. What problem does he/she have to deal with?
4. Does he/she have enemies? Does he/she have allies?
5. What does he/she want to achieve?
6. What are his/her obligations?
7. What does he/she know about others?
8. How does he/she face the problem? By what means?
9. Has his/her behaviour changed his/her desires, feelings, obligations at the end of the story?
10. Does he/she gain anything? What are the consequences of his/her actions in relation to him/herself and in relation to others?

At the Nursery School of Marathias (Fokida prefecture, Central Greece), the teacher asked these questions in succession, and the result was the writing of a fairy tale entitled “The seashell castle”.

Pupils’ creative writing

After we defined the notion of Creative Writing as “a process of creating text whose characteristics are identified as unusual, uncommon, original, intuitive, unique, respecting any way the basic requirements for the genre of the text that is being written” (Andonovska-Trajkovska, 2008, p. 4), we integrated in succession the answers to the above questions in a coherent text.

“The seashell castle”

Once upon a time on the seabed, deep in the ocean, there was a seashell castle. There lived marine knights who settled there after getting bored of living on land. They wore blue hats, green uniforms, and rode big seahorses. A beautiful queen who could transform into a mermaid lived in the castle, too!!! She was very happy on the seabed, but she sometimes went on land to see the sun.

Queen Mireva was extremely beautiful!!! She had a green tail with shiny scales, red hair, and blue eyes. She wore a golden necklace with a big white pearl around her neck! Her life was nice. She liked coming out of the palace and enjoying the rainbow with its shining colors that reached the seafloor! One day, on the other side of the ocean, Afrosoupa (Soupfroth) the witch was freed from her prison. She rode a shark for the first time and approached the castle in order to steal Mireva’s throne. Afrosoupa the witch had a black tail, and her hair was snakish green; she had dark brown eyes and wore a snake necklace around her neck, which gave her evil magic powers, such as throwing fire, causing storms, stirring up icy waves, and calling in the sea dragons!!!

She wanted to steal the throne from Queen Mireva, so she mounted her fearsome shark and approached the castle! She began to stir up huge and threatening waves!!! Then the knights wore their uniforms, mounted their seahorses, and, ready for battle, crossed the waves to reach the witch.

Queen Mireva was quick to seek refuge in the magic mushroom, thus escaping the waves and the storm. Then the knights rushed to the witch and cut off her necklace rendering her incapable of possessing any evil magic powers! Without them, Afrosoupa (Soupfroth) surprisingly became nice!!!

So the two queens became dear friends and lived together in the castle, enjoying each other’s company. The shark became the knights’ best friend and the guardian of the castle. And they lived happily ever after!!!

During the whole procedure, it was obvious that children enjoyed the process very much; they said that they liked most the fact that they became writers and illustrated their story. They even acted out their story during the breaks, as a free time activity. Children showed interest in the story-writing process at the Nursery School of Marathias, where our methodological tool has been tested.

CONCLUSION

Although the combination of the Theory of Literature with Creative Writing appeared, in the beginning, venturesome, particularly in a Kindergarten class, we faced the challenge of their coexistence in a methodological tool that involves active teachers and students in the adventure of writing. We thus realized, once more, that the space of Education has proven that it is a “secure” field, where the reliability of theory might be tested, and the dynamics of literary narration could be featured. Apparently, Bremond’s narrative model from the field of French Narratology can be combined with Marie-Laure Ryan’s model (Possible Worlds Theory) from the field of post-classical Narratology, and this gave us a handy, useful tool for the approach and the analysis of literary texts in Primary and Secondary education. At the same time, it becomes patent that such a tool could also serve as a creative writing tool. The children showed interest in the story-writing process at the Nursery School of Marathias, where our methodological tool has been applied. Finally, what came through the creative writing process was nothing more than literature itself!

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