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CINDERELLA BECOMES A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

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Abstract: Playing of a sixteen-year-old adolescent, the author proposes a reflection on the vicissitudes that parental divorce brings to children's lives, imposing a rebuilt family, a stepmother or a stepfather, a new reality. There was the need to elaborate the psychic transformations inherent in the process of becoming an adolescent. Cinderella is a classic of children's literature, present in many of our repertoires, which provides an inspirational framework for critical reflection on the clinical case presented herein, with a depressive clinical condition and antisocial behavior resulting in a marked inhibition, most noticeably manifesting in Cinderella's low school outcomes. The therapeutic space was constituted as a transforming and (re)signifying place for the tensions that followed one another in the external reality, allowing for the progressive consolidation of her identity.

Keywords: Adolescence, Family, Divorce, Psychotherapy, Transformation.

In clinical work with adolescents, parents play a crucial role in the development of identifications, but mainly in the function of containing and transforming the stresses and anxieties inherent in the drive to *become* and to confront the *not yet being*, to discover and construct, on the path from childhood to adulthood.

During childhood, parents appear idealized, everything seems magical. However, when a divorce occurs, the fairy tale glamour ends and the need arises to deal with two worlds: that of the father and that of the mother, with their respective stepmother/stepfather, when there is a (re)organization of the, with the existence of a rebuilt family. Despite this reconstitution, parents continue to play their role as parents, so it is essential to work together, for the best benefit of the child and/or adolescent, who is going through his/her mental development.

Throughout history, children's stories have had a particular importance in the understanding of psychic functioning. Bettelheim (1991) draws attention to the importance of fairy tales, in the sense that they offer the child's imagination new dimensions that he/she can explore on his/her own. The form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child through which he/she can structure his/her daydreams, allowing for a better psychic structuring.

The tale of Cinderella is a staple of many of our childhood repertoires, one which addresses the anguish caused by fraternal rivalry, when she feels hopelessly overcome by her sisters and her interests are sacrificed to those of her stepmother, and she must do the dirty work, its due value is not recognized (Bettelheim, 1991). This classic will serve as thematic reflection on the work of psychoanalytic-inspired psychotherapy carried out with a sixteen-year-old adolescent, a process during which successive psychic transformations took place, during which the understanding of her family dynamics proved essential towards her mental growth.

CINDERELLA...

"Once upon a time..." is how almost all fairy tales start (Roberts, 2001). In this case, Cinderella is a sixteen-year-old adolescent who came to my clinical psychology consultation with a troubled countenance and an absentminded and scattered look. Her father had scheduled the consultation by telephone, expressing concerns about his daughter's inability to relate to her two younger half-brothers, children of his current relationship, following his divorce.

Cinderella is the eldest daughter of her father's first relationship and has a fourteen year-old sister. Seven years prior, her parents got divorced opting for shared custody, the two daughters spending a week at the mother's

home and another at their father's. The father rebuilt his life and constituted a new family, having two boys, currently a six and four years-old.

The father's expressed desire, in the initial consultation, focused on the need to work the fraternal relational dynamic, so as to reduce confrontations and conflicts with the brothers, but the implicit request pointed to another reality, a deeper and more serious conflict with the stepmother, the figure that embodies the separation of the parental couple and with whom it was necessary to learn to cope.

Cinderella reveals herself lost in regards to her place within the new family. She describes the relationship with her mother as being quiet and peaceful, while the relationship with her father was punctuated by a constant feeling of dissatisfaction and restlessness. From her sister, she sought support, and towards the younger brothers felt a strong sense of care and protection.

At the outset all the elements converged towards the existence of a clinical depression, allied to her antisocial behavior resulting from strong inhibitions, conveyed in her countenance, with Cinderella bearing the weight of becoming an adolescent and finding her place within her new family - collectively translating her despondency through disappointing educational outcomes.

Today, the periods of human development cannot be disconnected from the characteristics of the society in which we live. It is usual to observe, during adolescence, that in the absence of a genital capacity that develops later on a biological level, the secondary identifications with both parents remain fluctuating and fragile. According to Guignard (2020), "*in particular, their relations and identifications with the mother do not bear the mark of an authentic accomplishment of the twofold mourning of the object, the primary maternal object and the genital oedipal*

object" (p. 161). Around Cinderella's age, the process of mourning takes place as best as the adolescent can, under the aegis of the father and the other adults within their social circle, and takes place thanks to primitive defense mechanisms.

THE EVIL STEPMOTHER: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY IN ADOLESCENCE

The process of adolescent development includes the conflicts inherent in growing and becoming an adult, in a context that imposes the need to reconcile and integrate different realities, internal and external, imposing the search for new objects and goals (Bion, 1982), as well as the construction of new identification models (Cahn, 1991), allowing a (re)construction of the Self, which, in turn, is only possible in relation to the Other(s).

When there is an adolescent in the family, the whole family inevitably becomes involved in the process of becoming an adolescent, which means that adolescence is also a family process (Benghozi, 2010). During adolescence, the family plays a key role and should function as an *extended psychic space* in which it may be possible to contain the tensions that are directly linked to this period of ongoing transformations (Jeammet, 1980). Parent divorce has a major impact on adolescents, causing them to have to divide themselves between their mother's and father's separate homes, demanding the difficult task of reconciling different (sometimes irreconcilable) realities, all of which clashes with the key moment of personal growth during which there is a need to make a set of connections that empower the construction of their identity (Marcelli & Braconnier, 2005).

The advent of adolescence imposes the need for (re)construction of the parental *imagos*, which implies a process of transformation and (re)organization of the tensions present

in intersychic dynamics with parental figures. During her latency, Cinderella was confronted with her parents' divorce. Her fairytale collapsed and harsh reality imposed two homes upon her, two new realities which she found herself on the brink of having to learn to deal with.

From the mother came novelty, a new home, in another part of the city, a smaller apartment that feels to her like her own nest; where the sharing of tasks between the three women flows casually and naturally. Cinderella feels her mother is close and available, attentive to her needs, respectful of her space — this despite a harsh ordeal the mother faced shortly after her divorce, a cancer that led her to undergo a mastectomy and taxing chemotherapy.

Her father continued to live at the “family home”, a house on the outskirts of town, where Cinderella shared a room with her younger sister, notably, a space with particularity, it was a place of passage, since it was at once both bedroom and an attic access point.

Cinderella describes how difficult it was at first to maintain a shared space with her father “*everything has to be the way my father wants and sometimes I don't understand why he gets so upset...*”. From the outset, there was evidence of failures in communication, difficulties in hearing and being heard, this during a developmental period – adolescence – that presents itself as a prime moment to develop a new sense and meaning to the new and unknown.

Her father's new relationship brought Cinderella a stepmother, and with her what she perceived as the hard work and seemingly impossible chores required of her as if they were normal and trivial (Bettelheim, 1991). During the first years, cohabitation was peaceful, but with the advent of adolescence, confrontation became constant. In an environment of mounting tension and

rivalry, Cinderella perceived such clashes as successive attacks against her existence, constant attempts at annihilation of her Self, still under construction, leading her to need to progressively withdraw.

During a child's development in the context of a reconstructed family, the presence of a stepfather or stepmother is important. This figure should ideally have a friendly and non-controlling attitude, acting as a support to the father or mother, facilitating the best integration and adaptation into the new family (Repond & Darwiche, 2016). Despite this being the desirable unfolding scenario, this was only partially true in Cinderella's story. While the mother rebuilt her love life with a man who supported her and her daughters, treating them with respect and affection, on the father's side, her stepmother saw her as a rival, clinging to a logic of rivalry and struggle for priority.

In the context of a reconstructed family, it is not always easy to deal with the past of the current partner, materialized, in this instance, as shared custody on alternate weeks. This situation activates the ghost of a relationship past in the relationship present, through the presence of the children, living, unavoidable reminders.

Markedly, context shifts during this period are coupled with physical transformations that affect both internal and familial dynamics. According to Molinari (2018), during adolescence, “*in a very short space of time, the body is transformed into an adult body that is capable of sexual reproduction and thus joins the flow of time and generations*” (p. 208). It is critical that one understand what is happening at this developmental juncture, and Bion's theory is particularly useful in this respect, since through it, one can imagine, “*when the container finds itself psychologically inadequate to bear the emotional burden that comes from the relationship but also from the need to*

cope with the alienating sensation of a body undergoing such rapid transformations” (Idem p. 209). Cinderella, despite her unassuming and downcast bearing, could not hide the womanly shapes her body had already taken on.

Cinderella was faced with a twofold hurdle: on the one hand, dealing with the existence of a changing physical body, still unknown, that she must integrate, and, on the other hand, dealing with a psychic body, saturated with elements that could not yet be thought and integrated in its adolescent developmental process and which raise the need to for psychotherapy to facilitate their elaboration.

THE BALL: THE DANCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Green (2000) sums up the moment(s) of the analytic treatment as a plural time. Indeed, the psychotherapeutic space with Cinderella functioned as a *field*, as Ferro (2000) calls it, as a place for (re)signifying the unknown. One in which the narratives that generate knowledge are produced.

The goal of therapy is after all to improve the patient’s ability to make personal sense of his own experience. Thus began the ball, with a revisitation of the past, allowing Cinderella to process the divorce of her parents, to understand her place with the parental couple, carrying out a progressive integration of the transformations of her becoming (Duarte, 2017), in a co-construction in the present (Brown, 2011) which, progressively, led to a blossoming of both body and mind.

To Civitarese (2018), the *field* model can be seen as a kind of inter-subjective model that rigorously presumes a radical conception of the unconscious expanded as far as possible to the inclusion of the body. Working with this model leads us to interlinking introjective and the projective identifications, thus generating a third area - because the *field* is more than the

sum of its initial parts.

When Cinderella began her psychotherapy, she was in the 11th grade with poor grades despite her educational performance over the years having always been smooth, passing every year with average achievement rates. She was very depressed, her eyes had no shine, her speech was monotone with hardly any reflection of her inner world.

Working with the field model framework allows for the interpretation to become the vehicle of the narrations during the session, understood as transformational narrations (Ferro, 2015). It was possible for Cinderella to progressively become aware of what had truly happened to her parents; her father’s betrayal had led him to end the marriage and start a new family. Awareness of her own story made her deeply sad - in a solidary identification with her mother - but also allows her to frame her own thoughts, making her more assertive in successive confrontations with her stepmother, allowing her to carry out a de-idealization of parental figures, and allowing her to elaborate her Oedipal conflict continuing its development.

As the dance of therapy progressed, Cinderella felt more confident about herself, less depressed, therefore more confident in her own abilities — surprising herself with the results she could achieve in school tests and group projects. Exceeding her expectations at all times, she constructed a new narrative of her family history.

Cinderella, like any adolescent in the process of growing up, had to overcome her deep Oedipal disappointment to return to a happy life, no longer as a child but as a young woman (Bettelheim, 1991). Her previously expressionless body began to take on feminine postures and shapes, which in turn led to increased tension with her stepmother, in a clear fraternal rivalry that, as at the end of Cinderella’s history, one hopes to

integrate and put behind oneself. We cannot forget that the body plays an extremely important role in family contexts, since this is where representations are engendered, and which, according to Eiguer (2005), remain as intersubjective bond, though archaic and transmuted into a network of psychic traits.

Matha (2010) when thinking about the body during adolescence, considers it a *mirror place*, of what is the internal and external world, present in the relationship with the Other. Or what might be described, to use a more Bionian language, as a psychic process at work that is characterized by a *catastrophic change*, one which generates imbalances, which calls for finding new states of equilibrium, which are only possible by negotiating a balance between the old and the new.

Cinderella's ability to feel progressively recognized her uniqueness and individuality, in her therapeutic space, enabled her to operate a set of transformations inherent to her becoming an adolescent, namely the ability to meet and reconcile opposites, something that we inevitably find in the universe, where beings seek the union of opposites, in a world ruled by the law of complementarity of opposites, which both, clash and harmonize (Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 2008).

This movement also describes how Cinderella's progressive flourishing is felt by her rebuilt family, during which confrontations remain a constant but now in apparent harmony, where everything is done with the best of intentions and on behalf of the family. The father remains dissatisfied, adopting a righteous posture with his demands, sternly calling out slights and failings, complaining about what he has to provide as father, severely criticizing Cinderella's attitude for having her own dreams and desires, and ultimately not acknowledging her alterity.

The high point of the ball happened with the threat of breakup between her stepmother and

Cinderella's father, during which the situation devolved into physical violence, which led to the stepmother filing a police complaint of aggression, which in turn brought in the CPCJ - Commission for the Protection of Children and Youth. All this process allowed Cinderella to carry out her own a de-idealization of the reconstituted family, better understanding its shortcomings and limitations, which were often attributed to her, in a logic of projective identification.

THE PRINCE: THE ENCOUNTER IN THE RELATIONSHIP I-OTHER

Before the summer break, Cinderella decided to volunteer at the Association where she had her primary schooling, monitoring holiday activities and taking children to the beach. It was in this context that she met her Prince Charming, a young man who was also performing the same functions, and with whom she immediately established a great empathy - a relationship that allowed her to discover a new relational dynamic, one guided by respect and sharing.

Fairy tales reveal truths about humanity and about each of us, allowing us to (re) think about some of the specifics inherent in development. The story of Cinderella describes the necessary steps for personality development, so that it is possible for anyone to understand what they need to become a complete person, highlighting the way the psyche functions, what the psychological problems are, and what may be the best ways to tackle them (Bettelheim, 1991).

Advances in her psychotherapeutic process allowed Cinderella to gain autonomy, not only in her thinking but in her daily routines which had changed in the meantime, following the father's new family moving to an apartment closer to her mother's home. This change granted her a different mobility, moving autonomously even when

coming to psychotherapy.

Progressively, Cinderella begins to feel her mother's home as her one home, a place where she can be and where her prince is accepted and respected. In her father's house, she feels like the Cinderella of the fairy tale who performs many domestic tasks and cares for her younger brothers, but lives resigned to dreaming of her prince, and cannot claim her right to become a Woman.

The lack of recognition and the lack of a place with her father caused a deep sense of de-idealization in Cinderella, one that became particularly evident when she finishes secondary school. After completing the 12th grade, Cinderella becomes aware that she is on her own. Her mother has had an accident that affected her mobility and speech, and while she is slowly recovering she is not able to take an active part in the decisions inherent to the college application process. Meanwhile, her father is unable to tune in to the needs of a female daughter who is about to make a choice on which her future will depend.

It is at this moment that Cinderella reveals herself as the beautiful woman she had become, making assertive choices and making important decisions about her future. Faced with the need to study for the National exams, she decides to remain at her mother's home, no longer dividing herself between two places, and picking the one where she feels she can care for her recovering mother but where she is also cared for nonetheless by the maternal family who are involved in her mother's painful recovery process. Based on the reality of her final grade averages, she decided to attend a private university, not because she feels unable to attend a public university and live on her own, but because she has decided to enter the job market, remaining close to the people who are emotionally significant to her.

For Ferro (2018), the end of a psychotherapy confronts us with the need for a parting,

for mourning. There is a fear that the time invested may not be enough, that it might be necessary to continue, because new challenges will inevitably emerge. However, the most important thing is that the adolescent is able to access his/her own internal resources in order to respond to reality, thus allowing analysis to continue, following the adolescent on his path, dealing with the surprises that may arise, performing new transformations and co-constructions.

In our therapeutic *field*, with the approach of the end of your ball, I feel that Cinderella looked for the answers in order to fulfil her own dreams in a firm and active manner. Her active posture was evident in her body, which communicated security and confidence and in her interpersonal relationships: with her father remained cordial and affable, with her brothers close and affectionate, with her distant stepmother politically correct, with his mother worried but confident in her full recovery, clearly balancing adequate positioning with the various significant figures in her familial environment.

THE (RE)ENCOUNTER: FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Family is fundamental during the process of becoming an adolescent, on the long path from childhood to adulthood, during which there is a need to reconcile and integrate the new and the unknown, the equal and the different in the search for new complementarities. Regardless of its particularities, the family is constituted as a space of sharing, a time that allows the construction of identity and identification processes.

In Cinderella's history, the family is punctuated by countless vicissitudes, her mother's illness, her father's new family, but it is the (re)encounter with her prince that allows her to find happiness for all eternity

(Roberts, 2001). In the clinical work carried out with Cinderella, the therapeutic space was constituted as a *field*, that is, as a place of (re)meeting, transforming and (re)signifying of the tensions present within the family, especially in the rebuilt family, allowing her to integrate and overcome fraternal rivalry, consolidate her identity and elaborate the psychic transformations present in the process of becoming an adolescent (Duarte, 2017).

Comprehensive models, such as Ferro's *field* model (2018), allow a shared, jointly elaborated and dreamt narrative, often disregarding real or historical truth, in favour of an emotional narrative truth where stories, transformations and insights coming to life. Such narratives are essential when working with children and adolescents given that they're in an early stage of psychic development, and this facilitates integration, carrying over into adult life.

During adolescence, *catastrophic change* is to be expected, in the Bionian understanding, which generates imbalances, propels the search for new states of equilibrium, producing what Matha (2010) designated the "*reorganization of identity*", which is only possible through the presentation negotiation between the old and the new, the known and the unknown, the need to integrate allowing advancement and growth.

When working with reconstituted families, it is essential to take into account what Repond & Darwiche (2016) describe as interpersonal relationships, because these allow us to understand how its members live the experience of "being a family". Cinderella's experience, within a reconstructed family, is the same as that of many other adolescents, but this took place in a family that was unable to organize itself in order to truly become a new family.

At the beginning of psychotherapeutic work, Cinderella had great difficulty in finding her place with her father, but the resolution

of her intrapsychic conflicts allowed her to develop an adult relationship, in which it was possible to share ideas despite the difference in values. The new-found security allowed her to stabilize the tensions existent in the relationship with his stepmother, leading to a greater personal affirmation, visible in the way she presented himself but mainly in the manner in which she began managing conflicts.

The psychotherapeutic work carried out in order to consolidate Cinderella's identification process allowed her to operate from a non-existence, evident in her initial clinical circumstances, to an existence, through the internalization of good objects, manifest in a newfound physicality and an ability to think, coalesced in the beautiful Woman that Cinderella became, able to think her being in the different intra- and intersubjective dynamics, integrating her personal sense of her own experience, present in the relationship I-Other(s).

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