

LIONNI'S LITTLE BLUE AND LITTLE YELLOW: THE JOY OF THE ENCOUNTER

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ABSTRACT:

Little blue and little yellow is a narration through images. In this article, the iconic language and the verbal language are analysed. As for the visual code, it discusses the illustration's task of this picture book and the verbal code with so minimalist amount of words. This verbal code offers the possibility of recognising a linear narrative structure for children's tales. On the other hand, the value of diversity is exposed, because the metaphoric image is open to different interpretations. All in all, to rediscover the concept of identity construction, taking into account that gender stereotypes are being defined at early years.

KEY WORD:

Gender stereotypes, identity construction, picture book, children's literature.

THE JOY OF THE ENCOUNTER.

When Dutch painter, writer, graphic designer and sculptor Leo Lionni first published his book *Little blue and little yellow* in New York in 1959, he surely could not have foreseen that his work would have represented an extraordinarily disruptive moment in children's literature and, specifically, in the international history of illustrated books for the youngest children. The fortuitous circumstance in which the book originated assumes the contours of the fable, as almost all literary classics for children come from a unique and exclusive meeting with the special recipients of the narration – at least those destined to strongly impress children's imagination because of their ability to genuinely arrange themselves along the children's communication tracks for their themes, style and message:

Then a miracle occurred. It happened on the day I was going to take my grandchildren, Pippo and Annie, to Greenwich [...]. They were adorable children, smart, bright and absolutely uninhibited. [...] It had not been hard to put them on a taxi nor lead them through the busy crowd at the Grand Central Station. We were early and the carriage was almost empty and, within minutes, those two little angels turned into two devilish acrobats who were leaping from one seat to the other [...] and, since more and more people were boarding the train, I realized that if I didn't think of something that would have been a horrible trip. With an automatic gesture, I opened the folder and took out a rely copy of a "Life" issue, I showed the children the cover and I tried to say something funny about the ads as I was turning the pages, until I had an idea from a page with a blue, yellow and green picture. "Alright", I said, "I'm going to tell you a story". I ripped the page and started breaking it into little pieces. The children followed excitedly the preparation. I took a blue piece of paper and ripped it into small discs. I did the same with the yellow and green pieces of paper. I put the folder on my knees to make a small table and, with a deep voice, I started "This is little blue and this is little yellow". (Lionni, 2014: 234-235. The translation from the italian book is by Chiara Lepri)

Little blue and little yellow is a simple yet revolutionary story of two coloured spots the reader can identify as two children: at the very beginning, through words and images, little blue and little yellow are introduced within their family (*traditional* family, made of a father, mother, son/daughter) doing daily routines (sitting properly in the classroom, or playing outside). Their friends are spots of several colours: red, brown, white, orange... One day little blue goes outside looking for little yellow. The two of them (being spots of colour there is no gender connotation) get together, they play and hug so tight that they become one single green spot. As they go home they can't hide the contamination: the happy encounter has deeply changed the core of the two friends, their parents themselves have a hard time identifying their little one. As in every happy ending tale, of course, the story ends on a positive note: the grown-ups understand what happened, they let themselves *contaminate* and run to



their neighbours “to bring the good news”. The message deriving from the story is that friendship between two people can change both of them and that the joy of the encounter with the other enriches both.

In the *Little blue and little yellow* book the narration through images is of an undoubted genius, meant to “speak to men’s heart for a long time coming” and to “change the way the youngest children’s books were seen and thought of, and deep down, not only for them” (Negri, 2014: 332). What are the elements of such exceptionality? There are many and on several levels. All of which concern the demolition of canonical, consolidated, univocal and compliant models.

First of all, on a formal level, the iconic language plays a leading role together with and the verbal language which accompanies each and every image with few precise words: the two codes support integrate and complete each other, in fact it would not be possible to fully understanding the entirety of the story in if one of the two was missing. This is one of main characteristics of a well thought picture book of which *Little blue and little yellow* is a paradigmatic and a radical example (Negri, 2014: 335) because of its use of the images as metaphors. As easy as it is to decode it, the use of a visual metaphor allows several interpretations, involving the ageless reader’s gaze in a fascinating adventure that feeds on new images and incisive stratified meanings.

Therefore, on a meaning level the book breaks the historic schemes of a stereotypical and melancholic children’s literature that was meant to admonish rather than to accompany the children’s growth through quality, enjoyable and meaningful readings. But there is more to it: *Little blue and little yellow* introduces the theme of self-identity that grows when meeting with diversity, as much as it is about freedom and independence, and hence of growth. It does so in an anti-conformist manner not using animals or human characters – as it always is the case with picture books so that the youngest readers can easily identify with them – but it uses spots that differ just by the colour, disrupting any reference to a gender identified bodylines and giving a different character of universality to its representation.

The latter is a very innovating element, especially thinking that as for today even in the best children’s publishing gender stereotypes are still deeply rooted and even more so it appears that in the iconographic representation there is a clear gender polarization put into effect more or less explicitly in the use of colours (pink for girls, blue for boys) in the role distinction (the mother cares for the house, the father works or reads the newspaper sitting on the couch), in biographical destinies (there are jobs for males and jobs for females), in the representation of the traditional families. It’s worth noticing, however, that thanks to artists and intellectuals such as Leo Lionni, in the North American and European context there is a strong micro publishing independent research, culturally active and very brave, that mostly publishes high

quality picture books, with an eye on the new social issues. The healthiest publishing is the one that can understand and translate this increasingly diverse and complex reality with intelligence, originality and care.

COMPARING TWO CODES.

The picture book has very complex semiotic characteristics as, to quote Marco Dallari, it uses five different codes: 1. iconic; 2. verbal; 3. graphic (both the page structure and the relation between the two codes); 4. “packaging” (materials, shape, cover, binding); 5. The mediator code and the way the book reading is performed. Not one of these codes can exist without the other, but if the quality of the book is good each and every one of these codes will express its own autonomy and relevance (Dallari, 2012: 48-49).

As for the visual code, it develops within a page, it is perceived as a whole and later in detail, according to the visual perception laws and based on the personal ability to perceive symbolic elements, make connections and associations. Therefore, to decode (or, at least, to reveal) an image, that by its very nature shows itself democratically and immediately, it's of a very significant relevance the hermeneutic contribution of the reader who – in the picture book – will integrate the verb-iconic textuality with his or her own prior knowledge, until they reach a complete understanding of the story told through an integration and interferences process, just as it happens with solely verbal texts.

The illustration's task of a picture book is not subordinate but complementary to the written word and, especially to children, it seems to hold a higher narrative role than the one of the words (Dallari, 2012: 51); furthermore, the illustrations wield sudden and long lasting charm and attraction that are destined not only to attract attention, but also to increase the visual alphabetization and to strongly impress the reader's personal imaginary.

What happens while reading *Little blue and little yellow*, then? It's worth saying that this picture book breaks the canon of the eye because it is the very first example of abstract narration for children.

Maria Nikolajeva notes that in this picture book the tension that exists between these two codes, verbal and iconic, creates numberless interactions between words and images: “The process of ‘reading’ a picture book may be represented by an hermeneutic cycle as well. Whichever we start with the verbal or the visual, it creates expectations for the other, which in turn provides new experiences and new expectations. The reader turns from verbal to visual and back again, in an ever-expanding concatenation of understanding. Each new rereading of either words or pictures creates better prerequisites for an adequate interpretation of the whole” (Nikolajeva, Scott, 2006: 2).



Leo Lionni proposes a very minimalist and abstract picture book which tries to relate to the pre-school children. It is a metaphor about friendship and innocence.

As for the structure of the tale, Lionni presents a literary tale with a linear structure. A structure which follows the main character's adventures from the beginning until the end. The reader witnesses the story through the narration and experiences how he/she overcomes trouble and changes because of it at the end (Truby, 2007). The story is the classical structure on tales: a main character that has an objective and finds consecutive difficulties to reach this objective. A very young main character that looks for his/her best friend. Conflict is a powerful element in a children's narrative structure, capable of keeping the reader's interest. The reader is more interested in the main character and a connection arises between them, to become a strong identification (Lavandier, 2003). The characters of the story are colour spots in a, most of the times, white base. Simple, and basic, with short and content sentences. As Ghosn states, "literature has the potential of nurturing emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that may help shape the brain circuits for empathy" (Ghosn, 1999: 4).

A very young main character that looks for his/her best friend and after finding him/her, he/she discovers something very astonishing: when they hug each other, they merge into little green, that is, when the mix blue and yellow, they become green. It is significant because the discovery comes from a very emotional moment, a climax after a process of suspense. The relevance of the text is the absence of a complete description.

The comprehension of *Little blue and little yellow* itself is linked to the interdependence of the codes: as we said, in this book words are essential; without them, most likely, the only obvious thing, on the message level, would be the encounter of the two colours, blue and yellow, whose outcome would just be a green spot that condenses and kneads the identity prerogatives of the two main characters, and as though it represents the high point of the narration, it does not give the story its completeness, even though the sequence of images clearly has textual and narrative intention features. The use of a visual metaphor, in fact, can disorientate and challenge the reader, who will be urged to do not stop at the literal meaning, but to work on the interpretation.



Fig. 1. Leo Lionni, *Little blue and little yellow*, 1959.

The interpretation, in this case, comes from the understanding of an anomaly, an inconsistency between visual and verbal text through which the expectations raised by the wording fail to be delivered from one another (Contini, 2012: 216). The child will have to keep reading the book to understand that those spots of colour with human like behaviours and emotions represent a group of children. However, as though age and role differences are easily spotted (parents, moms and dads, are longer, bigger spots that stand above, in heights, the little ones) there is no evidence of gender difference or connotation: surely, this is the most extraordinary and progressive aspect of Lionni's picture book, which neutral verbal language fully go along with the politically correct illustration. Moreover, by reading the book what can be mostly perceived are ludic and symbolic aspects, that are linked to the play on colours: yellow, light and bright colour, reminds of growth and movement; blue, the colour of murkiness and waters, it symbolizes gloom as well as stillness, contemplation (Contini, 2012: 219). We will finally read that "the blending of two primary and antonym colours creates a new colour as well as two individuals (unique and autonomous beings) when united in a friendship relation can blend their characters, ideas, projects even when these vary greatly, giving birth to new things" (Contini 2012: 220).

One of the main attributes of the book is the form of the images which is very conceptual and bases the argument on the theory of colour. Duran argues that any reader is capable of verifying "up to what point this axiom is substantiated in this book, a work that it is as brilliant in what it says about form, composition and balances in the values of its arguments" (Duran, 2007: 81). For instance, in school, pupils -colour spots- are shown "peaceful and still" in "neat rows". The reader notices it is the only place where they are ordered in a limited space. Colours in the base – black and red – show the anxiety and worries of little blue looking for his friend. There are several topics dealt in the book, among other friendship, knowledge and identity construction. The story has a variety of layers of meaning but one of them is the exploration of colour.

The illustrations the book contains make it easier the understanding of the story of the characters. Children's ability to draw in early ages is like the spots in Lionni's illustrations. This fact makes it easier for a child to empathize with the help of an adult narrator. The text is the bridge for the adult to connect with the child. The child will discover the relationship between visual and verbal languages through the illustrations. The colour spots are humanized characters, children that live at home with parents, play outside, go to school and suffer sometimes. So, sometimes, therefore, they cry. This combination of two or more colours is a very good opportunity for children to expand their experimentation and discovery of the world at this age, when they start to build symbols and tend to interpret all new elements they discover.

It has already been said that the written text is reduced to the minimum, so the storyteller experiences a volunteering extra descriptive attitude every time faces a new illustration. There is an existing interrelation between the words and the images which becomes a sign and concept unity between image and sound. This unity is learnt by the child almost automatically. This also happens in most of children's story books, where the image is more relevant than the text that dictates the story. The text can stand by itself without the aid of any extra action of the images, but the main innovation of this picture book disappears. Duran calls it "the concept of abstraction into children's literature". It may go beyond this, considering the emotions dealt in the plot, as well as the lack of gender attributions to all characters. All in all, it is a fusion between blue and yellow, image and word, masculine and feminine. Different are mixed to evolve to newer results.

Little blue is a humanized blue spot that lives enjoying a regular life. He does what a child at his/her age is supposed to do, and reacts as he/she would react. That means that *little blue* looks for solutions as a child, gets sad as a child. Little blue also develops the individual identity concept which takes part of children's process of growing up in early years. This means for the child to acknowledge that he or she is an individual with his/her own and single identity.

Lionni introduces the concept of social ability through the actions taking place between little blue and the rest of the characters in the story. Family and school are essential actors in his/her life for acquiring social abilities such as communication, behaviour, values acquisition, among others.

ON THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY.

According to Ada Fonzi & Elena Negro Sancipriano, metaphors tend to be more creative when the image associated with the metaphoric image is weaker. The metaphoric image doesn't end with the iconic element, but it is open to sensations, feelings, thought "that come together to build a dynamic and unique whole" (Fonzi & Negro Sancipriano, 1975: 34). It seems to us that *Little blue and little yellow* is open to different interpretations, because it's non-conventional and not granted. The outcome is a very precious and very topical picture book that speaks of the importance of diversity, a book that can has to be read and re-read to notice, not only its gender friendly features, but a multicultural message, or a message that speaks to the divers ability or simply it's about two individuals that become friends, each with its own prerogatives.

Gender is not defined by any of the characters in the story. Lionni leaves this category undefined in order not to disturb the rest of the actions in the story. According to Trepanier-Street & Romatowsky, at 4-5 years of age, children start developing

their models about what it means being a male or a female, their thinking and their behaviour. That is, gender stereotypes are defined. To do this, children observe masculine and feminine behaviours in relation to their roles in society, and develop them. Therefore, they achieve the appropriate attitudes to each gender (Trepanier-Street & Romatowsky, 1999: 155). Also, gender appreciates colours in a different perspective: men prefer brighter colours and women prefer softened colours. Becker adds that “gender lines continue to be drawn more strenuously and at early ages in our society... In general, men prefer brighter colors and their associated shades with black and women prefer pastel or softened colors tinted with white. Blue is a favourite for both men and women. Men’s most favorite colors are blue, green and black. Women’s most favorite colors are blue, purple and red” (Becker, 2016: 81). In Lionni’s book, the main character is *Little Blue*, which goes along Becker’s theories about gender colour preferences for both men and women.

The thought moves once again on meeting and its training value. Leo Lionni’s picture book “challenges the habitual perception, prejudices, cognitive and axiological rules, it leads us beyond identities, even though it does not deny them, and through a logic-epistemic and ethical universe resulting from the encounter, the dialogue, the *métissage*. It leads us to a new horizon of life, relations, exchange in which the rule is to stand *with* others, to agree and to build and grow common spaces (Cambi, 2006: 7).

FINAL THOUGHTS.

Telling tales is one of men’s founding activities, in its several forms (written, oral): it unravels meanings, it outlines further prospective that shed some light on oneself and the world. From early childhood, within stories men grow a fantasy made of categories and identity and behavioural references.

The sight’s scopic experience, that gives an analogic representation of the objects, prevails in the child who doesn’t yet have the tools to read the written words; the image impresses itself powerfully and quickly in the child’s mind, and it does so more than linguistic acts can.

The abstract images of *Little blue and little yellow* are supported by the verbal text and need prolonged stops, thoughtful silences before they can settle deep down. They will be, then, untangled, developed, linked to other experiences, until they can build, not only a sense set, but also a tool to emancipate from the literal sense substantiated by a personal attitude to freely ponder what is new, unfamiliar, different.

Lionni presents a literary tale with a linear structure. But, when conflict appears, colours change. Conflict keeps the reader’s interest, so the reader is more interested in the main character and a connection arises between them. Ghosn and Lavandier add a very similar and relevant characteristic in this story book: “strong identification” and



“shaping the brain circuits for empathy”. This is very well accomplished with the main character in the story. Diversity and gender are offered in the form of the images which is very conceptual and bases the book’s plot on the theory of colour. It is a bridge for the storyteller to connect with the child. Duran defines the concept of abstraction into children’s literature where there is a fusion between a very plain image and word. That is understood as a metaphor of two different characters that are mixed to evolve to newer results. Also, Lionni introduces the concept of social ability through the actions taking place between Little Blue and the rest of the characters in the story.

To conclude, gender is not defined by any of the characters in the story. Becker’s theories about gender colour preferences for both men and women meet Lionni’s colour preferences for the protagonist. It is a story that seems very simply composed but has many inner values to be worked out. The concept of identity is very positive but also friendship, care, and parental protection and family. Sizes, forms, colours and background colour change in some pages help to communicate the intensity of the story. Tolerance emerges from identity construction, as it was pointed out, gender stereotypes being defined at early years.

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