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French literature for children in the 19th and 20th century

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The present thesis aims at identifying and presenting the specificity of the French literature for children in the 19th and 20th century, the authors and works which marked this period. In the introduction we intend to trace and highlight the characteristic elements of the French literature for children during the mentioned period as well as the formative and informative role of the texts we will refer to. The second part will bring into the limelight the characteristics of the French literature for children in the 19th century, the topics it approached, the writers and their representative works. The third part is reserved to the presentation of the defining elements of the French literature for children in the 20th century, the authors and some of the reference works. The conclusions show the importance of literature in shaping the child in relation to the society he/she is living in.

Keywords: *French literature, children, specificity, authors, works*

1. The specificity of the French literature for children in the 19th and 20th century

Literature is a unique and very personal experience for each reader. For children it is an occasion to play, dream, think and travel in time (Debayle, 1993).

When we refer to children's literature we do not quote any literary criticism discourse. The evaluation of this type of literature is made globally, mainly taking into consideration the elements which draw children towards reading and that which influences them to read a certain book. Consequently, in the case of children, the interest for certain literary texts is not limited to their literary quality, but it also seeks the presence of cultural elements, life facts and the elements meant to develop their artistic sense and their language (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 1).

In France, the classification and selection of children's literature texts developed gradually, in close relation with the society's development. In the 18th century, due to the separation of education and religion, the subject of children's literature became approachable, raising interest (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 2).

In the second half of the 18th century, children's literature presents a particular sensitivity, defining for itself an intimate space, other than the social space, in which

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family values resurge, presenting the beautiful aspects of life and behavior role models within the society (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 3).

By the end of the 19th century, children's literature was the privilege of aristocracy and of the middle class. The child is treated as a miniature adult, who was given to read a selection of texts addressed to adults. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work, entitled *Emile,* published in 1762, broadened the horizon of children's literature, acknowledging the child as a tasteful reader, with a particular exigency. From that moment on, children started to be educated, taught, formed to discover their own values.

At the beginning of the 19th century, French children's literature mostly had an oral character, being passed on in the form of stories, songs and rhyme games, from adults to children, either within the family or between children, through play. The 19th century is marked by the influence of romanticism which unveils the importance of the aesthetic role of children's literature (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 7). The children's literature of this period encourages reverie, the use of imagination, connecting to the life experience of the little readers (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 2). It also discovers and highlights children's interest for reading. The first school libraries open at the end of this century. The industrial revolution launches among others the science-fiction literature, attracting readers from all social classes. Jules Verne's novels are representative in this field. Writers begin to target to stimulate the imagination and creativity of readers (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 8).

The French children's literature of the beginning of the 20th century was all marked by the two World Words. Between 1914 and 1918, children's literature in France recorded a considerable mutation in what concerns the thematic. The unwinding conflict becomes the main subject in the books written for children and adolescents. The novels and short stories for children evoke aspects from the war through child and adolescent characters who adapt to the same situations adults do, these characters being models of heroism and resilience for children (Aranda 2015, 20). The acknowledgment of the primordial role of literary works for children in forming their perception of the real world considerably extends in the 20th century.

In 1967, Ruy-Vidal publishing house merged with its American equivalent Harlin Quist, with the stated purpose of breaking the barriers of reading between generations. This innovative concept of reading, although considered dangerous by psychologists and education specialists of the time, aimed to create a social critical spirit in the little readers, who could thus create a real image of the world they lived in and of the day-to-day reality.

Life after the two world wars, the increase of the population, the return to the family values and the care for children made possible a greater implication in their education. The welfare of parents allowed the allocation of considerable amounts for children's education and a greater investment in books and means of information.

In the second half of the 20th century, children's literature undertakes a complex mission, that of educating, entertaining and informing the young public. Children's literature is not conceived as a separate type, but as a framework for

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reading where stories, fables, illustrated books, comic books, detective stories, science fiction and adventure books, as well as science, history and philosophy books find their place (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 6).

If at the beginning of the 19st century children's literature was mainly oral and represented a way to know the national culture, along with the access to education and the subsequent development of electronic means, children's literature moves on to a new stage, representing a way to know the universal culture (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 4). The literature at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is marked by the presence of writers who became well known due to texts written for an adult audience. The lack of literary works especially written for children resulted in the fact that books initially meant for the adult public were presented to children. In this field we mention writers such as Dumas, Sand, Nodier, La Fontaine, and in the 20th century Henri Bosco, Cendrars, Andre Maurois, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Marcel Ayme, Jacques Prevert, Paul Eluard, Maurice Druon, Marcel Pagnol, Michel Tournier (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 12).

Many of the texts written for children during this period resulted following special requests from book editors. Pierre-Jules Hetzel had such an initiative, repeatedly inviting writers such as Balzac, Nodier, Dumas, Feuillet, Sand and others, to write stories for his collection entitled *The New Children's Magazine* (Le Nouveau Magasin des Enfants, 1844-1851). The great majority of Jules Verne's novels were published by Hetzel in his collection of children's magazines. However, seven of these novels were published in magazines and newspapers for adults. Consequently, we may say that at the beginning, the works of Jules Verne had a double destination, both for adults and for children. After World War I, his novels were published in pieces and addressed to children exclusively. After 1950, adults rediscovered his works and started to appreciate them again, due to their complete publishing. A similar initiative was that of Paul Hartman in the period between the two world wars, when he requested André Maurois, André Chamson, Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac, Francois Mauriac, but also comic book authors such as Samivel and Jean Bruller, known under the name of Vercors to write for children. Towards the end of the 20th century, Francois Ruy-Vidal determined Marguerite Duras, Pascal Quignard and other authors to write for children. All these initiatives represent a materialized will to appreciate and stimulate productions for children. All these works finally lead towards the idea that the French literature of the 19th and the 20th century has a double destination, addressing adults on the one hand and children on the other hand (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 5-6).

The dedication of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's book, *The Little Prince*, clearly states the double destination of the book:

> To Leon Vert
> I ask the children's permission to dedicate this book to a grown-up. I have a serious excuse though: this adult person is my best friend. I have yet

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> another excuse: this grown-up can understand anything, even books for children. I have a third excuse: this person lives in France, where he suffers from cold and hunger. He is in great need of consolation. If these excuses are not enough, I will dedicate this book to the child this person once was. All grown-ups were once children. (Although very few of them remember). I will therefore correct my dedication: To Leon Vert, when he was a child. (Pârvulescu 2015, 3)

There were many attempts to find out what determined all these writers, promoters of literature for an adult public to turn towards the world of childhood. It is believed that this was determined by their wish to find simple, short forms to combine text and image, a procedure to display mimics, vocality and more credible speeches and descriptions. They rediscover the pleasure of fables, parables, and that of reality represented through symbols easy to decode and understand. In this context we must mention Marcel Ayme, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Michel Tournier, Claude Roy, but the most representative author for these exchanges between productions for children and those for adults remains Jacques Prevert, who, in his creative energy, makes the transition from images, cinema, animations to photographs, collages and children's albums and does not seem to establish a limit between adults and children. Similarly, the books for children written by Jacques Roubaud, seem to be clearly situated within a general literature and not within the adult literature or separated from this.

This double destination of the books written in this period made it easier for generations to come closer. Gradually, book editors and even writers, realize the importance of children's literature, which was at first transmitted orally by means of the stories parents or tutors told and read and subsequently of the literature read by children, at the suggestion of the school curriculum or independent from it. The very important role of the presence of children's literature, in its varied forms, is thus highlighted. Consequently the attention is focused on children's literature and the role it plays in forming the future adult. Gradually, a greater importance is granted to children's books, both in what the contents is concerned and from the point of view of their presentation. Illustrated books appeared in this context, books with attractive covers which contain texts adapted to the requirements and permanently changing interests of the young readers (Nieres-Chevrel 2002, 111).

2. Publishing Houses in the 19th and 20th centuries

The children's interest in reading and the society's interest to support the education of young generations through culture lead to the founding of the Pink Library in the Hachette Publishing Houses, the New magazine for children and that of the

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Educational and Recreational Magazine edited by Jules Hetzel at the end of the 19th century (Kovács, and Montagnon 2010, 17-18).

Pierre-Jules Hetzel was a representative children's literature book editor (Melmoux-Montaubin 2011, 3). In 1870, Hetzel reedited a selection of contemporary works, which he presented to the young public to read under the name of the White Library. The works of Dumas, Sand, Musset, Seguin and those of Hetzel were among these (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 17-18). An important characteristic of this publishing house resides in the ambition to excel. The didactic, the moral and ethics were the main pillars on which this publishing house was founded. Before being published, the works were intensely analyzed, the publisher being convinced that these books will not only be read by children, but also by adults (Melmheoux-Montaubin 2011, 3-4).

In 1914, Hachette Publishing House purchases the license of the Hetzel Publishing House and in 1925 republished the White Library, enriching it with colorful illustrations. The Great Illustrated Albums were issued in 1920, including the works of La Fontaine or Moliere. Unfortunately, the White Library does not survive World War II. Gallimard Publishing House then takes over the publishing of children's books.

Starting in 1960, illustrated books begin to be preferred by children and adolescents, instead of the books which only contain text. The authors of illustrated books such as Henri Morin, Marty Iessel, André Helle, Edy Legrand, Nathalie Parain become renowned in France.

In 1972, Gallimard Publishing House inaugurated a special edition dedicated to children: Gallimard Jeunesse.

In 1977, Folio Junior Publishing House started publishing pocket books for children and adolescents as well as the works of Bosco, Roy, Tournier and Ayme. Consequently, Gallimard Publishing House edited Folio Benjamin, a selection of books for children aged 5 to 7, followed by Folio Cadet, addressed to college students. The same year, Flammarion Publishing House issued the collection entitled Castor Poche dedicated to the young public.

In the '80s, pocket books are those which considerably contributed to the dissemination of children's literature (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 19-20).

3. French literature for children in the 19th century

The literature for children of this century was marked by the writings of Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne and Hector Malot.

Alexandre Dumas began his literary career while serving at the court of the Prince of Orléans, where he started writing plays. After the success of his historical drama *Henry III and his court*, he began to write historical novels such as *The*

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Three Musketeers, 20 Years After, The Vicomte of Bragelonne, The Count of Monte Cristo, etc.

In his writings, Alexandre Dumas was supported by a young history professor, a fact which confers authenticity to the historical events presented in detail in his books, making them credible to the reader.

Fragments of the *The Three Musketeers* and *20 Years After* are not just reading material, but also a way to know historical events, characters and the 19th century society of France.

As early as his first years of life, Jules Verne was fascinated by the sea world and boats which became later a source of inspiration for his writings. His best nown novels were translated into Romanian: *Journey to the Center of the World*, *Captain Grant's Children*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Floating City*, *Around the World in 80 days*, *The Mysterious Island*, etc.

Being considered as a child who wrote down his imaginary world or, on the contrary, a visionary, Jules Verne is without a doubt the founder of science-fiction literature in Europe. In his novels, he presents a fabulous world, with fantastic creatures, succeeding in combining fiction and reality in a world at the border of dreams.

Hector Malot was a novelist who wrote over 70 novels, which is why he was often compared to Dumas. Although he produced a lot of works, the novels he wrote for adults did not record the success he expected and he was recorded in the history of literature mainly due to the novels he wrote for children. Among these, *Alone in the World* remains his best known and most appreciated novel.

Reaching the sensitivity of the young and that of children, Malot managed to get their attention. In his novels, he describes life experiences to which they can relate speaking about their fears and the possibility to overcome them with courage, tenacity, strength of character, friendship, but also through ingenuity.

Although they seem condemned to accept a compromised destiny, the characters in Hector Malot's novels manage to overcome their condition through voluntary strength, intelligence and initiative (Pincet, 2002).

A special trait of the children's literature in the second half of the 19th century is the place given to the animals within stories and novels. Always around the children characters, the animal characters are those that help them and offer safety and consolation. The presence of animals becomes a privileged manner of identifying with the little readers, and with the help of animal characters, the children characters sense danger and the author manages to show the little readers the meaning of the trials they go through (Melmoux-Montaubin 2011, 11).

4. French Literature in the 20th century

The children's literature of the 20th century is marked by the need to entertain children, to present them the surrounding world in an amusing form, easy to understand. The

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children's ever growing need of information offers adults the opportunity to educate them through lecture. From this point of view, the most important writers are Marcel Ayme, Claude Roy, Michel Tournier, Henri Bosco, who tried to show children the surrounding world in the most pleasant and accessible way possible, preserving the value and the educational role of their writings.

Henri Bosco is a French novelist who wrote for children, both about them and about the world of childhood. His first novel, *Pierre Lampédouze*, describes the landscapes in Provence, the mystery of traditions and the realities of country life. Among his most famous novels we mention: *The Boy and the River*, *Malicroix*, etc.

The character named Babar was born from the stories of Cécile de Brunhoff, Jean de Brunhoff's wife, which she used to tell her children when they were small. Through Babar, these stories present an elephant that left the jungle to go into town, a fairy tale world, full of adventure, courage and optimism.

The books centered on Babar and his adventures are considered the predecessors of modern illustrated books. Actually, the first of these books, The Stories of Babar, was published as an illustrated book with text. Then, there followed *The Travels of Babar*, *King Babar*, *A.B.C. of Babar*, *Babar's Children*, etc.

The adventures presented with so much optimism and the accompanying colorful images make them very attractive and liked by the children.

Laurent de Brunhoff, Jean de Brunhoff's son, had a great contribution in refreshing the visual perspectives and the decorations of these books.

Fascinated by the beauty of the desert which he had discovered on his trips to Northern Africa, Antoine de Saint-Exupery describes it in his works as a beautiful world, enfolded in mystery. His writings cannot be considered traditional novels or short stories, but more contemplative descriptions with moralizing intentions.

The novel entitled *The Little Prince* starts from a real event. Trying to break the record of distance in aviation, Antoine de Saint-Exupery leaves from Paris to Saigon, but his plane crashes in the desert of Libia. Together with his copilot, he wonders through the desert for several days until a Bedouin saves them.

The story of the Little Prince starts with this real adventure, but continues in an imaginary world. The little person comes from a fantastic planet and appears in Sahara, described as an extraordinary world. The Little Prince symbolizes the purity of a child's soul, the innocence and the simplicity, and the adults are the ones who need to learn from him (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 22-24).

The Little Prince is a book written for children and adults alike. It presents a reversed world, a world in which the child is well behaved, hard-working, tidy, wise, concerned with the essence of life which he seems to understand and accept, while the adult is the one preoccupied with petty things, he is scared and unjustifiably proud and impotent.

The Little Prince is the character who "manages to break the limits of childhood", and the author, the adult, "balances between extremes: the eternal child

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who cannot break loose from the boa pattern" and the selfish adult who believes that he is the only one who has troubles (Pârvulescu 2015, 5).

A representative of the literature in the first half of the 20th century, Marcel Aymé was a writer, prose man, playwright and essayist. Among the books dedicated to children and which were very successful were: *Tales of the Perched Cat* and *The Man Who Walks Through Walls*.

One of the best known works of Raymond Queneau which later inspired director Louis Malle is entitled *Zazie in the Metro*. The main character, Zazie, is a pure hearted little girl who meets the bizarre world of the adults, involuntarily revealing the hypocritical character of this world. The reader finds in this book an open criticism of society, which invites both children and adults to reflect.

Claude Roy is a writer with a fruitful work, who wrote under multiple pseudonyms. He is convinced that adults should not write for children, but together with them. This is how books like *The Flying House* or *The Cat which talked in spite of itself* came about.

Michel Tournier produced a cultural show on Radio France in the '50s. Later on he becomes a journalist for Le Monde and Le Figaro. He is no stranger to the world of children stories and novels (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 21-22). He makes his debut in literature late, when he was over 40, and in 1967 he obtains the grand prize for a novel of the French Academy, with the book entitled *Vendredi ou les imbes du Pacifique* (Friday and the Islands of the Pacific), and three years later he becomes renowned with *Les Roi des Alunes* (The King of Alders), a novel turned into a film in 1996. Tournier started writing for children, enjoying to talk in schools about his works. One of his works is famous to children: *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (Friday or the wild life) (Bretan 2016, 2).

The works of Daniel Pennac gather around two central themes: the emotional connections between man and animal and the adventures of Kamo, a 10-year old boy. The novels he wrote for children present a world in which anything can become possible through a child's imagination (Kovács, and Montagnon 2010, 23). In his works entitled *Messieurs les enfants*, *At the Happy Ogres* or *Eye of the Wolf*, the author covers present day subjects: acknowledging and accepting the differences between people, respecting the rights of animals, but also the manner in which the human being influences the environment (Ene 2017, 1).

Virginia Lou, a nonconformist writer, blends in her works gentleness and violence. Her novels do not have a clear ending, they do not end sadly, nor happily, thus highlighting the complexity of the real world. It is interesting that she wrote for children, her work being considered less penetrable. Her best known works are: *Je n' ai pas peur de l'aspirateur* addressed to the little readers and *Eloge de la lumière au temps des dinosaures*, *Les aventures du silence*, *La vie en rose* – for adolescents.

The famous comic books represent a special category in the 20th century France. Considered for a long time as works for children and adolescents, comic

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books are also very close to the adult world through the criticism of old fashioned customs and traditions of the society by means of caricature characters.

Although he is of Belgian origin, Georges Prosper Remi wrote comic books in French under the pseudonym of Herge. The most famous refer to Tintin's adventures, a young reporter helped by his fox terrier Milou and by the incompetent detectives Dupont and Dupond.

The first comic book having as a main character Martine was published following an invitation from the Casterman Publishing House. *Martine at the farm* was written by Gilbert Delahaye and illustrated by Marcel Malier and it was first published in 1954, being translated into over 50 languages.

Written in the second half of the 20th century, the works of René Goscinny and Jean-Jacques Sempe are based on the surrounding reality, presented through the adventures of Nicolas, a 10-year old boy. The adventures form a series of five volumes, in which each chapter of each volume constitutes a distinct story which presents with humor and irony the aspects of every-day life.

Another important part of René Goscinny's work is formed by Asterix comic books in which, by means of historic characters, the author makes a caricature of the contemporary society. The producer of the cartoons was Albert Uderzo, who, after Goscinny dies, continued to write and draw the adventures of Asterix and his friend Obelix.

Claude Boujon was the chief editor of a comic magazine for children called Pif Gadget. The hero of these books is a dog named Pif who went through a bunch of exciting and interesting adventures which kept the little readers out of breath.

Phillipe Corentin, a self-taught creator of comics for children, stands out by the fact that it presents in a very modern and original manner a world of absurd characters, with human qualities as well as beast-like traits. Children as well as adults read his works due to the comics that try to break stereotypes and present reality in a comic and original manner (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 24-25).

5. Conclusions

The French literature for children went through a series of important changes in the 19th and the 20th centuries. From the concept that the child is a miniature adult which was characteristic for the 18th century, in the 19th century it was necessary to acknowledge the individuality of the child. The right and need of the child to be informed and formed by means of literature is gradually acknowledged. The beginning of the 20th century is marked by a literature with the aspects of propaganda, after going through the two World Wars. The second half of the 20th century brings about an acknowledgment of the primordial role held by the literature for children in forming and educating a child.

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Literature is shaping the child in relation to the society, having an important role in forming a realistic vision of the world in which he/she lives and grows. Literature comes to entertain and inform children, it presents life to them in a comic but realistic manner, without omitting the aspects which aim at educating and forming the little readers (Aranda 2015, 21).

In present day France, the literature for children holds a special place in the general literature, benefiting from an increased attention, book launches, a specialized media, such as Citrouille, Livres jeunes aujourd hui, etc., and its own libraries (Kovács and Montagnon 2010, 25).

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