



## **The Pedagogical Dimensions of Food in Children's Literature: *The paradigm of Greek children's literature***

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### **Abstract**

Children's literature is linked with pedagogy and it has often been characterized by an either direct or indirect didactic style. Food in fiction is an example of didacticism as it seems to go beyond its nutritional role, carrying pedagogical and didactic messages. In this paper we approach food and eating habits in children's books, with an emphasis on Greek children's books. The purpose of this study is to highlight the pedagogical function of food in fiction as well as to examine to what extent changes in human eating habits at the end of the 20th and in the early 21st century affected the gastronomic references in children's books of this period. Indeed, according to the findings, the context in which children's books are published appears to have a great influence on the way in which fictional food is approached. Consequently, gluttony may generally seem to be reprehensible in Greek fiction, but the changes in diet formed a new stream of children's books exclusively on healthy eating.

*Keywords:* food, pedagogical function, gluttony, healthy eating

### **Περίληψη**

Η παιδική λογοτεχνία είναι συνδεδεμένη με την παιδαγωγική και συχνά διακρίνεται από άμεσο ή έμμεσο διδακτικό ύφος. Το φαγητό στη μυθοπλασία είναι μια τέτοια περίπτωση, καθώς οι αναφορές σε αυτό φαίνεται να ξεφεύγουν από τον θρεπτικό του ρόλο, μεταφέροντας παιδαγωγικά και διδακτικά μηνύματα. Σε αυτή την εργασία προσεγγίζονται το φαγητό και οι διατροφικές συνήθειες στα παιδικά βιβλία, με έμφαση στα ελληνικά κείμενα. Σκοπός είναι να αναδειχθεί η παιδαγωγική λειτουργία του φαγητού στη μυθοπλασία, όπως επίσης και να εξεταστεί σε ποιο βαθμό οι αλλαγές στις διατροφικές συνήθειες των ανθρώπων κατά τα τέλη του 20ού και στις αρχές του 21ου αιώνα επηρέασαν τις γαστρονομικές αναφορές στα παιδικά βιβλία της περιόδου. Πράγματι, σύμφωνα με τα ευρήματα της εργασίας, το πλαίσιο μέσα στο οποίο τα παιδικά βιβλία δημοσιεύονται φαίνεται να ασκεί μεγάλη επίδραση στον τρόπο με τον οποίο προσεγγίζεται το φαγητό στη μυθοπλασία. Συνεπώς, η λαιμαργία μπορεί να φαίνεται γενικώς κατακριτέα στην ελληνική λογοτεχνία, ωστόσο οι αλλαγές στις διατροφικές



συνήθειες των ανθρώπων οδήγησαν σε ένα νέο ρεύμα παιδικών βιβλίων που παραγματεύονται αποκλειστικά την υγιεινή διατροφή.

*Λέξεις-κλειδιά: Φαγητό, παιδαγωγική λειτουργία, λαιμαργία, υγιεινή διατροφή*

### **Introduction**

Children's literature is linked, among others, with pedagogy due to the particularity of its reading audience. Thus, it has often been defined by pedagogical conventions and serves pedagogical purposes (Gavriilidou, 2008, p.p. 35, 38). Moreover, as Berry mentions, nowadays, there is a need for sensitive issues to be addressed through literature. In fact, children are interested in books that help them to face reality and give them the opportunity to honestly discuss their problems (2016, p.p. 49-50). Eating behavior and obesity are such issues.

In general, food in fiction goes beyond its nutritional role. Actually, it conveys socializing, pedagogical and didactic messages. That is, food references attempt to teach socially acceptable behavior, showing children how to eat properly, what to eat and what to avoid eating, or who eats whom (Daniel, 2006a. p.p. 4, 40, 186). Indeed, the writers, through detailed and delicious descriptions of food, tempt the readers and sweeten ideological discourses (Daniel, 2006b, p.p. 277, 284).

### **Purpose and methodology**

In this paper, we approach food and eating habits in children's books, emphasizing Greek ones. The purpose is to highlight the pedagogical function of food in fiction as well as to examine to what extent the changes in children's and adolescents' diet at the end of the 20th and at the early 21st century affected the gastronomic references in Greek children's books.

Concerning the method, literary texts are approached in terms of how reality is represented from the perspective of adults. Specifically, it is expected that the current concerns of the adult world regarding the increased rates of childhood obesity will be reflected in children's literature. According to Maria Nikolajeva (2005, p.p. 73-74), the mimetic approach is the most common in children's literature studies. A common tool in mimetic studies is to examine themes and motifs (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 81). In this case, nutrition is defined as the main thematic area, and healthy versus unhealthy diet and gluttony are considered repetitive motifs.

At first, a historical review of the food theme in international children's literature is made in order to exemplify the changes over time and connect that to historical food events. This also serves to form a background against which to compare the Greek case. The sample includes seven Greek picture books about healthy eating habits. The picture books have been randomly selected from the set of Greek children's picture books that they have been published at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century and they fall within the cases of the thematic patterns mentioned above. However, it should be noted that particular references are made to books that go beyond this time span

because they are important landmarks in Greek children's literature and serve the purposes of our research.

### **Historical Review of Food Theme in International Children's Literature**

People's attitude towards food has not always been the same. It has been observed that attitudes and perceptions around food and nutrition vary depending on the area, the era, and, of course, the sociocultural context.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is expected that the history of food will greatly influence its direct and indirect references to fiction.

Gluttony and vast amounts of food are common motifs in literature. Often this may be a consequence of the intense food deprivation over a certain period. Consider, for instance, the example of Europe, where the famine of medieval times inevitably led, among other things, to the creation of strong gastronomical desires.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, when people create and share fairy tales and myths about food utopias, we can only assume that hunger drives them there (Honeyman, 2010, p. 45). People's poor and monotonous eating habits make, if nothing else, a story with delicious food attractive (Daniel, 2006a, p. 63).

This gastronomic impunity does not remain unpunished during the following centuries. Gluttony was characterized as one of the seven deadly sins early on (Malewski, 2014, p. 100). In the famous *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll criticizes the excessive feeding of children, applauding the control of adults over what is consumed by children (Garland, 2008:30). German-illustrated children's books depict trips to places full of sweets that end in stomachache (Nikolajeva, 2000, p. 55) and *Toby Tyler's* discussions revolve around treatments for stomachache caused by gluttony (Griswold, 2009, p. 124).

However, the unpunished utopia of tastes reappears in British children's literature in the first half of the 20th century. Endless amounts of food appear due to strict children's upbringing as well as the deprivation of food during World Wars (Daniel, 2006a, p. 11). It is no coincidence that Enid Blyton's heroes *The Famous Five* (1942), taste delicious food. However, the books are published at a time when British people ate sparingly, in fact, less than ever before, in the period of food rationing during the Second World War (Barker, 1982, p. 4-11). However, it should also be noted that the writer does not present unaffordable meals to readers, and in any case, *The Famous Five* follow a balanced diet (Flanagan, 2017).

Astrid Lindgren promotes and applauds the enjoyment of food in Sweden, too. In *Pippi Longstocking* (1945), although Pippi seems to consume large amounts of food, she is rarely punished. She has healthy white teeth lovable mood and proves in this way that gluttony can be beneficial. Likewise, in Lindgren's *Karlsson-on-the-Roof* book series,

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the predominant trend of the aristocracy of medieval times was the consumption of excessive amounts of food as a sign of social superiority. On the other hand, in recent times, since the 1970s, fears of overeating have gradually created a world where delicacy triumphs (Montanari, 2006, p.p. 120-121).

<sup>2</sup> The absolute utopia of Cocagne, the land of abundance where everything is offered without prohibitions, money or effort, was created by an unknown writer's story around 1250. However, this gastronomic utopia has become more popular since the Middle Ages and has since spread throughout Europe (Valasi, 2015, p. 33). In fact, one of the first literary depictions of this delicious paradise is already found in the middle of the 16th century in the lyrics of the German Hans Sach (Nikolajeva, 2000, p. 55).



Karlsson enjoys his gluttony to the fullest without any side effects. Gluttony is not presented as a disgusting and immoral act, but as a glorious achievement. Nevertheless, the example of Lindgren is one of the few cases in children's literature where food appears as something very important, freely available and gluttony is an unrepentant joy. It should be also noted that Pippi's greed is accompanied by her selflessness. She does not keep the food exclusively for herself. On the contrary, she shares it generously with everyone. It is, therefore, an element that distinguishes her from other greedy heroes of children's literature and perhaps alleviates her greed (Malewski, 2014, p.p. 100-115).

Around the same time, at the beginning of the 20th century, American children's literature has been influenced by a more lenient way of education and without being affected by a period of intense hunger, it presents food, but not with such intense and delicious descriptions (Daniel, 2006a, p.p. 69-71). The case of Popeye, who appeared in 1929 in Elzie Cristel Segar comic strip *Thimble Theatre*, is noteworthy. In particular, the appearance of the famous Popeye in 1929 seems to be associated with the consumption of more fruits and vegetables, which occurred with the change in the eating behavior of Americans during the transition from industrial to consumer capitalism. Popeye may now be known for his love of spinach, but in the early years of his appearance he was eating more meat. The spinach was, actually, introduced just three years after his first appearance. The reason seems to be hidden again in the history of nutrition (Honeyman, 2013, p.p. 141, 143).

The international food crisis following the end of World War I necessitated the introduction of a nutrition education program during the 1920s. According to Lovett (2005, p.p. 83-84), educators and public health professionals were funded to propagate and instill in children's nutritional norms by convincing them that everyone should eat spinach, drink milk and brush their teeth. Thus, Popeye, the character who embodies the dietary rules of the 1920s crisis, could be the model for a healthy diet, as, by linking nutrition to physical strength in a special way, he would help children learn the relationship between nutrition and health (Huemer, 2003, p. 116).

Today, the countries of the first world face a new risk that of obesity. Specifically, according to the Greek National System for the Prevention and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity during childhood and adolescence, obesity is one of the most important public health problems of the 21st century (childhood-obesity, n.d.). Therefore, the adoption of a healthy diet is considered necessary to be followed starting in early childhood. Indeed, Goldman & Descartes (2016, p.p. 203-204) cite several research findings according to which children understand the concept of healthy and unhealthy diets from an early age. Moreover, it is highlighted that their exposure to media messages about healthy eating influences their choices significantly. Hence, given that one part of the media undoubtedly books, it would be expected that the adult world would try to control and redefine eating habits through children's books.

Carolyn Daniel (2006a) has looked into whether the findings of modern medical studies on increasing rates of childhood obesity could initiate a debate reflected in children's literature more than a decade ago. Indeed, the concern of the western world for obesity, healthy eating, and a slender female figure seems to be reflected now in fiction.



Daniel's remarks, thus, seem to be particularly confirmed in recent years, as childhood obesity is one of the most ordinary themes in children's books.

Actually, the series of *Berenstain Bears* books was published in 1985 in America. As the title, *Berenstain Bears and too much junk food* suggests, the bears love eating junk food. Thus, adults take on the role of talking to them and introducing them to healthy food and exercise. Hence, a new strand of illustrated children's books emerged, promoting healthy eating. In this case, children's books are inspired by a specific pedagogical message, which is embedded in a funny narration and follows the very popular strategy: Entertainment Education. According to it, pedagogical and health-related messages are incorporated into popular entertainment media to positively influence attitudes and behaviors. Scholars of communication theory claim that through this strategy, the messages are more likely to be accepted by the audience, as they do not appear to be straightforwardly instructive (Moyer-Gusé, 2008, p.p. 407-425).

Indicative of this trend is *Readers to Eaters Publishing*, founded in 2009 and published stories about food, both fiction and non-fiction, to promote nutritional education, so that parents and children get a better knowledge of what and how they eat.<sup>3</sup> Child nutrition programs like American Alliance for a Healthier Generation have followed the same pattern. Models of healthy eating have been taught through picture books, which function as positive role models of eating behavior (Droog, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2014, p. 73).

At the same time another example comes from Canadian children's books. More specifically, several children's picture books focus on promoting healthy eating choices due to the general concern about rising obesity rates. Indeed, obesity is perceived as a disease and thus, the plump Canadian child illustrated in those children's books has no place in society and acts like a threat. In this way, children are taught through literature the right tools to distinguish what is right to eat. In other words, the ultimate goal is to influence and possibly change children's eating habits (Bosc, 2014, p.p. 179-186).

### **The Pedagogical Dimensions of Food in Greek Children's Literature**

Similar remarks can be made about Greek children's books. Specifically, a balanced and restrained diet has been reflected in literary and philosophical works since antiquity. We read, for example, in Aesop's myths about the master who orders lentils for the dinner that he will make for his friends. Moreover, Plato, by referring to gastronomy in his *Republic*, points out that food makes the human race unphilosophical and absurd, that is to say, incapable of participating in the enjoyment of art and philosophy (Valasi, 2015, p.p. 21, 25). Generally, it should be noted that for the ancient Greeks, polyphagia had not only a negative effect on physical health but had also severe consequences for the mental

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<sup>3</sup> *Readers to Eaters Publishing* is accepting book proposals, fiction or non-fiction, by authors and artists. According to its website it publishes "books that give a fresh and fun perspective on what we eat and how we eat through good stories, beautiful writing, and a deep appreciation of food cultures." <http://www.readerstoeaters.com/our-story>.



state of the individual, causing spiritual laziness and mental anger (Matala, Grivetti, Giannakoulia, 2015, p. 111).

Ancient Greeks' temperance continued to be a basic feature of Greek dietary behavior in the following centuries, a fact that is directly reflected in the literary works of the 19th century. The motto in the book *Γεροστάθης* [Gerostathis] includes Leon Melas's, the protagonists' advice (1858): 'Pan metron ariston' ['All in good measure']. This motto is repeated over time and concerns all areas of life, including nutrition. The ancient perceptions of nutrition obviously influence Gerostathis. He not only cautions that harmful foods should be avoided through a simple and healthy diet but also promotes self-control as a basic virtue, which contributes to good health. In fact, the punishment of gluttony is exemplary through the diseases and pains it brings. Gluttony is also disapproved in classic Greek children's books at the beginning of the 20th century. For example, in Zacharias Papantoniou's book, *Τα ψηλά βουνά*, [High Mountains] (1918), Foundoulis gets sick as soon as he eats all the wild pears.

However, fictional food takes on another dimension, and gluttony is not punished during the 1940s. Indicatively, the Greek journal *Η διάπλασις των παιδών* [Children's Education] (1947) publishes stories in which poor and hungry heroes acquire a magical object that allows them to live richly and eat delicious meals. The gastronomic utopia in this case, seems to arise from the hunger during the German occupation of Greece. (1941-1944).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, and having put the risk of hunger behind, the need to adopt a healthier diet became more urgent in Greece. In fact, the rate of overweight and obesity during childhood and adolescence in Greece is one of the highest rates worldwide (childhood-obesity, n.d.). Therefore, the matter of healthy eating could not but concern children's books. Food may have always been a part of Greek children's literature, but books on the subject of proper nutrition began to appear after the 1980s.

The first children's book on proper nutrition, *Μια φορά ήταν... η Κολοτούμπα* [Once upon a time it was ... Kolotoumpa], was published in 1988. Sofia Mantouvalou humorously presents the story of Kolotoumpa who tried to participate in sports but did not succeed. Through the didactic voice of her friend Panōkatō, Kolotoumpa learns that if she is to avoid feeling tired, she must eat a variety of foods on a daily basis, always in moderation and in combination with exercise.<sup>4</sup> Part of the nutrition education is also oral hygiene. The story of *Δόνα Τερηδόνα και το μυστικό της γαμήλιας τούρτας* [Dona Terēdona and the secret of the wedding cake] was written by Eugenios Trivizas in 1993 and published in book format in 2001. Dona Terēdona, whose name means dental decay, tries to destroy Lucia's bright smile by offering her vast quantities of sweets. However, Lucia is not deceived and she always brushes her teeth after every meal.

Since then, of course, the current concern about the rapid rise in obesity rates has led to an increase in the publishing of books that focus on eating behavior. The topic of healthy eating has gradually begun to occupy more and more writers and publishers.

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<sup>4</sup> Sofia Mantouvalou has also written the picture book *Η οδοντογλυφίδα που έγινε οδοντογλυφίδα* (2004) about obesity.



Specifically, the interest in food and nutrition education is intensifying in the twenty-first decade of the 21st century and peaking after 2009. This is also the year in which the Women's Literary Society's literary competition announces the category of award for a story about food. The growing trend of writing children's books on nutrition becomes even more apparent, looking at the international distinctions of Greece at the Gourmand World Cookbooks Award.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the promotion of book series on proper nutrition could be characterized as systematic. Specifically, some of the main themes are obesity and gluttony, the struggle between unhealthy eating and a healthy diet, the treatment of the child's refusal to eat certain foods, as well as the consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Sofia Zarampouka's illustrated children's book, *Ο ωραίος Δαρείος* [Beautiful Darius] (1996) is such an example. The cat, named Darius, follows a healthy and balanced diet like his master. When it comes to fighting the stray cats of his neighborhood, Darius emerges as the winner because of his healthy diet. Indeed, the other cats wonder how he can be so strong and he answers that it is so simple. He consumes a little meat, much fish, milk, cheese, and eggs, as well as plenty of vegetables and fruits. Here, the value of a healthy diet is enhanced by comparing it with the negative effects of an unhealthy lifestyle. When Darius deviates from his healthy diet in order to enjoy unhealthy foods, he soon confronts the consequences: sickness, extra pounds, and negative comments.

Lack of spiritual clarity, fatigue, and weakness are some of the characteristics of all dwarfs, who are fed on junk food, in the award-winning illustrated story *Ο Γυριστρούλης και οι Ό,τι Νάνοι... στη χώρα των σωστοφάγων* [Gyristroulis and the dwarfs ... in the land of eating right] (2014) by Maria Politou. Gyristroulis urges the dwarfs to embark on a long journey in search of a healthier diet. In this respect, the story differs from others that follow a similar pattern, emphasizing that trying to change one's diet is not so easy. Of course, the first stage is that of the decision for change. However, the dwarfs soon face the temptation, the second stage. In the third stage, which concerns mutual assistance, their Governor assumes this role and brings them more information about the land of eating right which helps them. Dwarfs learn, thence, that healthy eating provides strength, endurance for sports, school, and leisure, and they are ultimately convinced by seeing apparent results.

However, one of the few cases of Greek children's books that are found about proper nutrition with no comparison between healthy and unhealthy diet, is the illustrated children's book *Πώς να καταβροχθίσετε ένα ουράνιο τόξο* [How to devour a rainbow] (2008) by Yolanda Tsiambokalous. Actually, it is a story that shows only the positive results of healthy eating habits through an allegorical search for a rainbow. George, Iro

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<sup>5</sup> Gourmand World Cookbooks Award is an international award given annually since 1995 to the best food and wine books. The award-winning categories include children's books on food. More specifically, in 2012 the book *9 παραμύθια και μια ξύλινη κουτάλα* [9 fairy tales and a wooden ladle] (2012) by Ioanna and Ersi Niaoti was shortlisted at the Gourmand World Cookbooks Awards as the book with the best text and best illustration in Greece, while in 2015 the book *Ο Γυριστρούλης και οι Ό,τι Νάνοι... στη χώρα των σωστοφάγων* [Gyristroulis and the dwarfs ... in the land of eating right] (2014) by Maria Politou was distinguished by the Gourmand World Cookbooks Awards as the best Greek children's book in the category "Children Food Books".



and Tryphon, their pet dragon, are looking for a rainbow which according to the legend will give them a precious treasure. When they find the rainbow, which is nothing but vegetables and fruits hidden in their refrigerator, they devour it without realizing what the precious treasure is. At this point the father intervenes and explains to George that as long as he had strength, appetite, good eyesight and fine hair he had won the precious treasure offered by fruits and vegetables. The originality of Tsiambokalou's story lies precisely in its allegory and in the fact that there are neither references to the side effects of unhealthy eating nor adults' pressures in order to change a wrong eating behavior. Contrariwise, the heroes look for the rainbow because of their curiosity and the adult comes at the end only to give explanations.

Last but not least, the connection between the food and a basic stereotypical characteristic, which is usually acquired by the one who consumes it, is also noteworthy dimension. The example of the illustrated story *Αλέξη, φάε κάτι!* [Alexis, eat something!] (2014) by Alison Falkonaki, which was included among the 200 best books in the world, according to the international list of White Ravens 2015, is indicative. Alexis' relatives try to persuade him to eat the last spoonful of yogurt in order to grow taller, fruit to be fast, milk to have strong bones, carrots for better eyesight and cheese for strong teeth.

Summarizing, Greek picture books about healthy eating follow common patterns, such as the gluttony that comes with punishment or a negative situation, as well as the contrast between healthy and unhealthy diet, in which the reader sees the hero who suffers, due to poor diet, and realizes the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. In any case, the motif of the mature character is representative as she/he appears to guide directly or indirectly a more susceptible character in shaping her/his eating habits.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the context in which children's books are published has a great influence on the way in which fictional food is approached. The representations of food are concurrent with historical events that impacted people's perception of food from a necessity to survive to comfort and pleasure to food as a danger. That is, intense periods of hunger or taste richness affect the appearance of food in children's literature.

As regards the Greek paradigm, gluttony in general may have been reprehensible in Greek fiction, but the changes in diet, which occurred in the second half of the 20th century, formed a new strand of children's books focused exclusively on healthy eating. Specifically, the concern of modern society regarding the increasing rates of childhood obesity is reflected in Greek children's books. Diet, rules and manners around food are reflected, applauded or rejected. Thus, children's books seem to act as pedagogical tools in order for adults to talk about the negative effects of unhealthy eating and obesity. In that way we could argue that the readers are called to redefine their eating behavior and follow the existing dietary rules of adult society.





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