Sleeping Beauty in Never-Never Land: Fairy Tales and the Formation of the Autistic Child’s Emotional World—A Psychoanalytic Exploration

This article offers a psychoanalytical and literary analysis of the way in which autistic children use fairy tales for self-formation and the development of their subjective emotional worlds. Fairy tales being of particular appeal to those on the spectrum, the paper explores their pertinence to the distinctive challenges and conflicts autistic children face, aiding them in forming and articulating their emotional states. The paper engages with both psychoanalytic and literary methods, presenting the approaches of Jones (1954) and Bettelheim (1976), who addressed the illusory reality of fairy tales, and Tustin’s (1994) view of autism as a survival mechanism employed in response to the earliest, most traumatic threat—in precisely the same way as fairy tales work. It then discusses more up-to-date psychoanalytical theories pertaining to the mental-development processes reflected in fairy tales from the perspective of the language of the soul (Yigael & Raufman, 2016). In the field of literature, it examines the features of fairy tales identified by Orlik, suggesting that their internal grammar echoes and reflects the autistic child’s world to a certain degree. Clinical examples and vignettes illustrating all the arguments set forth, the article will be of interest to theoreticians and practitioners alike, proposing a novel psychoanalytical mode of approaching literature in general and the use of fairy tales in the treatment of children on the spectrum in particular. To the extent that fairy tales help them shape their subjectivity, they are then better able to create an emotional world in which they can interact with their social environment.