

Pinocchio: a Bildungsroman?

Alessandra Avanzini

Abstract – In this article I will discuss the novel by Collodi *The adventures of Pinocchio*. I will start from the following question: can we consider *Pinocchio* a Bildungsroman? I'll show that it is hardly possible to do so because there is no change in *Pinocchio*. The second question is whether this novel is actually a novel for children. I will argue that this is a book that does not consider the feelings of the boy, but aims at forcing him to adapt to the world outside. This world is made up of specific values that *Pinocchio* does not understand. These are the same values that characterize the post Risorgimento period. *Pinocchio* does not understand them but finally decides to accept them and abandon the search for his own identity.

Riassunto – In questo intervento prendo in esame il romanzo *Le avventure di Pinocchio* di Collodi, partendo da una domanda centrale: si può considerare *Pinocchio* un romanzo di formazione? Cercherò di dimostrare che difficilmente si può sostenere una tesi del genere, giacché nel racconto di Collodi il suo personaggio non è aperto ad un vero cambiamento. La seconda questione è se questo racconto sia davvero un racconto per ragazzi. Questo libro, infatti, non tiene in considerazione quanto i ragazzi provano, ma mira a conformarli al mondo adulto, cioè a valori che *Pinocchio* non comprende. Sono gli stessi valori che caratterizzano l'epoca post-risorgimentale. *Pinocchio* non comprende questi valori, ma ad un certo punto decide di accettarli e di abbandonare la ricerca della propria identità.

Keywords – literature for children, childhood, education, educational relations, Collodi

Parole chiave – letteratura per l'infanzia, Infanzia, educazione, relazione educativa, Collodi

Alessandra Avanzini (San Secondo, Parma, 1967) is PhD in Pedagogy and co-editor of the series “LINEE” (studies on literature for children and young adults), and editor in chief of the series “Gazza Ladra”, both published in Milan by FrancoAngeli. She is currently curating the project A.L.I.C.E.E. (Analysing Literature for Young Adults and Children in Europe and Elsewhere), whose first volume – on children's literature from Italy, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom and Portugal (1945-2012) – was published in 2013 and the second in 2015. Her area of research also includes an in-depth analysis of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll..

1. *Pinocchio*: a Bildungsroman?

When I was a child, *Pinocchio* was always present in my parents' teachings, but most of all in my teacher's words: they used to say 'if you tell a lie, your nose will grow longer and longer, just like *Pinocchio*'s one'. And quoting Collodi, they would say: “there are two kind of lies: those with short legs and those with long noses”. Sometimes I was really worried about the length of my nose and my legs... but, just like *Pinocchio*, I shrugged my shoulders and kept on playing and telling innocent white lies!

Pinocchio was also present in adults' words to remind us that we had to obey parents, we had to behave in *the* right way (there really seem to be no more than one right way to follow...), otherwise terrible things would have happened to us: and the image of poor Pinocchio hanging from the big oak tree terrified me as well as his long donkey ears.... not to talk about poor Lampwick, who after all was nothing more than a little child with a tiny brain, but didn't deserve to die! For all these reasons I was not fond of Pinocchio at all and I didn't enjoy my mother telling me the story.

I think this personal experience of mine can show how profoundly Pinocchio has entered the Italian conscience: it was and it is generally considered a *Bildungsroman*, a novel that shows how a person's formative years can lead to a better understanding of the world and of their place in the world.

Actually it is possible to say that the story of Pinocchio as a model for a personal growth is focused on the child's 'guilt', on continuous threats (death in Pinocchio is always present, Pinocchio himself risks dying and in fact has to die to become a real boy), well this model has been exported also abroad, particularly with the Walt Disney film, that is certainly less cruel than the original book, but contains this idea of dependence on adults and of the unique model for a right behaviour.

Looking at the novel with critical eyes, can we really consider it a *Bildungsroman*?

In order to answer to this question¹, I would go through the story itself, starting from the beginning, as it should be done!

When Pinocchio is still a silent piece of wood, Geppetto goes to Mr Cherry and shares with him the following idea: "I thought I would make a fine wooden puppet – a really fine one, that can dance, fence and turn somersaults in the air. Then, with this puppet, I could travel round the world, and earn my bit of bread and my glass of wine"².

The idea of Geppetto is to make a puppet in order to use it as a means to have a better life! It is neither a desire of fatherhood nor an educative idea, rather it is that of creating a marionette that can move but cannot think. And so he does... he creates a puppet, that can move, can run, can do a lot of things... but which cannot think at all. And Geppetto will discover to his cost that this was a big mistake! A puppet that cannot think is a puppet that cannot understand the world outside himself and that is always trying to obtain what he needs, without thinking of anyone else... but how is it possible to control a puppet without strings and without any brain?

We can say that Geppetto has began the whole enterprise in the wrong way, forgetting that Pinocchio could grow up with his own personality, desires and identity. Throughout all the book no one has any respect for Pinocchio's ideas or wishes; he is always punished in order to make him grow up as everybody should grow up! Anyway Geppetto should have considered that he was giving life, and not simply creating a puppet, but his intention is not that of a father rather that of man that does not want his personal order to be upset.

¹ For a more detailed analysis of *Pinocchio* cf. A. Avanzini, *Come accadde che degli occhiacci di legno sfidarono il mondo e ne furono sconfitti*, in A. Avanzini, S. Barsotti, *Ancora Pinocchio. Riflessioni sulle avventure di un burattino*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012.

² C. Collodi, *Pinocchio*, London, Puffin books, p. 8.

Creating a life, even from a piece of wood, implies a great responsibility and Geppetto seems not to be aware of this. Instead, he appears to feel this responsibility as a huge load as the story unfolds. He loves his son, that is clear from the very beginning, but he does not actually know how to act as a father. Father and son should learn together, they should grow together, but they do not. He has just finished making Pinocchio's eyes and, to quote Collodi, "when Geppetto saw those two wooden eyes looking at him, he did not like it at all, and he said angrily "naughty wooden eyes, why are you staring at me?"³

Why is Geppetto angry? Why does he judge these wooden eyes and call them 'naughty'? He seems not to like the life stirring in the piece of wood. And when life explodes, a few lines after, with Pinocchio running away with his new legs and feet, Geppetto gets even more angry: "You scoundrel of a son! You are not finished and you already disobey your father! That's bad, my boy – very bad"⁴.

And talking to himself he confesses he wished he'd never started carving the wood, but it is too late, the puppet is already there! He did not properly consider the consequences of giving life to a piece of wood! That means educate, teach, make him understand the way things go, talk to him, listen to him, grow and change together with him. And Geppetto is not able to do this! He only has a few certainties and he wants them to be respected by the puppet. So at the beginning of the story there is a strong contrast between the explosion of life, the puppet's enthusiastic approach to life and the still, slightly sad and static image of the world that belongs to Geppetto. Consequently Geppetto and Pinocchio have different expectations: Geppetto simply wants Pinocchio to act as it 'should be done', Pinocchio, on his side, lives in a world that he always fails to understand, a world that for him is completely unreadable (unintelligible); so he always does the wrong thing.

This lack of understanding culminates in the episode of the Assassins and the big oak tree. He is deceived by the fox and the cat but he is too naïve and conceited at the same time to understand it! So he doesn't recognize the Assassins, that are the fox and the cat in disguise, and is terribly scared by them. They want his money and, in order to obtain it, they hang Pinocchio on a branch of the big oak tree and wait for his death. In the fight Pinocchio bites off the cat's paw and spits it out. Notwithstanding this, he does not understand that he is fighting with the fox and the cat, the same two who have just promised to make his golden coins grow as if they were seeds.

He never manages to read reality: he is curious, he would like to discover and understand the world, but he can never decode the deceitful behaviour of people. So what is his guilt this time? Why has he to be hanged and risk death? Because he did not obey the adult (in this case, the adult is the Fire-eater who had given him the five golden coins for his father). But if we look more profoundly at the story, he actually trusts the adult, but the wrong one! He thinks the fox and the cat to be honest, but they are not! He is so ignorant (since he doesn't go to school) that he does not know that coins never grow on trees... but his intentions are good: he would like his father to be richer and happier and proud of his disobedient son!

³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

In the logic of the story we can say that the reason why he is hanged on a tree is because he has to learn a lesson: if you do wrong you get punished, if you keep on doing wrong you will pay with your life. The logic is cause-effect, nothing else will do. There are no other ways and Pinocchio is more and more distant from this reality: how can he ever learn how to act in the right way? There is only one possibility: lose his curiosity and his own personal journey with himself. It is not important to understand why it should happen like this, what counts is to do what is expected of you and obey. So, to answer our first question, we cannot consider this novel a *Bildungsroman* because there is no interest in giving the child a better understanding of the world, nurturing his soul and his mind.

This leads me to my second question: is Pinocchio a novel for children? I think it isn't and here are my reasons.

In this world the child-Pinocchio is always at risk: if he doesn't do what he is told to, he risks being trapped (caught) by the enemy, always a dishonest, wicked man, that can be the fox and the cat, the fire-eater (that fortunately after all was a good man), the fisherman, the couch man, known as the little man (the driver of the couch that deceived the children into thinking they were going to Playland)... All these enemies have something in common: they are people without money and desperately searching for some. For this reason they are bad people, at the edge of society, people that Pinocchio should recognize as such, because it is so clear that they are deceitful... but he never does! He never seems to be able to read the social code implicit in the story.

Anyway, whatever this social code is, the fact is there is only one code to follow, so he cannot make a choice; secondly it is imposed with a strict cause-effect logic. I can quote the episode where the peasant catches Pinocchio and makes him work as a watch dog because he had "pick a few punches of muscatel grapes".

For this reason he is considered the worst thief and tied like a dog to an iron chain - a terrible punishment which leads the puppet into a complete loss of identity, since he feels and behave as he really were a dog. As we can see, the world outside Pinocchio is always trying to brainwash him into feeling that he has done wrong, that is guilty of something terrible.

He also has a lot of supporters who represent the good in society, such as the Fairy, first of all, Geppetto himself, the magic creatures (the talking cricket, the parrot etc.), and even the peasant (that acts for Pinocchio's benefit, in the logic of the story); but they never encourage him to find himself and to discover the world outside, instead they all make him feel bad.

It is possible to say that even the Fairy, Pinocchio's main supporter, has a cruel attitude towards him, since she uses guilt to teach him how to behave. She represents what is correct and good in society; she's beautiful, she has a house and a sort of housemaid (the snail), she's the right one to follow. But she intends to educate him by means of threats and fear, so as to limit his curiosity and his desire for exploring his new world. He has to share specific values and certainties and is prevented from becoming an 'independent thinker'! For example in the XXIII chapter Pinocchio goes back to her house but, instead of the house, he finds "a little

piece of marble on which these sad words were engraved: 'Here lies the blue-haired child who died of sorrow for being deserted by her little brother Pinocchio'⁵.

So, what are these values and certainties? They are work, industriousness, money. The fox and the cat are dishonest because they don't have a job and try to make a living deceiving people and stealing their money; the fisherman is wicked just because he is poor (after all he does nothing bad, simply catches fish to eat); the land of the Busy Bees is a good place because everybody is busy working while Play-land is a wicked place because everybody is busy playing (and will be punished) etc.

2. A children's book?

What is there then in this book that can be considered suitable for children? I would say nothing, because the child's nature is not taken into account. We are miles away from Alice in Wonderland, whose "fever of curiosity" (the same fever who makes Pinocchio burn in the IX chapter, where we can read: "Pinocchio was in such a fever of curiosity that he lost his self-control") takes her to Wonderland, which she herself creates. She makes a lot of mistakes on the way (without being punished or killed) but in doing so her identity evolves and she can grow up. Furthermore thanks to Wonderland, Alice is going to learn new ways of thinking and of imagining the world and new different logics; she's going to have an original view of things. So while Alice grows up, Pinocchio gets more and more frustrated and is prevented from becoming himself.

As I was saying, the values proposed by the book are mainly work, industriousness, money, that is to say the same values strongly proposed by the new born Italian nation. Unfortunately the dream of the Italian Risorgimento was in some way over and Italy was busy trying to be an Italian nation. Making Italians was the main concern of the new born Italy.

The book *Pinocchio* did a great service to this new nation in being a model of controversial, but universally accepted values⁶. If the nation was to grow, Italy had to give up its diversity of cultures and languages and become a single nation. *Pinocchio* was the first example of a national language but we can also say of a single set of values, not very original and rather distant from what Italy actually was and most of all from what Risorgimento heroes would have wanted it to be. As for the language it was noted by E. Paruolo that while the language of Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* "ended up becoming a literary language invented by the writer", "Collodi, a Tuscan... adopted in *Pinocchio* the spoken language, Florentine, which he considered the only language... With his book Collodi provided the practical example of the language that Manzoni contemplated"⁷.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

⁶ About the relation between *Pinocchio* and the need to "make Italians" cf. S. Stewart-Steinberg, *The Pinocchio effect. On Making Italians, 1860-1920*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007

⁷ E. Paruolo, *The Word of Pinocchio: Adventures in Languages and cultures*, in L. Tosi (Ed. by), *Hearts of Lightness: the Magico of Children's Literature*, Venezia, Cafoscarina, 2001, p. 77.

As for the values, they were actually shared by all the social and political tendencies, that is by the conservative, but also by the progressive and even by the so popular philanthropic groups in the new country. Controlling the masses of illiterate people would have been impossible; literacy from this point of view was a means of control over the diversity of Italian nation (conservative view) but also a means of giving people some independence in order to be able to have a job (progressive and philanthropic view⁸). And it was universally accepted that people without a job could upset the social order. The concern for childhood and for the diversity of childhood was certainly not in the first place in a period that had to face so many social and cultural problems: actually most Italian citizens (up to 85% in certain parts of Italy, especially in the South) were totally illiterate.

We can say that Pinocchio is not a thought-provoking book as Alice in Wonderland is, rather it is a book conceived to announce a sort of restoring of order in a particular social and historical situation: certain values were to be shared and there was no time and place for childhood with its huge potential, that is the capacity of looking at the world with those “occhiacci di legno” (tr. naughty wooden eyes), eyes that could put things upside down and completely upset such a delicate search for balance.

After all, Pinocchio gives us the idea that childhood is a potentially dangerous age, because it has a rebellious way of looking at reality without any prejudice or barrier and if it is not restricted, it could really lead to a new vision of the world. In other words, the child has an immense power that the adult doesn't actually know how to control. From this point of view education seems to be intended only as a means of controlling the mind in order to make children act as they are expected to. If we compare children to the very diverse Italian people of the period, education is meant as a way of unifying them all into one. So, education is not intended as '*Bildung*', as a search for personal, intellectual and emotional growth.

For all these reasons, I would say this is not a book for children but a book against children, since it aims at controlling the huge potentials of childhood and reduce it to the needs of society.

3. Conclusions

To conclude we can affirm that Pinocchio is not allowed to grow up and has to give up his freedom to think, his curiosity and his spontaneous nature in order to become a so-called adult. He hasn't the possibility to question the adult's values, but has to accept them as they are. So for him reality remains unreadable throughout the book: because of this Pinocchio gets more and more confused and sadder and sadder, so sad that he feels desperately guilty and tries to cure this feeling by behaving properly.

⁸ About characteristic, potentialities and limits related to the philanthropic attitude in post-unitary Italy cf. A. Avanzini, 1861-1871. *Antonio Bruni e le biblioteche popolari circolanti*, in L. Bellatalla, E. Marescotti (a cura di), *150 anni di scuola in Italia. Identità, figure, situazioni*, Padova, Cleup, 2013.

We can see that Pinocchio-child (the puppet) is dead when he meets Lampwick in the last chapter: his friend is a dying donkey while he is a good boy working hard to get his father a cup of milk. He goes and sees his friend, they recognize each other and Lampwick dies. Pinocchio only allows himself the time to wipe off “the tears that were running down his cheek” with some straw and then keeps on working.

The real Pinocchio, the real child, that is the puppet, would have stamped his feet, would have cried and kicked the wicked gardener who was laughing at his poor friend... but he doesn't. His childhood is behind him and he is now an adult, without hope, dreams or the ability to create reality. His only purpose is to obey to other people's rules.

4. Bibliographical references

Asor Rosa A., *Introduzione a Collodi, Le avventure di Pinocchio*, Roma, Gruppo editorial L'espresso, 2004.

Avanzini A., *Antonio Bruni e le biblioteche popolari circolanti*, in Bellatalla L., Marescotti E. (a cura di), *150 anni di scuola in Italia. Identità, figure, situazioni*, Padova, Cleup, 2013.

Avanzini A., Barsotti S., *Ancora Pinocchio. Riflessioni sulle avventure di un burattino*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012.

Avanzini A., *L'educazione attraverso lo Specchio*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2008.

Boero P., De Luca C, *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1995.

Collodi, *Adventures of Pinocchio*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1946.

Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino*, Firenze, Felice Paggi editore, 1883.

Collodi, *Pinocchio*, London, Penguin, 1996.

Gilmour D., *The pursuit of Italy*, London, Penguin, 2011.

Myers L., *Making the Italians: poetics and politics of Italian children's fantasy*, Berna, Peter Lang, 2011.

Stewart-Steinberg S., *The Pinocchio effect. On Making Italians, 1860-1920*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Tempesti F., *Introduzione a Collodi, Pinocchio*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1993.

Tosi L. (Ed. by), *Hearts of Lightness: the Magic of Children's Literature*, Venezia, Cafoscarri, 2001.

Received January 24, 2017

Revision received February 18, 2017 – February 20, 2017

Accepted March 13, 2017