

TANULMÁNYOK

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ROBERT BACALJA¹ – KATARINA IVON² – DIANA NENADIĆ-BILAN³**Identity Formation in the Stories of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić**

Identities of male and female characters in the stories of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić are formed on a male-female binary opposition. The authors explain this thesis by analysing the leading male and female characters in the stories of Fisherman Plunk and His Wife (Ribar Palunko i njegova žena) and Stribor's Forest (Šuma Striborova). Despite the predominance of the patriarchal model in the social context, the authors point to the distinction between women's activity and courage and the passivity and naivety of male characters. The stories show a gradual evolution of the male protagonists, influenced by female persistence, motherhood, as well as parenthood. The development of the characters mentioned above goes hand in hand with the motif of travel, as a metaphor of life, during which a thorough transformation of the patterns of behaviour and the system of values of the male characters occur.

Introduction

Starting from the constructivist nature of identity which is noticeable in the fairy tale narrative of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, we can see how the identities of her characters are formed on a male-female opposition. If we recognize contradictions about identity-alterity relationship, most characters gain their narrative status in opposition to a different one, contrasting them with their diversity, which in the case of the author reflects in the gender roles. Therefore, there is an almost paradigmatically positive attitude towards the construction of female characters, who mostly make a stable female identity in the narration, and also serve as correctors for male characters. This is particularly noticeable in the fairy tales of Stribor's Forest and Fisherman Plunk and His Wife. Although it is in the mostly patriarchal family environment (Duda, 2012), female identities stand out with their persistence and firmness, and they also possess a

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significant dose of female emancipation, which is not characteristic of the period when the fairy tale opus⁴ was created or the fact that it is primarily a female engagement that insisted on taking over a role which is not exclusively related to the private sphere of the home (Detoni Dujmić, 1998). Following this line of reasoning, both fairy tales are based on the male-female system of values and consequently the acquisition of women over (power). Female characters are daring, intuitive, ethically dominant, and utterly opposed to male characters who take on the passive position in both of these fairy tales and whose lives are managed by a mother or a wife. They often possess a character trait of naivety and a lack of understanding proper values such as modesty, family love, parenthood. They usually encounter some obstacles which are the result of their misguided aspirations or prejudices: for example, in Plunk, this is a longing for the material, not the ambition for modest and harmonious family life; in the Stribor's Forest, outer beauty overwhelms the son's mind. On the opposite pole, there is the modesty and devotion of the poor girl, her diligence and persistence when in the bitter cold she goes around and sells candles. By leaving for the world of fantasy, that trait changes. The character trait, which we could tentatively call some naivety, is also present in the character of Plunk from one of the few “sea” fairy tales by Ivan Brlić-Mažuranić, Fisherman Plunk and His Wife:

“And then Plunk heard that there were also rich sheriffs and misers, men of great power and might, who lived in luxury and comfort, lapped in gold and fed on truffles. Then Plunk fell a-thinking how he too might come to look upon such riches and live in the midst of them. So he made up his mind that for three whole days he would sit in his boat on the sea and not take any fish at all, but see if the spell will help him“ (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 51).

Stribor's Forest

The naivety and lack of concern pointed out in Stribor's Forest can be traced through the figure of the son, who, seeing the snake (in which the “human soul” was cursed), says: *“Dear me, what a pretty snake! I should rather take it home [..]“ (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 11)* and thus quickly dismisses the value frameworks of the family. The snake clutches to his naive thoughts and sees the opportunity for freedom: *“Here's the silly fool who is going to help me out of my trouble-thought the sinful soul within the same, so she made haste and turned herself out of a snake into a most beautiful woman standing there before him“ (op. cit.).*

⁴Tales of Long Ago were published in 1916. The first edition consisted of six stories, and two additional stories were added to the 1926 edition.

Mažuranić also develops this trait of naivety and good-naturedness with the image of his indecisiveness at the moment when he could have got rid of the “forest monster“: *“But he was one of your good-natured timid and shy youths; moreover he was ashamed to say »no« to her when she had transformed herself all on his account. Besides, he liked her because she was pretty and he couldn't know in his innocence what her remained in her mouth“* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 12). His character forms on the male indecision before beauty, that is, the inability to comprehend and observe life with the wisdom of an adult. He appears to be an immature individual over whom the female (motherly) figure demonstrates her emotional, experiential and ethical potential (Molvarec 2016, p. 328). Namely, his mother immediately saw that it was a snake, because, despite the fact that beauty had concealed the evil character, it did not slip her attention that the beautiful girl still had a snake's tongue in her mouth. Like in every fairy tale, her road, the road of the hero is fraught with obstacles, and the other fairy tales in the opus of Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić also have this solid start and composition. We can find this long-suffering and troubled road of the main hero far back in *Odyssey*: *“Gods are angry with Odysseus, suitors destroy his house, and the way to overcoming the obstacles is thorny and long”* (Bacalja et al., 2017, p. 24).

In *Stribor's Forest*, the daughter-in-law's- snake's wickedness brings obstacles to Mother: *“There was a mountain peak there as high as the clouds, and one day the daughter-in-law bade the old Mother to go and fetch her snow from the summit for he to wash“* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 12). The son again shows weakness, and inclines to his wife and thus harms his mother: *“The son was there at the time, but he only laughed at the words, simply to please his wife”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2012, p. 13). These obstacles, as the story unfolds, only accumulate, and this is a typical position of heroes in most fairy tales and heroes with increasing persistence and often with assistants overcome the barriers (Čubelić 1970, p. 83). Another obstacle is even more demanding: *“Go out on to the frozen lake. In the middle of the lake there is a hole. Get me a carp there for dinner“* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2012, p. 13) to his Mother's torment and fear that she might fall into the lake: *“The ice will give under me, and I shall perish in the lake [...]“* (op. cit.), the daughter-in-law-says sarcastically: *“The carp will be pleased if you go down with him [...]“* (op. cit.). The second obstacle also leaves the son out of his depth, and he appeases his wife: *“And again the son laughed and the Mother was so grieved that she went out at once to the lake. The ice cracked under the old woman, and she wept so that the tears froze on her face”* (op. cit.)

But usually female heroes in Mažuranić's fairy-tales have a stable trait, just as all the heroes of fairy tales, which originates from the myth, fight for their attitude (Botica, 2013, pp. 418–419), which, in this case, is motherhood and parenthood: *“But yet she would not pray to God for help, she would keep it from God so that her son was sinful”* (op. cit.). The mother, despite the overwhelming temptations placed before her by her child, remains the same. And in spite of the sight when the snake-daughter –in-law uncontrollably craved for the little magpies, and when the whole village saw that she was a snake, it was not enough for her son to return to his family and come to his mother with love and desire for forgiveness:

“When the Snake–Woman so unexpectedly caught sight of magpies, she betrayed herself. Her serpent's nature craved its prey, she darted down the passage after the little magpies and shot out her quivering tongue at them as she used to do in the forest. Gossips and neighbours screamed and crossed themselves, and took their children home, because they realised that the woman indeed was the snake from the forest” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 18).

But the son has changed since he met the snake woman and kept a stable characteristic of indecision and influence of others. Therefore, there is no sign of the child's love for the parent in him, but the evil brought by the daughter-in-law into the house governs him and his actions, and he throws out his mother into the cold: *“But her son was utterly infatuated, so that he only hardened himself the more against the village and against his mother, and against the evidence of his own eyes. He would not turn away the snake-woman but cried up on his mother: – Where did you get young magpies at this time of the year, old witch. Be off you out of my house!”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 19). Despite the fact that he is sorry for what he has done to his mother, the evil daughter still exercises power over him:

“But as the Mother crossed the threshold, the fire went out on the hearth and the crucifix fell from the wall. Son and daughter-in-law were left alone in the darkened cottage- and now the son felt that he had sinned greatly against his mother, and he repented bitterly. But he did not care to speak of it to his wife, because he was afraid so he just said: “Let's follow the mother and see her die of cold“ (op. cit.).

On the other hand, the characters in Mažuranić's fairy tales show “functional stability”, which the mother in Stribor's Forest *“confirms; she, by taking on the role of the travel victim, goes through the enchanted forest with the unquestionable and sole purpose of rescuing her son”*

(Ivon, Mataija, 2016, p. 353). When the mother came to Stribor (who is the forest deity and a ruler of the fantastic which constantly mixes with the real in this story), the female victim prevails again, because the mother could have gone back to her youth as offered by Stribor. However, sacrificing herself for her child, she rather chooses her disaster and son, than returning to her youth and losing her son. Her steady character, her perseverance and attitude, the struggle for parenthood and child, subordinates the whole narration to her noble intent. Motherhood and the love for her son overcome all the evil and misfortune that the snake-woman brought to their home and family:

“But I would rather abide in my misery and know that I have a son. You should give me all the riches and happiness in the world and I forget my son. [...] The entire forest quaked, the earth fell in, and the huge oak, with its castles [...] – The daughter-in-law gave a shriek, turned into a snake, wiggled again down a hole and Mother and son were left alone side by side in the Forest” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 23).

Eventually, the son realises his mistake and begs the mother for forgiveness. Despite everything her child has done to her, *“her mother did not even blame her”* (op. cit.). Finally, the return home follows to the centre of life and warmth- to the hearth and family happiness: *“Later on the young man married that poor girl who had brought the Brownies to their house. They all three living happily together to this day, and Wee Tintilinkie loves to visit their hearth of a winter's evening”* (op. cit.), and the *“home [...], disrupted by the act of Mythical Evil, becomes the embodiment of family togetherness obtained through the journey, confirmed by the power of maternal identity, while the snake-daughter-in-law disappears along with the forest confirming and supporting the thought of the aforementioned authenticity of the two spaces”* (Ivon, Mataija, 2016, p. 352).

Fisherman Plunk and His Wife

In the story of Fisherman Plunk and His Wife, we again encounter a similar contrast between male and female figures. Fisherman Plunk does not realise that because of his selfishness he endangered the life and harmony of his family: *“But Plunk was such a zany that he couldn't think of anything else but just this, that he was set on seeing and enjoying the Sea King's treasure; and so he didn't wish for his child back again, or that his wife should regain the power of speech, but he bagged the Dawn-Maiden [...]”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 54). Utterly

selfish, Plunk does not care about the Dawn-Maiden's warning that he will not be able to return because, if he goes to the underwater world, three terrible and unsurmountable obstacles stand in the way: *“One troubles the waves, the second raises the storm, and the third wields the lightning”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 55). Nevertheless, he continues his way to the mill-wheel where he will go down to the underwater world. Selfishness still leads him although he justifies himself by the poverty that drives him to his unreasonable and immature actions: *“Dawn-Maiden, you've never known want in this world. I shan't hanker back after this earth, where I'm leaving nothing but ill-luck behind”* (op. cit.).

At first Plunk is delighted with this submarine unreal world:

“Plunk looked around and cried out: - Ho, there's a wonder for you. A whole field of golden sand! Now what Plunk had taken to be a big field was the great Hall of the Sea King. Round the Hall stood the sea like a marble wall, and above the Hall stood the sea, like a glass dome. Down from the stone Alatir streamed a blue glare like moonlight. From the ceiling hung festoons of pearls, on the floor below stood the tables of coral” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 57).

Something begins to bother Plunk despite the abundance of meals and drinks, the enormous splendour and richness of the new world, the world of wonders and the unbelievable that he longed for and for which he abandoned his former life and family. He brings back memories of his previous life and a modest dinner he had with his family. This superb dinner of choice-dishes and drinks did not satisfy him, so he wanted a decent supper: *“[...] King of Sea, I was wishing that I had a good helping of boiled wild spinach”* (op. cit.). On the other hand, meeting with the lost son stirs in Plunk a feeling of fatherhood and parenthood, but also a family feeling. The abundance and wealth he wished for are no longer a priority; it is the return to his family and the humble life as a real value:

“He looked at the little king and then –Plunk was startled. It was his own baby boy, little Winpead (Vlatko Little) [...]” Look at him, the urchin, how he's got on, lording it here in idleness and sport, and his mother at home gone dumb with grieving“ (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 58).

The aroused fatherhood in the meeting with Vlatko Little changes Plunk and makes him cry: *“All the Sea King's attendants gathered round him and said to one another: – Well, well, he must have been a great lord on earth, to weep amid such splendours.”* (op. cit.). Feeling

regenerated and suddenly becoming a conscious father and husband, he only now maturely replies, realising the immense values of the family: *“Upon my soul“, cried Plunk wrathfully, “I was the same as your King here. I had a son tugged my beard, a wife who showed me marvels, and wild spinach, brothers, as much as you want-and no need to turn coach-wheels before anybody“* (op. cit.).

But Plunk's faithful and courageous wife, as a real heroine of the fairy tale, decides to continue her struggle for the preservation of the family. There is no family without Plunk and Vlatko Little. Indeed, some miraculous assistants help her in doing so. She comes to her mother's grave where a Hind with its fairy, inanimate, silent language tells her mother's thoughts:

“You must not sit there and pine away, my daughter, for else your heart will break and your house will perish. But every evening you must get Plunk's supper ready, and after supper you must unpick some fine hemp as well. If Plunk does not come home, then you must take his supper in the morning and the fine hemp as well, and also the slender twin pipes and go up the rocky mountain. Play upon the twin pipes. The snakes and their young will come and eat up the supper, and the sea-fowl will line their nests with the hemp” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 59).

This is all the preparation for a trip which the Hind makes arrangements for:

“Your Plunk is in grievous trouble. Now listen and hear how you may help him. In the Unknown Sea there is a Big Bass, and that Bass has a golden fin, and on that fin grows a golden apple. If you catch that Bass by moonlight, you will deliver your dear Plunk from his trouble” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 60).

As a real heroine of the fairy tale she encounters obstacles:

“But on the road to the Unknown Sea you will have to pass three caverns of cloud: in the first there is a monstrous Snake, the Mother of All Snakes- it is she who troubles the sea and stirs up the waves; in the second there is a monstrous Bird, the Mother of All Birds-it is she who raises the storm; and in the third there is a Golden Bee-it is she who flashes and wields the lightning“ (op. cit.).

She overcomes them one by one with increasingly greater strength and determination of a brave and faithful wife:

“The woman sailed on, and came to the second cavern, and in the second cavern there was a monstrous Bird, the Mother of All Birds. She craned her frightful head through the opening, her iron beak gaped wide; she spread her vast wings in the cavern and flapped them and raised a storm” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 61.)

Hind/Mother's advice helps Plunk's wife to continue her journey and also overcome the second obstacle:

“The gulls all entreated the Mother-Bird and also advised her to take a little nap, and they would meanwhile raise the storm for her. The Mother-Bird listened to her children's entreaty, clung to the wall of the cavern with her iron talons and went to sleep. But the gulls great and small, instead of raising the storm, calmed the winds and soothed them. So the dumb Woman sailed through the second cavern and came to the third” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 63).

In the third cavern she even was asleep. *“Eh, my dearie, but the sea was quiet that day, with the winds at rest in the sky, and the fearsome Snake asleep in the first cavern, and the monstrous bird asleep in the second, and the wearied Woman in the third”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 64). Precisely at the time (when his weary wife is asleep), we can see a change in Plunk. While the sea world is sleeping, Plunk is dreaming of a new beginning in accordance with his sudden awareness and a new look at life and values: *“I never asked anyone's counsel when I was making fool of myself, nor shall I do so now that I have come to my senses. And as he said this he went softly to the cradle, wound the cradle to his own back and started to run away with his son”* (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 65).

In this *“complexity of the narrative structure, Plunk changes several times: from the traveller searcher (real treasures) through the traveller victim (his misconception) to the seeker passenger (spiritual treasure). His travel urge is balanced by the woman who travels motivated by the conviction of her action or the utmost necessity because only her search can save her family”* (Ivon, Mataija 2016, p. 345).

Now Plunk does not look for enormous wealth but invokes the Dawn-Maiden to save his family, and she gives them magic things which can rescue them from the pursuit of the Sea King, who

wants to bring back Vlatko Little. She gives Plunk's wife a brodered kerchief and a pin: “*They hoisted the kerchief, and it became a white sail, and the pin turned into a rudder. The wind filled the sail, so it bulged like a ripe apple, and the Woman gripped the rudder with a strong hand*” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, p. 67). No obstacles on the road to the togetherness and harmony of the family can hurt those who have chosen to live in this way:

“A wonder of wonders, it flew over the sea before its terrible pursuers- the fiercer the pursuit, the greater help it was to them; for the swifter wind blew, the more swiftly yet flew the boat before the wind, and the swifter the sea, the more swiftly rode the boat upon the sea” (op. cit.).

Finally, like in Stribor's Forest, the return home follows:

“The boat split on the rock. Down went the sail and the rudder, down went the golden cradle; away flew the Golden-winged Bee- and Plunk and his wife and child were left alone on the beach outside their cottage. When they sat down that night to their supper of wild spinach they had clean forgotten all that had happened” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, pp. 67–68).

Plunk's wife is a prototype of a traditional woman dedicated to her husband and child. Her peculiar obedience is in harmony with the Jewish-Christian tradition which “*has historically largely determined the relationship to a woman in society*” (Berković, 2009, p. 307). Plunk's relationship to women mirrors the sociological aspects of gender roles and their relations, and it is possible to discern the dominant social norms in society because it is “*culture that poses different expectations to men and women*” (Kamenov et al., 2011, p. 196).

However, in this paper, we are primarily interested in the value aspects of the story. The values, hierarchically superior to attitudes and behaviours, determine, explain, and direct the activities, and thus the actions of the main characters in the story. It is impossible not to notice the difference in the motivation of behaviour between fisherman Plunk and his wife. Opposite fisherman Plunk, who does not recognise the values of family life, stands his wife, who is characterised by fidelity, self-sacrifice, and unselfish love for her husband and child. This disharmony extends to the very end of the story when Plunk, as a result of events, restructures his concept of family values and experiences the transformation of his behaviour.

The woman's concern for the child and her husband is an expression of unconditional love. Her commitment is a powerful motive in the painstaking and self-sacrificing search of the lost

child and husband. She reveals herself as a being of tenderness and strength, emotionality and will. She remains a faithful guard of the home hearth. However, although she is primarily concerned with the family and housework, she gradually takes on the role of seeker and rescuer. At the most dramatic moment, she is put before the choice: son or husband. She remains faithful to her husband by fulfilling her role as a life companion. Her fidelity and charity lead to Plunk's transformation, that is to change his behaviour and to accept the value of the family being together.

In today's time of endangered marital and family togetherness and the rejection of the model of love as a victim, the story of Fisherman Plunk and His Wife offers a model of unselfish love. Western culture, "*embracing itself as the main idol of itself*" (Frankl, 2010, p. 45), reduces the value of patience, forgiveness, togetherness, and selflessness. Plunk's wife is described as the universal ideal of the person - to be there for others. Unselfish love, based on living a life for others, is a way of establishing a lasting and stable family community. Plunk's wife reveals unselfish love as a love for serving and forgiving, as a love that trusts and hopes. Awaiting the return of the child and husband, Plunk's wife passes through a deep mental crisis, uncertainty and anxiety. Her trust and hope of love are on trial. This perception of love is far from romantic ecstasy because "*love that does not include weakness does not deserve its name*" (Courth, according to Tamarut, 2015, p. 683). Touching the bottom of her powerlessness, she experiences the Almighty of Heaven.

Although at first Plunk's family successfully resisted the challenges, the disappearance of their son became a new test of family togetherness. The values and functions of the family, as well as its structure, were put on trial. It seems that the whole family is growing apart, but the self-sacrificing victim of Plunk's wife brings about the reunited family. The story powerfully emphasises motherhood, that is, parenthood as a universal value. The parental role, as one of the most crucial family roles, manifests itself in taking over and accepting care and responsibilities for the child. The child's upbringing is "*possibly the most significant and most likely the most demanding task*" (Ljubetić, 2011, p. 283). For the proper development of a child, the love of mother and father is essential. The concept of parenthood is changing and building up as the story unfolds. Plunk's awakened parenthood joins the motherhood of his wife, representing two sides of parenthood. With the mother's unconditional love and Plunk's awakened paternity, Vlatko returns to the family reunited. The presence of a child changes parenting behaviour by causing strong emotions in the parents. Explicitly, in the struggle for his son's salvation, Plunk accepts his share of parental responsibility. Parental responsibility, as a component of the concept of successful parenting, is the connecting thread of all other parental

competencies. Bergmann (2007) points out that for parents the essential competence is precisely the responsibility.

Since values and morality “*so closely relate that it is almost impossible to separate them*” (Rakić and Vukušić, 2010, p. 772), the motives of the action of the main characters in the story can also be evaluated from a moral point of view. The good and bad behaviour of the main characters is differentiated. The good behaviour is the love for others and the responsibility for the actions. The basic starting point of every ethics indicates the human ability to make decisions that precede responsibility freely. Jankovic et al. emphasise that “*an individual shapes his self-esteem in the social environment in which they live and that environment affects the creation of value orientation*” (Janković et al., 2004, p. 92). From a value perspective, the story is a celebration of family and marital togetherness as one of the fundamental values of humanity. Inner and exterior pressure on the Plunk family, especially those caused by the disappearance of their son, failed to destroy the family. True love changes with one's self-sacrifice and creates substantial family communion. The love of Plunk's wife is an act of will and firm decision but at the same time the oblivion of the selfish self. Commitment to the ones who need it creates a new marriage and family harmony.

Conclusion

In the other works by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, we also encounter protagonists of similar character traits. Some naivety and immaturity appear in the story of Reygoch (Regoč), in the outlining of the character of Reygoch himself, as well as in the characters of the little children in the story but also in the fairy tale of How Quest Sought the Truth. In this sense, small Primrose in the story of Little Brother Primrose and Sister Lavender is also delightful, a little brother who is protected by his older sister. The male protagonists are characterised by inadequacy, although sometimes there are also real male heroes who control their destinies like Relya:

“As Prince Relya said this, he took the blade of the scythe, fitted it with a mighty hilt at the gorge, and then he hurried out into the world to find his heritage. The earth rang beneath his feet, his hair streamed in the wind, so swiftly did he stride; and his murderous blade shone in the sun as though it were plated with flame. So Relya went on without stopping. He strode on by day, and by night he did not rest; both great and small got out of his way” (Brlić-Mažuranić, 2002, pp. 118–119).

However, during the journey, the transformation of identity occurs:

“The journey of Primrose and Jagor is ultimately the confirmation of their children's identity in contrast to Relya's journey which becomes a way of accepting the Christian philosophy of forgiveness. Relya who defeats with his sword the Fury Dragon, planning to realise his return in a struggle, becomes a humble convert, whose highest value is the readiness to change, discard arrogance, violence and vindictiveness and the acceptance of a non-violent form of behaviour.” (Ivon, Mataija, 2016, p. 354).

It is precisely Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić who, in building the identity of her characters, finds examples of the evolution of human characters under the strong influence of motherhood, parenthood, female perseverance, and above all love and courage. The motif of travel, as a metaphor for life, i.e. the road of life, is the primary cornerstone of her narrative procedure, in which the characters experience transformations by her views on life. In this transformation, the mythological motifs and fantasy play an essential role, where her heroes mature by breaking away from their delusions and turning to the life values that the author emphasises and repeats: truth, courage, family, love, fidelity and perseverance. In this ethical key, with the substantial domination of gender characterisation, we indeed interpret the shaping of narrative identities presented in the Tales of Long Ago.

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