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Children's stories in the educational theories of Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori

William Grandi
University of Bologna

Abstract

The article explores the educational value that Ellen Key (1849-1926), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) attributed to children's stories. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these three important authors contributed to the renewal of the educational theories and practices. They dedicated a part of their pedagogical reflections to the educational meanings of children's stories; consider, e.g., the many pages of Ellen Key on children's literature, the recommendations of Rudolf Steiner on the educational relevance of fairy tales and mythology or, finally, Maria Montessori's reflections on fairy tales. The article examines these ideas from a historical and pedagogical point of view.

Keywords: Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Children's Literature.

Introduction

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori made a significant contribution to renewing reflections on pedagogy and educational activities addressed to children. Their innovative endeavour remains unexhausted: as we shall see, many of these three European intellectuals' intuitions and proposals are still valid today. This article seeks to reconstruct the historical and cultural setting within which Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori lived and worked, to point up their shared interests and differences, and to analyse their thought in the field of children's literature.

The article will first examine certain points of contact among the three thinkers, including their intention to renew society through education, their desire to converse with European colleagues beyond their own national borders, their interest in the theosophical movement, and, finally, the fierce opposition that all three suffered in their respective countries.

Following a brief reconstruction of the relevant historical and cultural framework, the article turns to discussion of its specific topic of inquiry. It first shows how children's literature became a highly significant cultural and social phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thanks to the rediscovery of folk tales, the publication of fundamental "classics" for young readers, and the indisputable fame of many children's authors, including Verne and Collodi. Using the publication and success of literature for young people between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as its starting point, the article reviews the thoughts that the three authors developed on the subject during that period.

Ellen Key devoted a number of significant pages of her best-known book, *The Century of the Child*, to children's literature. She underlined the importance of fables and popular legends in the education of the young generation, conducted acute criticism of the abstract and fragmentary nature of the textbooks used in schools, and put forward the still valid idea that every home should have a bookshelf for its children. Rudolf Steiner also stressed the fundamental educational role of fables and legends in the spiritual and human education of children. He also developed philosophical notions that later influenced a substantial part of recent fiction for young readers. Finally, Maria Montessori showed that, in order to cultivate a love of reading in the younger generations, the basic tools of literacy (knowing how to read and write) were not enough, and that it was necessary to appeal to the imagination, the need to communicate, and the desire to comprehend the world, which children naturally possess and demonstrate.

Shared ideas

The idea that any renewal of society must necessarily derive also from a renewal of educational methods has animated the European cultural debate for centuries. Already during the Enlightenment period, great intellectuals such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed new educational ideals as a reaction to the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* and the frequently disorderly and inhuman development of industry.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Locke's and Rousseau's ideas were often evoked in pedagogical theory in subsequent centuries, becoming for example, a source of inspiration and reflection for the Swedish thinker Ellen Key (Ambjörnsson, 2014, pp. 146-153) and the Italian educationist Maria Montessori (Moseley, 2014, pp. 177-178; Tassi, 1987, p. 115). From the nineteenth century until today, these two authors' social and educational proposals, together with those of the Austro-German philosopher and educationist Rudolf Steiner, have been the subjects of numerous debates and projects on the reform of educational and cultural systems. As well known, criticisms of notionism, disciplinary fragmentation, the inadequacy of textbooks, and

the rigidity of the traditional model of the classroom lesson were the fundamental issues for all three authors in regard to profound renewal of schools and learning. Ellen Key (1849-1926), Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) were opposed to the school based on the passive transmission of contents, and instead advocated education of the individual's natural potential.

While it is indisputable that there were noteworthy differences of opinion among the three thinkers with regard to theoretical principles, educational approach, and personal sensibility, it cannot be denied that Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori shared a similar objective: to promote a radical renewal of society through profound reform of educational practices addressed to children. After all, these three authors lived in virtually the same time-span between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; a period in which the old world of kings and emperors – a glorious world, but a decadent one – was disintegrating, and a new reality dominated by the masses and ideologies was coming to the fore. Theirs was a cultural and social context traversed by the tensions and anxieties well described by Musil in his celebrated novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*).

A further feature shared by the three authors was that they travelled widely in Europe and were in contact with intellectuals and artists in a variety of countries. By doing so, they found a cultured international audience ready to consider and discuss their ideas. In many respects, Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori were true European intellectuals able to overcome their limitations of nationality. Ellen Key travelled extensively around the "old continent" and visited a number of countries, including France, Germany, and Italy. She also developed cultural relationships with thinkers such as the Englishman Thomas Henry Huxley (Lengborn, 1993, pp. 825-827) and the Frenchman Romain Rolland, and with writers such as the Bohemian-Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke (Ramondino, 1989, pp. I-V) and the Italian Sibilla Aleramo (Åkerström, 2013, pp. 18-24). Testifying to the international significance of Ellen Key's thought is the fact that her main work, *The Century of the Child* (the original title of which was *Barnets Århundrade*), was published in Swedish in 1900, but within a very few years had been translated into numerous languages, including German, English, French, Italian, and Russian. Rudolf Steiner was born in the part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that is now in Croatia, but he studied first in Vienna and then in Berlin. He worked for many years in Weimar at the archives of Goethe's works, and finally travelled constantly around Europe, where he delivered very well-attended lectures (Bouchet, 2005) such as the ones organized by the Theosophical Society in Paris in 1906 (Rihouët-Coroze, 1976, pp. 153-156). Steiner also travelled to Bologna, in Italy, where he was one of the speakers at the Fourth International Philosophy Congress, together with thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Hermann von Keyserling, and mathematicians like Henri Poincaré and Federigo Enriques (Enriques, 1911). Maria Montessori also frequently travelled outside her country for

conferences and for work (Tassi, 1987, pp. 103-104). She was also very frequently visited by foreign scholars and figures particularly interested in her educational work, especially after the success of her " Children's House" (Casa dei Bambini) opened in the poor neighbourhood of San Lorenzo in Rome on 6th January 1907 (Montessori, 1950, pp. 39-40; Pironi, 2014, pp. 73-84). Finally, mention should also be made Maria Montessori's lengthy stay in India, in Adyar, near the main headquarters of the Theosophical Society, when her increasingly severe conflicts with Mussolini's Fascist regime induced her to leave Italy and go into exile abroad (Cives, 2010, p. 95-98).

It was their shared interest in theosophy which united the three authors considered in this article. The Theosophical Society (Stasulane, 2005, pp. 21-34; Giovetti, 2010) was founded in 1875 by the controversial Russian esotericist Helena Blavatsky and the American Colonel Henry Alcott, who was also a devotee of esoteric knowledge. The group immediately attracted numerous followers, many of whom were artists and intellectuals. The initial success of Madame Blavatsky's "creature" may be attributed to the fact that the Theosophical Society offered (and still does) teachings that promised to merge scientific progress and spiritual aspirations together, promoting brotherhood among peoples, and respecting cultural traditions different from those of the West. Especial attention was paid to the esoteric philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism and to Tibetan philosophy. Many, intellectuals and common people alike, saw Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy as a convincing interpretation of reality, the evolution of life, and human spiritual development.

Incidentally, it is curious to note that the esoteric revelations of Theosophy had a great influence – on some occasions direct, and on others covert – on pedagogy between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. We will see shortly that Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori were all attracted by the Theosophist doctrine, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Another of the great pedagogists of the time – the Polish educator Janusz Korczak[1] – was also close to Madame Blavatsky's movement. The relationship between educational commitment and esoteric Orientalism still remains to be studied: it is a surprising element, because Theosophy comprises a large component of irrationality, whilst pedagogy has always been characterized by its highly rational epistemic roots.

To return to the main argument, to be noted is that Ellen Key[2] was extremely interested in the work of Swedish intellectuals close to Theosophy, such as the writer Viktor Rydberg. We know from numerous references that the Swedish thinker, like her authors of reference (above all Goethe, Darwin, and Nietzsche) had a profound interest in Buddhist revelation and Oriental philosophies. Inevitably, during the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, in the absence of adequate academic studies, this interest was satisfied mainly by the numerous theosophical publications in circulation. We know that Ellen Key met Ru-

dolf Steiner in Paris in 1906 (Ambjörnsson, 2014, pp. 156-157), the year in which the Austro-German thinker was in the French capital to deliver a series of lectures in his role as an eminent exponent of the Theosophical movement (Rihouët-Coroze, 1976, pp. 153-156). We also know that Steiner was invited on several occasions – the first being in September 1900 – to participate in assemblies and conferences organized by the Theosophical Society. Initially, he was asked to attend in his capacity as an expert on Goethe and Nietzsche. However, Steiner's charisma and culture aroused such enthusiasm that he was persuaded to become a formal member of the Theosophical Society in Germany in 1902 (Bouchet, 2005, pp. 30-33). Subsequently, however, a number of authoritative theosophists, including Annie Besant, who succeeded Madame Blavatsky as leader of the group, realized that Steiner's theories could not be completely assimilated with those of theosophism, and these differences gradually provoked significant conflict between Steiner and the other theosophists. One of the reasons for this conflict was the greater weight that Steiner attributed to the Western philosophical and spiritual tradition with respect to that of the East, whereas for Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant the Eastern tradition was the true centre of mystic initiation (Bouchet, 2005, pp. 36-37). As a consequence of these differences, Steiner detached himself from the theosophists, and in 1913 founded the Anthroposophical Society, which still today engages in the study and publication of the Austro-German philosopher's thoughts and applies his theories in many fields, such as spiritual research, medicine, art, agriculture, and pedagogy (Rihouët-Coroze, 1976, pp. 192-206).

Maria Montessori was also attracted by the thought of Madame Blavatsky, and she enrolled in the European Section of the Theosophical Society in 1899. As said, in 1939 she chose to spend her exile in India, and specifically in the area of Adyar, where the Philosophical Society has its headquarters. During her exile in India, Maria Montessori continued to write and to conduct courses on her educational method (Giovetti, 2010, pp. 164-165).

Theosophy attributes significance to brotherhood among peoples, to the encounter between religions and sciences, and to the fusion of rationality and intuition. These elements of deep moral and cultural openness convinced many intellectuals to follow the spiritual and philosophical pathway marked out by Madame Blavatsky. After all, these were paths that appeared able to connect new scientific discoveries (Darwinism, for example) with the world's most ancient cultural traditions. Although theosophy raised doubts among many observers, it was in many respects an attempt to achieve a synthesis of the various aspects of human culture, thus responding to the most profound existential questions.

Another feature shared by the three authors considered here was the opposition encountered by their ideas and projects, although in different ways and to different extents.

Ellen Key's proposals concerning the role of women, marriage, religion, and culture were the subject of heated debate in Sweden. Her ideas were judged to be radical, and met with strong opposition from many of her compatriots (Lengborn, 1993, pp. 833-835). At times, Key also had bitter rivals in the area of female emancipation. Among them was Alexandra Gripenberg (1857-1913), one of the most important figures in the female emancipation movement in Finland between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Alexandra Gripenberg was a conservative, and fiercely opposed Ellen Key's ideas on numerous occasions because, for example, in her opinion they were alien to Christianity and too liberal on sexual issues (Kinnunen, 2013, pp. 57-58).

Steiner and his movement also frequently suffered enmity in the countries in which anthroposophism was widespread: for instance, on New Year's Eve 1923 the original headquarters of Steiner's group in Dornach in Switzerland – the large wooden building known as Goetheanum – was totally destroyed in an arson attack instigated by some of his enemies. Despite the great pain that this caused him, Steiner undertook to reconstruct a new Goetheanum in cement at the same place where the original one had been destroyed. The Austro-German thinker never saw his work completed, however, because he died in 1925 (Rihouët-Coroze, 1976, pp. 305-334). In Germany, during the early years of Nazism, the schools and clinics inspired by Steiner's ideas suffered increasing oppression, until the regime finally ordered their definitive closure (Schmidt, 1997, pp. 95, 213).

As we have seen, Maria Montessori, after trying in vain to save her educational projects in Fascist Italy, was obliged to leave the country in 1934: her pedagogy, which was based on liberty, could not be tolerated by Mussolini's regime (Cives, 2010, pp. 96-97), and in 1939 the Italian educationist travelled to India, where she remained for about ten years.

Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori lived through decades of great change and major tragedies. They experienced the horrors of the First World War, they saw the ascent of totalitarianism, and they witnessed the end of an old European world. The three personalities gave their own interpretations to the changes wrought by science, technology, and hope in social progress between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were true European intellectuals because they did not restrict their observations within the limited confines of their home countries but applied them across the entire continent. This is why it is important to analyse their ideas, proposals, and achievements – also with comparison among them – in order to verify the extent to which their vast cultural legacy might still be useful for human and educational progress in contemporary European society.

Starting from children's literature

Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori covered a large number of social themes and wrote about numerous educational problems. Children's literature occupies a marginal space in their books compared with the central core of their thought. Of the three of them, Ellen Key is the one who devoted the most space to stories and books for children: two sections of her *Barnets Århundrade – Böckerna mot Läseböckerna* and *Bilaga* – examine the relationship among childhood, stories, literature, and education. Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori, on the other hand, conducted only fragmentary – though significant – discussion of books and stories for young readers. Why, therefore, is it helpful to analyse this apparently marginal area of their theories? The answer is that some of the greatest classics of children's literature were written in the years between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries: Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* was published in 1865, Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* in 1873, Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* was published in various episodes, starting in 1881, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* was published in 1883 and Kipling's *The Jungle Book* in 1894, and Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* came out in 1906. *Nils Holgersson underbara res genom Sverige* by Selma Lagerlöf was published in 1907, and Pamela Travers' *Mary Poppins* in 1934. During this period, children's literature became consolidated as an important and diffused phenomenon: it was at that time, in fact, that a number of children's books enjoyed great success because they were extremely popular among young readers. This was the case, for example, of the adventure books by Jules Verne, Karl May[3], and Emilio Salgari[4], which were published between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Following the romantic rediscovery of fairy tales in the early years of the nineteenth century, Nordic and Greco-Roman legends were increasingly adapted to become part of books for children between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; a phenomenon that began in Britain and Germany and gradually emerged in Italy, France, and the rest of Europe. Consequently, while the period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the mounting success of children's literature, it is essential to understand what some of the most significant scholars in the field of education who lived through that period thought of the stories and books for young readers. In many respects, their analyses are the first examples of critical and pedagogical reviews of children's literature.

Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori are three great European intellectuals whose educational ideas for children are still today of major importance in the international pedagogical debate. Their approach to children's literature is consequently of not only historical but also current value. It should therefore be carefully examined.

Ellen Key and children's literature

An important school of nineteenth-century pedagogical thought, which was developed mainly by the German philosopher Johan Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), believed that an individual's psychophysical stages of development correspond to the phases of the historical progress of humanity. According to this theory, therefore, human childhood corresponds to the infancy of civilization. For this reason, Herbart maintained – based in part on his direct observations – that Homer's Odyssey was the most appropriate story for children (Herbart, 1806, pp. 20-21): Ulysses's adventures derived directly from the dawn of human history, and therefore included content and topics that fully corresponded to the onset of human life: that is, to the educational and moral needs of childhood (Herbart, 1841, pp. 229-231). This analogy between the ages of life and historical progress is known as the "Culture Epochs Theory of Child Development" (Chambliss, 1996, p. 259), and it was formalized by the German thinker Tuiskon Ziller (1817-1882), a pupil of Herbart (Gelpi, 1967, p. 347). The Culture Epochs Theory long remained at the centre of pedagogical debate.

In her writings on children's literature, to which we have already referred, Ellen Key resumed and developed this theory. In the chapter of her book *Barnets Århundrade* entitled "*Böckerna mot Läseböckerna*", the Swedish thinker wrote in her ironic manner that the correspondence between children's development and the evolution of humanity was a consolidated concept, and in certain aspects also a worn-out one (Key, 1900a, p. 176). She added that children are gifted with an ingenuous idealism and realism that can also be identified in the epic poetry of past peoples: the good, the heroic, and the supernatural present in ancient stories fascinate children, who, between a popular fairy tale and a new version of Andersen would undoubtedly choose the former, because they would find it more entertaining. She also showed that the same thing happened when children were offered first an original story by the old Nordic writer Snorre Sturluson and then a modern paraphrase of the same story (Key, 1900a, pp. 176-177). Children liked the old, original story much more than the modern version. These observations by Key were closely linked with other observations on the schoolbooks of her time. In her view, those books recounted artificial, moralistic stories frequently too abstract and fragmentary to be truly appreciated by children. If, she wrote, the authors of texts could hear the opinions of schoolchildren on their books, they would realize that children found the fruits of their labours unattractive: they preferred to read real fables and real poems, and not collections of pieces selected by the authors of the textbooks (Key, 1900a, pp. 183-184). Moreover, Ellen Key noted, young women at the end of the nineteenth century who had studied from textbooks were less cultured than their grandmothers, who although they had not attended literature classes and had not written compositions at school had been able to read the works of poets directly, and were often their

most attentive readers (Key, 1900a, pp. 187-188). Key did acknowledge, however, that there were some well-written textbooks (Key, 1900a, pp. 184-185), but she had a clear preference for texts published in their complete edition: for her, it was important for children to have access to ancient legends, folk tales, and Nordic and biblical stories in their original form. It is important to note here that Key believed that elderly nannies made the best storytellers because they related versions that conformed to the original stories, while adding interesting picturesque features (Key, 1900a, p. 175), and when children, who are all artistic by nature, listened to a fable, they had a complete impression that was an end in itself and associated only with the pleasure of listening to a good story (Key, 1900a, pp. 175-176). Everything that is great, good, heroic, and supernatural attracts children's attention, provided that it is presented in a form that they are able to visualize, as in the case of traditional fairy tales (Key, 1900a, p. 176). The fact that children will listen repeatedly to the same story with pleasure demonstrates that they have an unconscious need to assimilate it deeply and completely (Key, 1900a, p. 177). Ellen Key developed an interpretation of the relationship between fables and childhood that is at once ancient and current: it is ancient because it reprises the romantic idea of popular fables as a simple, authentic literary genre; for the Swedish author, a fable is like a toy constructed by a child, while many books for children, which may be richly illustrated, are like expensive toys that provide only fleeting pleasure at the moment when they are seen for the first time (Key, 1900a, p. 178-181). This interpretation of the relationship between fables and childhood is also extraordinarily current, since it can be applied to many contemporary published works for young readers. There are many books today which have captivating illustrations but tell stories that are not especially interesting or significant. These books are often connected to television series or media events, and have a tendency to be vehicles for stereotypes or banalities. Frequently, these published products are very commercially successful for a time but are then quickly forgotten. Ellen Key's pedagogical invitation, therefore, is to offer children profound, fascinating stories associated with popular poetry and a sense of wonder. From her point of view, traditional fables and ancient legends are the narrative forms best suited to the education of children. The Swedish writer believed that the traditional rhymes which have always been recited in nurseries are particularly important for children: these ancient poems have made children happy for generation after generation (Key, 1900a, p. 179). This ancient heritage of rhymes and stories is in harmony with childhood and allows children to face up to their discoveries and their feelings (Key, 1900a, pp. 188-189). All of this should also be true of schoolbooks; but they frequently present artificial or moralistic situations that children quickly unmask and reject (Key, 1900a, p. 180).

Ellen Key completed her reflections on children's literature by indicating books that should, in her opinion, be on children's story bookshelves in homes (Key,

1900b, pp. 245-247). The modernity of Ellen Key's thought is also apparent in the fact that she hoped that a bookshelf such as this would be created in every Swedish home: a desire for such a bookshelf involves granting a specific identity to childhood that requires not only material care but also special educational and aesthetic attention. The image of children as artists constantly emerges from Ellen Key's words: it is in beautiful, evocative, and profound stories that children find the content they need to grow and discover themselves and the world. Among the books suggested by Ellen Key for children's bookshelves some pertain to a taste that has now passed, but to be noted is that among the many books that she recommends there is a clear prevalence of fables and legends. What strikes contemporary readers is the sincere attention that Ellen Key paid to a topic – that of publishing and literature for children – which at the end of the nineteenth century was still nascent, and which only consolidated its significant contemporary commercial and cultural role in the years that followed. It is also in Key's attention to books for children that we are able to recognize how modern the Swedish writer's thoughts actually are.

Rudolf Steiner and children's literature

In order to understand the relationship between Rudolf Steiner and children's literature, it is necessary to return to the year 1812, when the German brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first edition of *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, perhaps the best-known and most widely distributed collection of folk tales in the world. For the two philologists, folk tales were like precious stones in which the sequence of life relating to the oldest times were embedded (Zipes, 2001 p. 124). The brothers Grimm collected and selected tales recounted by common people – such as elderly women and housewives – in order to recuperate the great narrative heritage of the German *Volk* and identify the wider roots of Indo-Germanic culture. As the American scholar Jack Zipes has shown, the two German brothers wanted to keep the mythical meaning of fables alive not only for readers of their time but also as a heritage for future readers (Zipes, 2001, pp. 124-125). Incidentally, it therefore also seems that the work of the brothers Grimm had an educational purpose: it was intended to connect new generations to their ancient cultural roots. Zipes stresses, however, that the Grimms' research defined the formal content of what a folk tale should be once and for all. In reality, it is hard to say he was wrong: between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, numerous researchers throughout Europe were collecting and publishing extensive collections of fairy tales from the various countries of the old continent, including the precious and exact work of carried out by Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius (1818-1889) in Sweden and by Giuseppe Pitré (1841-1916) in Italy (Grandi, 2014, pp. 46-48). In some ways, it is no exaggeration to state that from the middle of the nineteenth century until the begin-

ning of the twentieth, folk tales were among the principal subjects of anthropological, historical, and literary research in Europe. This is the context of Steiner's reflections on the relationship between fairy tales and childhood. In two lectures given by the Austro-German author in Berlin in 1908 and 1913 (respectively entitled *Märchendeutung* and *Märchendichtungen im Lichte der Geistesforschung*), Steiner illustrated his theories on the origins of fables and the connection between fairy tales, childhood, and the spiritual growth of humanity. For Steiner, traditional fables did not result from a people's fantasy; rather, they went back to very ancient times, when man had not yet developed a rational civilization. This humanity from times long past possessed a form of clairvoyance that was an intermediate state between wakefulness and sleep. Through this condition, humanity was able to explore the spiritual world and unite itself with the forces of nature then being represented in fairy tales (Steiner, 1908, pp. 43-51). Steiner added that those who lived in this particular state of clairvoyance did not want to be disturbed by the noise of the world, and desired to live in solitude. The many sages and hermits described in fables therefore lived in poverty and solitude in the forests, but they also knew the forces that connect man to the spiritual world.

Steiner's explanation of the origins of fables seems to be associated with the figure of the shaman. As many scholars of anthropology and folklore have recalled (Eliade, 1951, pp. 59-63; Hoppál, 2007, pp. 21-30; Benozzo, 2007, pp. 96-110), one of the functions of the shaman was to "travel" alone through the spiritual worlds that exist beyond the confines of reality. These journeys were made in a dream or in a state of ecstasy. The shaman returned from them with stories, myths, and teachings. In other words, the shaman entered a state of clairvoyance that led him beyond everyday life towards the world of the spirit.

Steiner believed that fables were food for the soul because they recounted the profound relationships between the images produced by the soul and events in the universe (Steiner, 1913, pp. 16-18): in fables, the soul hears echoes of what it is experiencing, but does not always comprehend. Fables are the most appropriate form of presentation for children, because this kind of story has ties to the most intimate part of childhood (Steiner, 1913, p. 32). According to Steiner's theories, a child is primordially joined to life, and hence needs fables as food for the soul. The fable is attached to the roots of existence, and therefore provides children with the strength to grow (Steiner, 1913, p. 33). Steiner poetically believed that fables and legends can be compared with guardian angels who accompany people from birth throughout their earthly pilgrimage (Steiner, 1913, pp. 34-35).

Rudolf Steiner offered an interpretation of the fable as both the primordial root and force for growth in the future. From this perspective, the fable is the principal narrative form conveying the images that permit children to grow properly. In addition, the figure of the guardian angel associated with fables alludes to the fact that

this type of story offers advice on spiritual advancement to children and adults alike. From Steiner's viewpoint, fables and legends activate pedagogical processes because they convey enduring truths that apply also to the future.

Also part of Steiner's esoteric philosophy evidences the idea that enduring stories can guide humanity along its path of spiritual evolution. This concerns the "Akasha Chronicles" (Steiner, 1910, pp. 106-107), which he presumably discovered in the course of his theosophical studies. For Steiner, the Akasha Chronicles were a kind of intangible depository conserving the indelible traces of spiritual deeds since the most far-off times. They could still be read by initiates with suprasensible levels of perception. In his view, the Akasha Chronicles, like legends and fables, are forms of storytelling from the past to guide man on his spiritual evolution towards the future. This is a kind of Pedagogy of Storytelling in which stories are selected and interpreted from a spiritual and esoteric standpoint.

It should also be pointed out that, for Steiner, a child's development arrives at a significant turning point between the ages of nine and ten, when the child's attention turns to all of nature, because children do not yet know how to distinguish between themselves and the outside world. He suggested presenting fables, legends, and myths to children of this age, because the artistic descriptions in them help children create useful images of what they discover as they explore the world (Steiner, 1924, p. 49). Based in part on these reflections, when pupils reach the age of about nine, teachers at Steinerian schools read them stories from Nordic mythology that contain powerful images considered appropriate for helping the children in their conquest of the world (Homberger, 1995, pp. 49-50).

It is also significant that Steiner did not think that textbooks were helpful for children. In his opinion, such books are suitable for furnishing information more to adults than to children. For Steiner, textbooks should be rejected because they ruin the individuality of young people and do not provide useful advice to teachers on how to work at school (Steiner, 1924, p. 37).

There is one final element to be considered: the influence that Steiner indirectly exerted over children's literature, especially fantasy literature. One of Steiner's most important followers in Great Britain was Owen Barfield (1898-1997). He was a literary critic and a personal friend of C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and of Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Barfield expounded his literary theories in books, including *Poetic Diction*, published in 1928, and *Saving the Appearances*, published in 1957, which were very much appreciated by British universities. Barfield was well versed in anthroposophy, so that Steiner's ideas were favourably received in his books and thoughts (Fischer, 2011, pp.135-157). For instance, according to Steiner, myths were a form of narrative that sprang naturally from the primitive state of knowledge of ancient man, who was only able to interpret reality through mythological images that did not distinguish between the individual

and the cosmos. In the opinion of Steiner and Barfield and many other thinkers from the romantic era, development of the individual psyche from childhood was a recapitulation of the evolution of human knowledge (Fischer, 2011, pp. 141-142). In his reflections, Barfield often resumed and developed these theories, as when he wrote that for ancient peoples at the dawn of language and knowledge there was no difference between the 'literal' and 'metaphorical' meaning of a word. Ancient languages used words in a 'mythological' sense. For example, they had only one word to describe 'wind', 'breath', and 'spirit': for ancient peoples, the wind was the breath of the divine spirit (Barfield, 1928, pp. 77-82). Barfield's ideas – and therefore those of Steiner – were frequently at the centre of discussions by the Inklings, a group of Oxford intellectuals that included Lewis and Tolkien (Carpenter, 1978). The two of them were not only professors of English language and literature, but also writers for young people. Lewis and Tolkien studied ancient mythologies in detail, and drew many ideas for their novels from them. Barfield's theories on myth and language also exerted a powerful influence on the two professor-authors, as they themselves expressly acknowledged (Carpenter, 1978, p. 58). Accordingly, the contemporary imagery of fantasy novels derives in part from Steiner's reflections on the relationship between myth and knowledge.

Maria Montessori and children's literature

In order to understand the relationship between Maria Montessori and children's books, it is necessary briefly to review the history of children's literature in Italy between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when the Italian pedagogist laid the bases of her educational method.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no real children's literature in Italy, although there were many forms of oral storytelling for children that were often appreciated by adults as well. From many points of view, it may be said that children and adults throughout Italy have shared an extensive narrative heritage consisting of popular fairy tales, sacred and profane legends, and mediaeval stories such as those of the legends of Charlemagne's Paladins, and the adventures of Genevieve of Brabant. These were tales handed down through both oral storytelling and puppet and marionette theatres, which were extremely widespread throughout Italy and whose audiences included both adults and children (Cipolla, 2004; Melloni, 1978; Pandolfini Barberi, 1923). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first real 'classic' of Italian children's literature was a book dedicated to a puppet – Pinocchio – first published in 1881 in episodes in a magazine for children. There were various children's magazines in Italy between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Some of them were well edited and circulated quite widely, most notably the Giornale per i Bambini (The Children's Magazine), which was

founded in 1881, and Il giornalino della Domenica (The Sunday's Little Magazine), which first came out in 1906. As we have seen, Emilio Salgari, who was one of the most widely-published Italian authors of adventure books, and who was read and admired by young readers, also lived in the period between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This was a period of fundamental importance for Italian children's literature, because it is in those years that we find a large number of authors writing principally for young readers for the first time (Myers, 2012). In this regard, Maria Montessori noted in a book first published in 1938 that adults were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of their children's first years of life, and the theatres, books, and magazines expressly intended for children were indicative of this new awareness. According to Montessori, it was not just hygiene but also attention to stories for children that demonstrated the increasing attention being paid by adults towards children (Montessori, 1938, pp. XI-XII). This reflection by Maria Montessori is extremely significant because she gives magazines, books, and theatres for children the same importance as their fundamental hygienic and educational needs. She thus indicates that care of children should not be limited to satisfying their primary needs but could also be extended to the aesthetic, poetic, and narrative domains. In another section of her pedagogical analysis, she also wrote that knowing how to read and write was not the only thing children needed in order to become close to books. Literacy is fundamental, but a love of reading is only born when a child understands that fascinating stories are being told in books (Montessori, 1938, pp. 181-184). Discovery of the pleasures of reading can cause children to literally snatch books from one's hand, sometimes even tearing the pages for the joy of discovering what is in them. For this reason, Maria Montessori suggested that the use of books in the classroom should be regulated (Montessori, 1938, p. 184). This was advice born of good sense, and after all, education and reading means that children must attain the objective of looking after books with care. Nonetheless, it is also helpful to recall what Rosellina Archinto, one of the most intelligent and original of Italian publishers for children, has written on this subject: we can only have good adult readers if children have numerous books available from the first years of their lives which they can freely leaf through, look at, turn into toys, and even break. These acts bring children closer to books, and they create ties, curiosity, and a desire to understand and read (Archinto, 2007, pp. 251-261).

It is important to add that for Maria Montessori (Montessori, 1913, pp. 226-229), a child can only understand the meaning of a book when she or he has mastered logical language: even very well illustrated books are not appreciated by children until they have grasped the connection between language and logic which allows young readers to understand that written communication serves to transmit the thoughts of others. Indeed, comprehension of written language will initially even seem to be magical to children. Small readers then understand that the written language in books

is a spiritualized language that puts people of the whole world in communication with each other (Montessori, 1913, p. 229). From this last reflection, we clearly see Maria Montessori's desire to create a world of peace in which everyone is joined together as brothers and sisters through the instruments of culture, education, and knowledge.

With regard to fairy tales, however, unlike Ellen Key and Rudolf Steiner, Montessori took an extremely prudent position: in her opinion, children immerse themselves in fantasy when they experiences problems in their real-life environment. A child who takes refuge in imagination wishes to escape from difficulties or boredom (Montessori, 1938, pp. 209-217). However, Maria Montessori's educational proposals allow fables to be read to children from the age of seven years onwards, because in her opinion, smaller children do not know how to distinguish reality from fantasy, and may therefore be subject to great fear if they listen to fables (Tucker, 1981, pp. 73-74). Montessori's prudent stance on fables may possibly have derived from her scientific and positivist education. Moreover, her form of pedagogy envisages above all logic, concrete experience, and rationality (even though, as we will see, the imagination is also an important part of her educational method). Montessorian children are immersed in a reality which they gradually learn to understand and govern. It has also been proposed (Broccolini, 1973, p. 6) that exponents of natural education such as Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Maria Montessori always openly expressed their opposition to books for children. These educators believed that children are intrinsically good; they therefore did not appreciate books for children that frequently seek to teach children useless moral precepts in the guise of entertainment.

As said, there is one important element of the Montessorian educational proposal that decisively recovers the positive value of imagination, and therefore of storytelling: this concerns Cosmic Education, which the Italian author developed mainly during her Indian exile at the Theosophical Society. Maria Montessori noted that children have a genuine curiosity about the causes of natural phenomena, the origins of the world, and the meaning of life. These are complex questions that deserve answers. Montessori developed a Theory and a Cosmic Education to help children explore and comprehend phenomena and questions that are difficult yet fundamental. This educational path is only possible, however, if it starts from the imagination, from myths, and from fables. Through imagination, it is possible to stimulate children's enthusiasm for the things that need to be learned, while through myths and fables it is possible to discuss notions of a philosophical nature in a manner that is clear to a child's psychology (Montessori, 1947, pp. 29-47). After all, the purpose of the Cosmic Theory is to translate the marvels of the planet into terminology that children can understand (Honegger Fresco, 2014, pp. 109-110). Maria Montessori's Cosmic Theory relies on the imagination, and recovers myths and fables, in order to create an educational pathway that allows children not only to know, but also to re-

spect, the natural environment and the biosphere. This educational and ecological effort is of fundamental importance above all in present times.

Conclusions

"The uniformity, rhythm and symmetry that we find in an authentic fairy tale are extremely convincing for children" Ellen Key (1900a, p. 181)[5] wrote evocatively in *The Century of the Child*. In many respects, this statement by the Swedish thinker sums up this study, the purpose of which has been to review the reflections on children's literature of three great European intellectuals interested in the education of the young. The foregoing analysis of the thought of Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori has evidenced the desire to identify those special stories within the very broad panorama of storytelling which respects children's natural interest in the world and life's great questions. For these three authors, popular fables and ancient myths can help children explore and understand reality because, they believe, these stories perfectly reflect the psychology, developmental state, and imagination of the younger generation. From their time until today, children's literature has undergone significant changes, many metamorphoses, and great developments: fairy tales, just like myths, have been the subject of criticism, rewriting, and rediscovery that have transformed these ancient tales into stories that are always new and able to enchant young readers. It is not only the narrative form of fables or myths that interests our three thinkers, however: if we look carefully, it is apparent all three emphasise the connection that these specific stories create with children's imaginations in a positive, natural, and fruitful way. This same connection can activate educational and formative pathways that are of primary significance for the harmonious development of childhood. In many respects, this is one of the most significant and topical messages that Ellen Key, Rudolf Steiner, and Maria Montessori have bequeathed to modern times.

Notes

[1] See http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Korczak_Janusz on the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research website, visited on 13/09/2015.

[2] Much of the information provided here on the relationship between Ellen Key and Theosophy is taken from research carried out by the Swedish scholar Hedda Jansson (Director of the Ellen Key Research Institute, Ödeshög, Sweden). The interesting outcomes of her analysis were explained by her in a presentation entitled "Ellen Key and Theosophy in Sweden" during the "Ellen Key Study Days" at the Friedrich Ebert Memorial in Heidelberg (Germany) on 8 March 2014.

[3] Karl May (1842-1912) was a German writer of adventure books for children. His stories were often set in exotic, faraway places. His characters were split in Manichean fashion between good and bad. In his books, May heavily criticized the violence of colonialism. He reached the peak of his success between 1896 and 1898. It has been calculated that over 25 million copies of his books were published between the end of the nineteenth century and 1963 (Spina, 1970, pp. 2106-2107).

[4] Emilio Salgari (1863-1911) was the most important and best-loved Italian author of adventure books for children. His stories were almost always set in remote, exotic places, and as we have seen in the case of Karl May (although May and Salgari did not know each other personally), his characters were split in a Manichean fashion between good and bad. Salgari, too, was a powerful critic of colonialism, especially British colonialism. His books were frequently turned into very successful films for the cinema and television, which helped keep him famous in Italy (Faeti, 1992, pp. 1-75).

[5] "Den enformighet, rytm och symmetri, hvilka finnas i den äkta folksagan, äro för barnet synnerligen fängslande". Translated by the author.

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William Grandi
(Ph.D. in Pedagogy) is an Associate Professor at the University of Bologna. His studies regard Children's Literature and History of Education. His research topics are connections between education and myth-mythologies, the History of Schools, the History of publishing for school and children, the Literary "Genres" for children (Fantasy, Science-Fiction, Horror, Mystery, Detective Stories, Adventure books and films for childhood and youth).
Contact: william.grandi@unibo.it