

Marina Gellona : Alone in the wild wood

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present my personal teaching experience. I currently teach how to write a fairy tale in creative writing **workshops and courses**. The paper will present my different projects on the subject, **the approach I follow, the methods I use, problems and results emerging while working with people of different ages willing to express themselves through a fairy tale.**

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to share with you a teaching method for creating writing.

I have used this method in my workshops and courses with people of different ages.

The title of this paper, “*Alone in the wild wood*” is a sentence appearing in many fairy tales and, in my opinion, as shown further on, is also the synthetic image of the narrative and symbolic form of fairy tales. In my experience, this concept is essential in order to explore, invent and write new tales, in syntony with the students *expectations*.

“*Alone in the wild wood*” , in a fairy tale, normally indicates a turning-point for the main character. Is the situation around which the main character's story builds up and is, as well, both symbol and structure of the process of liberation, the theme of the fairy tales. Eventually, it can also describe the teacher of a fairy tale course *facing* the the students “wild” imagination ...

2. Workshops and courses: a teacher alone in a wild wood

In the last twelve months I have held ten courses/workshops attended by a hundred people of different ages .

All this effort has produced a lot of experience, lots of texts written and read and the birth of lots of friendships and collaborations. It sounds, looks and feels like a “wood”... let’s try to have a look inside it.

Preparing the conference speech, related to this paper, I’ve searched for a *fil rouge* within the whole process and I could say that in every workshop students have been always asking three questions :

- a) **I want to write a fairy tale! Can you help me? I love tales!**
- b) **... what is or which is the form of a fairy tale?**
- c) **How can I turn my (wild or shy) imagination into a fairy tale?**

My teaching process is led by these three questions. Out of this question, as anticipated, I have synthetically pictured the *form* of fairy tales in the sentence: “alone in the wild woods”. I am using this concept to find ways to let the students imagination “out of the bag”, and eventually to give the content of the “imagination bag” a fairy tale form.

In the next paragraphs I will give an example of how I allow my students to become familiar with a fairy tale form and structure, before venturing themselves in inventing one. The tale I’ve chosen is “*The golden key*“, a short tale of the Brothers Grimm.

3. The golden key (W. J. Grimm)

Here’s the tale.

“In the winter time, when deep snow lay on the ground, a poor boy was forced to go out on a sledge to fetch wood. When he had gathered it together, and packed it, he wished, as he was so frozen with cold, not to go home at once, but to light a fire and warm himself a little. So he scraped away the snow, and as he was thus clearing the ground, he found a tiny golden key.

Hereupon he thought that where the key was, the lock must be also, and dug in the ground and found an iron chest. "If the key does but fit it!" thought he; "no doubt there are precious things in that little box." He searched, but no keyhole was there. At last he discovered one, but so small that it was hardly visible. He tried it, and the key fitted it exactly.

Then he turned it once round, and now we must wait until he has quite unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we shall learn what wonderful things were lying in that box.”

On the one hand this tale is an exercise of storytelling or creative writing in itself (you can invite the students to develop the story imagining the content of the box), on the other hand is an invitation to visual exploration.

What I usually suggest the group to do is, in fact, to explore the “space” of the tale. How?

Every sentence of the tale gives a suggestion for the workshop. “*In the winter time, when deep snow lay on the ground, a poor boy was forced to go out on a sledge to fetch wood.*”

- a) First of all students are required to **make a map** of the tale's space; through this process the students will grasp the coherence of story's locations . In this particular tale we have a landscape covered with snow, a house, and a forest where you can fetch wood. With the help of the map the students can visualize the typical fairy tale situation: a house one must to leave to find something that is needed in order to survive. In this very case, the wood, necessary to warm up the house.
- b) I show my students similar relationships among a landscape and a protagonist, in different kind of stories (tales, not fairy tales). This operation will allow them to see how the landscape net is crucial to build the structure of a tale. **The golden key** for example, can be compared to two other stories: To build a fire (a Jack London short story) and to Into the wild (a true story, a film directed from Sean Penn, a journalistic reportage written by John Krakauer).

Among the fairy tales, there are many possible comparisons: *Thumbelina* by Andersen, *Hansel and Gretel* as well as *Snowwhite* by the Brothers Grimm.

To build a fire and *Into the wild* present exactly the same situation: a boy in a freezing winter landscape trying to build a fire and survive.

- c) Hand draw the different moments of the tale. The aim of this exercise is to allow the students to experience the world of the tale with another, visual, language.
- d) Write a text which describes the place. If the fairy tale is a *genre* which doesn't give much space to descriptions, the use of descriptions will be a good way to enter the story, to let the story express all its power.

All these exercises allow the students to see the form of the tale, first of all as:

- **a connection of places: a house, a wood covered in snow.**
- **a GEOGRAPHY and a GEOMETRY of FREEDOM RESARCH: every tale has a MAP where a PROTAGONIST find himself, mostly poor and/or alone, young, AWAY FROM HOME, looking for something essential to his life: something which must be somewhere in the landscape, something that will let him/her survive, grow up and achieve a higher degree of freedom.**
- **A WAY OF TELLING THE THEME OF FREEDOM through the actions of a body in the space, as we will see in the next paragraph.**

4. A body to feel, to move, to work.

Feeling, moving, working with a body.

“When he had gathered it together, and packed it, he wished, as he was so frozen with cold, not to go home at once, but to light a fire and warm himself a little”.

After having seen where, in which network of places, the boy is located and moves through, we take a moment to see what it means for the main character's body, to be there, uncovering sensations and actions while he is confronting with the landscape. In this particular situation: in a wood covered with snow. How does the cold place concretely affects the protagonist?

The exercise I propose is to make a sort of **travel-diary**, to describe how the protagonist feels, alone in the chilling wood

Through the diary the students can understand that the main character **has a body**, through which he can:

- Have feelings and sensations (hunger, cold)
- Move: walk, run, escape... go back, stay...
- Work, explore, discover, watch closer...
- Meet people, objects, that can help or hurt him...
- Survive... or die...

We have to realize that in this tale, in this snow-on-the ground there is no other life-form, no witches, no one, only the Cold, the Snow, cruel enough to freeze him to death. In other tales, in the

places the protagonist is traveling through, we can find a character having a sort of authority on the territory, an antagonist, like the old woman in *Hansel and Gretel* or the wolf in *Little Red Cap*.

In synthesis: a body, within the tale's network of places, can move in different directions, taking actions to survive, despite of all the threats, coming from sites and ruling antagonist. The tale tissue has some evil “knots” representing possible danger for the main character.

5. From a web of dependence to a net of independence: the process of freedom in a fairy tale seen as a tissue.

“So he scraped away the snow, and as he was thus clearing the ground, he found a **tiny golden key**. Hereupon he thought that where the key was, the lock must be also, and dug in the ground and found an **iron chest**. "If the key does but fit it!" thought he; "no doubt there are precious things in that little box."

Once we have realized that the boy is using his body in the space to survive, we can see how the net, the tissue of the tale, contains another kind of knot, a new “possibility” for the poor boy:

- A poor boy + a golden thing + the process of looking for precious things.

Thanks to the golden thing (the gift, the helper, the magic object representing the good knot tied in the tale tissue) the protagonist's adventure to find the form of a tale gains another element:

In a tale the boy, resting alone in the wood (nearly frozen!) can find a new opportunity (help, relationships) to try to gain independence (in “the Golden key”: not to be poor anymore): a net of independence.

I use the image of a **net** because the tale's language, or rather, the tales form, seems to tell us: there is no “salvation” without a net. There is on 'salvation' without a tissue of magic knots associated with the protagonist's work and the spirit of freedom animating him. When you're a child you are dependent; when you grow up you (should) become independent. But independence is not the absence of relationship but a connection of positive relationships of freedom, life and self-improvement.

The search for independence is the “engine” of fairy tales. As Lüthi observes, thinking about the situation of “finding oneself alone in the wild woods”: “[In fairy tales], everything can enter into relationship with everything else...[they] free people from their natural context.”

The meaning becomes clearer in comparison with *Into the wild*: Chris Mc Candless is a boy who leaves family to have a deeper experience on himself, of his self, in the wild, away from family and the social tissue where he does not fit in. He goes away, in Alaska, a place even much colder than the one of our Grimm’s tale.

In *To build a fire* London’s main character has to build a fire with many degrees below zero in freezing Alaska, again.

Both characters of London and Krakauer are looking for freedom, specifically finding their own way to live according to a different look on how they experience themselves.

A tale follows the path of a character who wants, or has to, change the web of dependence / oppression, into a new net of independence / freedom.

7. Happy End in fairy tales & Tragic End in the other stories

“He searched, but no **keyhole** was there. At last he discovered one, but so small that it was **hardly visible**. He tried it, and the key **fitted it exactly**. Then he turned it once round, and now we must wait until he has

quite unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we shall learn what **wonderful things were lying in that box.**”

Looking at the form of a tale, we can say that an happy end occurs when some points are present all at the same time :

- a) The net is good enough or the landscape is human-friendly enough, when you are alone.
- b) The young person is able enough (has a know-how and/or work experience to satisfy his basic needs: warm, food, ecc.)
- c) The young person is not alone and/or is familiar with the location he is moving through

This was not the case of Chris Mc. Candless: he was alone in the snow and couldn't communicate with anybody, he was completely isolated; he also couldn't survive because he didn't know well the environment he was living on; that is why his tale was not a fairy tale with an happy end.

In *To build a fire* the situation is similar: for the main character the place is too cold to survive and he cannot build a fire in the right way. And, again, he is all alone, without a friend, an helper, a gift to get out of troubles.

8. The “white bag of images”: how to start up a creative process in fairy tales.

After the students have understood the form of the tale, they can now listen to their imagination. Their task is now to express themselves with the same language of the fairy tale: objects, people and their skills, places where and other characters ruling or controlling the landscape in some other ways.

I invite people to express the images they come up with, on a white paper bag, with drawings, filling it with little objects, for example, the lines of a poem, lyrics of a song, the title of a film, the picture of a art work or pictures taken from magazines or newspapers representing some character, some places, some objects.

They need to be just images which can “ring a bell” in the inner worlds of the participants.

Once they have placed all the images and objects together in and on the white bag, I give them a “mirror of questions” .In this way their association of images will be able to take a form.

The question's aim is to let the students find the net/web/tissue of their own tale. All these questions will expose once again the form of the tale, the relationship between the protagonist and the tissues that allows him to grow.

This list of questions allow the students to find out who is the story of “salvation” about. As Clarissa Pinkola Estes, questions are keys.

"Asking the proper question is the central action of transformation- in fairy tales, in analysis, and in individuation. The key question causes germination of consciousness. The properly shaped question always emanates from an essential curiosity about what stands behind. Questions are the keys that cause the secret doors of the psyche to swing open."

The last sentences of *The golden key* coincides with an important passage within the creative process:

after we let the voice of imagination speaking, now that some colorful things and characters surged from the snow of the white bag... the questions (more or less 20 questions concerning the form of the tale) let the creative big bag/bang switch to the creation of the tale.

9 . Did the workshops had an happy end?

Every time the students had revealed their imagination with the white bag method, at the end they had a tale, coherent, original, more or less complicated, more or less well written, (the style is something I still have to work on in my courses... maybe a issue for a next paper?).

All the results had a specific life and specific form, **a fairy tale form.**

Other reasons why workshops and courses have an happy end:

- the emergence of friendships and artistic cooperation among the students
- the possibility to develop other social and cultural projects (with the students)
- the care of the schools
- new ideas for me as writer, researcher and teacher
- good food, good air to “inspire” every student.
- increase of knowledge, a sense of community, a collective cultural work, less loneliness... the growth of a good social tissue or network
- And, eventually, a new concept for how to held a creative writing course.

This concept was produced by eight friends in a beautiful spot between the sea and the mountains, nearby Genova, in Italy: a three days fairy tale trekking, when the landscape itself became a place to walk, watch and write. **Everyone found himself or herself precisely alone in the woods, so we were able to write about the same condition faced by the main character of a tale.**

The sea
Smiles from far off
Teeth of foam
Lips of sky.

Federico Garcia Lorca