

He's too sensitive!

Diana, Pandora's box and Elpis. (clinical cases 6)

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To start: a little bit of mythology

- Diana: “was the goddess of the **hunt**, the **moon** and **childbirth**, being associated with wild animals and woodland, and having the power to talk to and control animals”.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diana_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diana_(mythology))
- Pandora: “Zeus, enraged for the theft of the divine fire committed by Prometheus, decided to punish him and his beloved creation: humankind. Prometheus was chained to a rock and every day an eagle would eat his liver: during the night the organ would grow back every day so, the next morning the torture resumed. To punish humankind, Zeus ordered Hephaestus to create a beautiful lady, Pandora, to which the gods offered all sorts of virtues. Hermes, who gave the lady curiosity and cunning, was appointed to lead Pandora to Prometheus's brother, who, meanwhile had been freed by Heracles, Epimetheus. Prometheus, despite the warning of his brother not to accept gifts from the gods, married Pandora, and they had Phyrre. Pandora had a vase, which was given to her by Zeus, who told her never to open it. But, driven by curiosity, she opened it: all the evils of the world escaped from the vase: aging, jealousy, diseases, madness and vice, that beat against the world. At the bottom of the vase stayed hope, that couldn't escape before the vase was closed again. Before this moment humankind lived free from evil, fatigues or any worries, and humans were, like gods, immortals. After the opening of the vase, the world became a desolate and inhospitable place, like a desert, until Pandora opened it again, which allowed hope to escape, and the world lived again.”. <http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora> (translated by myself)
- Elpis: “In Greek mythology, **Elpis** (Ancient Greek: ἔλπις) was the personification and spirit of hope (hope was usually seen as an extension to suffering by the Greek, not as a god), perhaps a child of Nyx and mother of Pheme, the goddess of fame, renown and rumor. She was depicted as a young woman, usually carrying flowers or cornucopia in her hands. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Elpis was the last item in Pandora's box (or jar). Based on Hesiod's description, the debate is still alive to determine if Elpis was only *hope*, or more generally *expectation*.”.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elpis>

And now the experience of a mother.

This is her story:

“Cinzia ..., are you showing cartoons during the day again?” – I ask the teacher.

“Diana (the daughter) says you do”.

After a moment of hesitation the teacher confirms: “Yes, we do, sometimes, but hey, not everyday!”

“The problem is that your daughter always cries, for everything we show! She's too sensitive!!”

Ok, ... I state that I'm against showing cartoons in kindergarten, even though it seems I'm the only one bothered by it. But that's not what I want to talk about.

I'd like to talk about what Cinzia, Diana's teacher said, on Diana's being too sensitive,

It's true, Diana is too sensitive.

She is really “too, too” sensitive.

But is it really her fault?

Is it my fault, if she finds sad seeing Donald Duck getting hit in the head by a hammer, instead of laughing like the other children?

Is it my fault, if she cries while watching Lady and the Tramp (which is showed in kindergarten!), or if she's scared of Kung Fu panda, because the characters hit each other

Is it my fault, if she's afraid of the witches in tales?

Is it my fault, if she cries when she sees a child without a mother in a cartoon?

Is it really a problem having such deep feelings?

Is it really so weird that, if a young girl doesn't like the things most of her peers do, she has to be labeled 'weird'?

If someone sat next to her and explained her what's going on, explained her the story, what she's seeing and that's it's just a cartoon, that the good always wins (in cartoons, at least), and how things happen, she wouldn't be scared.

She just needs to understand.

She is very rational, she must know. And understand.

She is very very curious.

She doesn't like cartoons, but try to show her a clip explaining how things are made (lately she's literally fascinated by the "how it's made" on focus tv), how things are made in detail, how they are built, and she's going to watch it and will ask you a lot of questions. Without getting scared.

Try to show her cartoons about the human body, and I challenge you to answer all of her questions she asks while watching it.

I often don't know what to say.

The other night she asked me: "Mom, are white blood cells people?"

"No honey". – I explained. "They are made look like people in the cartoon to make you understand how they work, but they are cells"

"And who's moving them then? Who's behind everything?"

'Mom, how is the throat made?'

'Mom, why does the heart beat? Is it true that it never stops? Same for the blood.'

And so on.

Or, 'Mom, how does sound work? How is it created?'

She often asks about how we are made, on the reason of things, on how the sun and the moon work.

But the teacher didn't notice it, she just sees her sensitivity and her extreme slowness.

This is also true, she's really slow at doing things. But she does them all, and with extreme precision.

She's slow at getting dressed, eating, tying her shoes, everything.

And teachers notice it, and point it up!

'Sorry mom, I'm always the last one that finishes the job. The teacher said I take forever.'

But she did finish the job, and she did it within the time limit.

So, is it right to stress her weaknesses and not her strenghts?

I'd like to understand, and I ask you too, is it really a problem that my Diana is so sensitive?

I'd say this mother: Your daughter is not too rational, your daughter is human. She lives with deep sensitivity emotions and feels that there's something wrong with Donald Duck, when he gets hurt. And she lives a deep bewilderment, with absolute solitude: "why am I the only one who's not laughing?"

Diana's "mistake", just like every other children's, is to consider fictional characters too realistically, and not like symbolic illustrations, like mythologic figures, of the human life. Her "weakness" is to identify herself too much, without recognizing fiction and reality.

On the other hand her "weakness", unlike other children, is to somehow feel the drama that hides the impotence, of the weak and/or of the guilty. Weak: because defeated, never victorious and victim of revenges. Guilty: because sistematically punished. Diana can't laugh because of fights. Other children can. That's the difference, very simple but at the same time huge. Diana, somehow feels that in cartoons characters (Paperino, Gatto Silvestro, coyote) don't evolve. They are doomed.

Is it also for this that it's said that gifted children have a great justice sense? Who knows!

Or, for the same reason, they are interested in some greek myyths, to the origins, to important topics.

For example, let's see sylvester the cat and tweety bird cartoons (in hundreds of examples https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=sylvester+the+cat+and+tweety+bird+cartoons+), or Sylvester and Speedy Gonzalez, Tom and Jerry,...

Too sensitive?

Some definitions.

- To sensitize = to pay attention, to draw attention.
- Sensitivity = skill. Attitude to receive impressions through senses.
- Sensitive = receptive, perceptive, sensitive, susceptible, impressionable, excitable, edgy, passionate, delicate ... Opposite: refractory, apathetic, tough, coriaceous, indifferent, obtuse, torpid, immune.
- DE-sensitize (teeth, nerves), happens only after a degenerative process. In psychotherapy desensitization therapies submit the subject to a progressive and growing amount of stimuli that arouse his phobias. Secondly the subject is presented with relaxation techniques.

Verily the statement "he's too sensitive", makes think about a measure. But what is the basic unit of this measurement, under which we are insensitive and above which we are hypersensitive?

Somewhere there must be an idea of what is normal. Something that, if exceeded, will distance itself a bit, or a lot, from the standard.

But what is this idea? Other than the consent and the agreement erected on the major behaviours?

This unit of measure can (has to) be determined based on a cartoon?

Verily the statement "he's too sensitive" is a trench that saves us from the child's cry.

It saves us from seeking answers to his cry.

It saves us from having to explain and teach him the myths and the mess of the world.

It saves us from having to explain him that between cartoon and reality there's a huge difference, that the cartoon, like a litmus test assumes various colorations, delivers various emotions, that the stories that the cartoon offers can almost always be associated to archetypes (not in the content but in the form). They always convey the same story.

It saves us from feeling the pain.

Archetipo: “The concept of an **archetype** /'arkɪtaɪp/ is found in areas relating to behavior, modern psychological theory, and literary analysis. An archetype can be:

- 1 a statement, pattern of behavior, or prototype which other statements, patterns of behavior, and objects copy or emulate;
- 2 a Platonic philosophical idea referring to pure forms which embody the fundamental characteristics of a thing;
- 3 a collectively-inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., that is universally present in individual psyches, as in Jungian psychology; or a constantly recurring symbol or motif in literature, painting, or mythology (this usage of the term draws from both comparative anthropology and Jungian archetypal theory).”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archetype>

Pandora’s box and Elpis.

What is Diana’s evil, the too sensitive Diana? Diana, “goddess of the hunt and childbirth, associated with wild animals”, with that cartoon, in school, somehow felt that the world is too big for her little figure? With that cry Diana unconsciously questions the opened Pandora’s box.

Bruno Bettelheim and fairy tales.

A lot of the attention reversed on gifted children

A lot of the attention given to gifted children can’t consider that intellect and emotion fly the same coin.

A cartoon is similar to a fairy tale; a bad copy let’s say. About lots of cartoons we can say that they are very bad, a commercial consumerist product, ecc, but they have something of the tale. We’ll see how.

They offer repeating scenarios, they arouse emotions and they make think.

So, talking about the cartoon and Diana’s fear, going beyond the cartoon to penetrate in fairy tales, is a bit like going from a sometimes trivialized form of entertainment (like “culture and supermarket consumerism”) to the content of childhood fears.

Going beyond the cartoon, to enter the tales, seems to me a good way to honor Diana’s fears. Diana “goddess of woods and wild animals”.

Bettelheim questions why children appreciate popular tales more than other childhood stories.

Tales talk to the child about his strong emotions, wishes and fears. They unconsciously talk to him, activating thoughts and questions.

Bettelheim explains well how tales act on the child like a sounding board, the story goes on, like a wave, making one (or more) deep unconscious fears vibrate.

They talk him about abandonment fears, envy, love and aggressiveness. Then they act as a big amplifier for aggressiveness and guilt senses: because if it’s the mother or the father telling the tale, the child will feel somehow allowed to get angry, feeling less guilty about his “bad” thoughts.

Moreover tales lead to a good ending, and this heartens and strengthens the child in his giving the world an order. The tale, starting from the most horrible abominations (infanticide, abandon, ecc.) leads to a strong positive way, for the future.

Tales raise the interior problems and handle problems that worry the child.

Tales indicate well the characters (good or bad).

There’s a strong polarity and this makes the child’s assignment easier. In truth nobody is completely good or bad, like the two halves of the cloven viscount indicate. But the child needs to clearly acknowledge, in order to give a sense and a positive direction to his emotions. That’s why tales are so clear about characters: Snow White, the witch, the stepmother,...

It's the success, the victory of the good that's important. A deed of trust in the world and in itself. In tales, the good and the bad are always there, but, let's say, in a simplified situation. They are easily and immediately graspable. This facilitates the child's assignment, that therefore can identify himself in the heroes of the stories.

Maybe this is the reason because some cartoons make cry, the roles are too mixed. Sylvester suffers too much, always, is doomed to his role and will never grow.

Considering the importance that Bettelheim gives tales, two are the thoughts that drive me

- 1) The tale comes before the knowledge of the world (interior and social). Anticipating the knowledge, it builds the world.
L. Vygotskji stated that "The word is the microcosm of the consciousness." This makes me think about how important it is to escort the child while he listens to a tale/watches a cartoon.
- 2) Experience doesn't replace knowledge.
And the absence of experience provokes only fears in a sensitive mind, that can't accept, understand and digest the badness. This indigestion maybe will associate to the perception of his impotence.

In front of the problems of the world a child can get scared, because what can he, so little, do? He doesn't have experience, strength, he's not associated with any group, NGO, syndacate, party,... but can feel the complexity of things.

Above all Diana feels it in a different way than her peers do. This deep experience is associated to the perception of her personal inadequacy (I'm a child) compared to those issues.

So, this experience, brings the child back to his place in the world, to his fragility, his impotence, but above all must bring the parents and the educators to the needs of reassuring him, in regard of his growth.

This sensitivity has to be faced on the inner plan. It's a fundamental narcissistic issue.

The gifted child is emotionally childish, immature? Or emotionally inflammable?

You will probably have noticed that the fruition of cartoons involves different feelings, depending on the subject's systems of projection and identification. Briefly, there will be those who side Tweety and those who side Sylvester. In truth I would say that many side Sylvester, even if he suffers, especially when Tweety seems too petulant and unpleasant (Tweety is a male, for those who didn't know).

But this is not the point, the point is to understand what bothers the child.

- The loneliness that the child feels in this situation, where he, the only one crying, without understanding why, lives a "inadequate" sensitivity.
- Which sense of justice he would imagine
- Why does he identify himself with the victim. Why does he happen to always be the Calimero of the situation.

A child, even more if very young, shouldn't watch TV alone. Someone has to be with him. Things must be explained. Period.

Many say it. Françoise Dolto says it. I used to say it. My wife (especially her) said it.

We would explain: this is what happens, that one is bad, that seems big but he's tiny... Let's say we see a tiny insect in a nature documentary... Huge, gigantic in TV. Who's telling him that in reality the insect is as big as a pebble? Do you imagine a kite or a scrabble, enlarged on a widescreen?

This is even more important with gifted children, because they ask a lot of question.

And so there it is, diana's crying, sad bout the persecution of the victim, scared of the injustice, Diana who may well wonder why people laugh each time Sylvester gets hit.

Here. We can wonder why authors want to repeat this scenario. What do you think? Why do they show the same ending all over again? But what do you feel?

Bettelheim wrote that he used to tell a lot of tales. The child then chooses the one he wants to hear. Without wanting to know why, he's going to choose the one he needs in that particular moment. And we will read it, a lot of times, without changing it at all, not to mess its order up.

With the child, be careful not to rationalize and psychoanalyze the tale. It's absolutely not about matching real people, maybe familiar ones, with the characters of the tale.

It's also important to remember, that the same plot, seen in TV or heard in a tale, takes a different dynamic. The rythm of the story is more a subjective rythm, more prone to breaks, interruptions, repetitions. Sure, with today's digital TV it's possible to stop any emission to replay, go back,...

After all we must tell that in the cartoon the characters don't die. That the peers get scared when death is real , and not fictional, like in the cartoon; but when it's in the cartoon they laugh and this laughing is a way to eject the fear.

Understand why in the cartoon the hit is acceptable, why it makes laugh, but in real life it's bad, distinguishing between reality and fiction allows us to think about the sense of the cartoon.

Those who aren't real people are personification of roles (caricatures).

I think this is the difference.

So is it Diana's weeping a signal that ask to help her distinguish between real and fictional characters?

I'd like to stress how the reading of tales by parents, with their characters, all misdeeds that happen, justifies the child in living his hostile feelings (natural and useful for the creation of his personal Self). So, if parents told those things "I, child, am not guilty for thinking them, I am not bad, abnormal, selfish and so on. If my parents are telling it I am free to think them".

Also let's not forget that:

- 1) easily, for a gifted child, his arboreous mind quickly brings him to imagine a high number of variations, for example a 1000 pieces puzzle. To finish one, it's required a certain amount of perseverance and determination;
- 2) gifted children's operation quickness brings him to immediate reactions. This quickness isn't only cognitive, but also emotional. This way children expose themselves with strong, quick reactions, maybe strongly dramatised, giving us a sign of their fragility. Surely, all of this shows a strong disharmony between cognitive development and affective maturity.

To finish: remember Enzo Jannacci?

Ho visto un re ~ I saw a king

Enzo Jannacci - Dario Fo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfR384pMpTY>

Italian lyrics:

Dai, dai, cunta su...

Mi?

Sì, propri ti!

Ah, beh... Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Ho visto un re.

Sa l'ha vist cus'è?

Ho visto un re!

Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Un re che piangeva seduto sulla sella
piangeva tante lacrime

ma tante che

bagnava anche il cavallo!

Povero re!

E povero anche il cavallo!

Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

È l'imperatore che gli ha portato via
un bel castello...

Oh, che baloss!

...di trentadue che lui ce n'ha.

Povero re!

E povero anche il cavallo!

Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Ho visto un *vesc...*

Sa l'ha vist cus'è?

Ho visto un vescovo!

Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Anche lui, lui, piangeva,

faceva un gran baccano,

mordeva anche una mano...

La mano di chi?

La mano del sacrestano!

Povero vescovo!

E povero anche il sacrista!

Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh... **Cunta su, dai.**

È il cardinale che gli ha portato via
un'abbazia...

Oh, poer crist!

...di trentadue che lui ce n'ha.

Povero vescovo!

E povero anche il sacrista!

Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh... **Dai, cunta su...**

Ho visto un *ric...*

Sa l'ha vist cus'è?

Ho visto un ricco! Un *sciur!*

Sì... Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Il tapino lacrimava su un calice di vino
ed ogni go... ed ogni goccia andava...

Deren't al vin?

Sì, che tutto l'annacquava!

Pover tapin!

E povero anche il vin!

Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh...

Il vescovo, il re, l'imperatore

l'han mezzo rovinato

gli han portato via

tre case e un caseggiato

English translation:

Come on, tell us...

Me?

Yes, just you!

Oh, well... Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well...

I saw a *re*.

What did you saw?!

I saw a king!

Oh, well... Yes, well...

A king was crying sitten on the saddle

He had so tears

so many that

he also wetted the horse!

Poor king!

And also poor horse!

Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well...

The emperor carried away from him
a beautiful castle...

Oh, he was evil!

...from thirtytwo he owns.

Poor king!

And also poor horse!

Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well...

I saw a *vesc...*

What did you saw?!

I saw a bishop!

Oh, well... Yes, well...

He also was crying,

he made real noise,

he also bitted a hand...

Whose hand is it?

The verger's hand!

Poor bishop!

And also poor verger!

Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well... **Come on, tell us!**

The cardinal carried away from him
an abbey...

Oh, poor man!

...from thirtytwo he owns.

Poor bishop!

And also poor verger!

Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well... **Come on, tell us...**

I saw a *ric...*

What did you saw?!

I saw a rich person! A lord!

Yeah... Oh, well... Yes, well...

That poor man was crying on a glass of wine
and every drop... and every drop went...

Into the wine?!

Yes, they diluted it!

Poor poor man!

And also poor wine!

Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well...

The bishop, the king, the emperor

they almost ruined him

they carried away from him

<p>di trentadue che lui ce n'ha. <i>Pover tapin!</i> E povero anche il vin! Sì, beh... Ah, beh... Sì, beh... Dai, cunta su, dai, dai, cunta su! <i>Vist un villan.</i> <i>Sa l'ba vist cus'è?</i> Un contadino! Ah, beh... Sì, beh... Il vescovo, il re, il ricco, l'imperatore, persino il cardinale, l'han mezzo rovinato gli han portato via: la casa il cascinale la mucca il violino la scatola di kaki la radio a transistor i dischi di Little Tony la moglie! <i>E po', cus'è?</i> Un figlio militare gli hanno ammazzato anche il maiale... <i>Pover porscell!</i> Nel senso del maiale... Ah, beh... Sì, beh... Ma lui no, lui non piangeva, anzi: ridacchiava! Ah! Ah! Ah! <i>Ma sa l'e', matt?</i> No! Il fatto è che noi <i>villan</i>...</p> <p>[everybody:]</p> <p>Noi <i>villan</i>... E sempre allegri bisogna stare, che il nostro piangere fa male al re. Fa male al ricco e al cardinale: diventan tristi se noi piangiam! E sempre allegri bisogna stare, che il nostro piangere fa male al re. Fa male al ricco e al cardinale: diventan tristi se noi piangiam! Ah, beh!!</p>	<p>three mansions and an apartment house ...from thirtytwo he owns. Poor poor man! And also poor wine! Yes, well... Oh, well... Yes, well... Come on, tell us, tell us! I saw a <i>villan</i>. What did you saw?! A farmer! Oh, well... Yes, well... The bishop, the king, the lord, the emperor, also the cardinal, they almost ruined him, they carried away from him: the house the farm the cow the violin the box of persimmons the radio Little Tony's discs the wife! No, really! And then? His son became a conscript soldier, they also killed his pig... Poor hog! We're meaning the pig! Oh, well... Yes, well... But he didn't cry, rather he was laughing! Ah! Ah! Ah! What? Is he crazy? No! The fact is that all we farmers...</p> <p>[everybody:]</p> <p>All we farmers... We always have to be cheerful, 'cause if we cry, the king becomes sad. Also the rich person and the cardinal: they become sad if we cry! We have to be always cheerful, 'cause if we cry, the king becomes sad. Also the rich person and the cardinal: they become sad if we cry! Oh, well!!</p>
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Give the right words

The mother: “This is why the other parents judge Diana, they throw away any question, they avoid their children’s question. The not thinking is healthy. At home, if I can, I explain everything, and when I do, she calms down”.

There is no better description of the emotional experience of the gifted child.

But be careful, the intellectualisation shouldn’t become a nevrotic defense. Let’s not scare her.

To say the truth, the daughter has to be led to the discovery of herself, understand why she identifies so much herself with the victims, which feelings and emotions derive from her heart. One of the functions of the parent is to lead the child and restrain his anxiety, trying to use the right words. As F.Dolto insisted, when the children can't express their feelings and emotions is appropriate that the parent tries to give him words, or a choice of words, so that the child learns to name what he feels, to communicate. This way he feels, here too, that it's legit to feel certain emotions without being ashamed, but mainly sees in function a communicative function, that one day he'll be able to imitate.

I really thank the mother I quoted, for her witness, hoping she will appreciate what I wrote.

Giovanni Galli, august 2014