

The Worker Characters in Storytelling and Puppetry: How they Can Support Imitation in Children

~ Suzanne Down

Meaningful, purposeful work can be a potent antidote for a child to help balance the overwhelming nature of technology today. Our interest in practical life, our physical and heart engagement in doing real work, baking, knitting, sewing, shoveling, planting a garden, building, and so on, provide the vital source of imitation for our children. Through their eagerness to imitate us, we help enliven their relationship to their own will forces, their confidence in “doing,” and their sense of joy. When children imitate useful, worthwhile actions that we perform in their presence, they are forming the building blocks of their own moral capacity.

When they view puppet characters also visibly engaged in “doing,” this reinforces the children’s imitative powers, and sparks their own interest in participating in a life of accomplishment in the daily life around them. Imagine the sense of self-worth that can arise from this.

The key is in building up our own story imagination. We draw on our own life experiences, story meaning and symbolism, research, and consciousness, and warm it all into an imaginative inner picture. We find the inspiration for these worker tales in the activity of the competent puppet characters that inhabit them.

The shoemaker lovingly, with great care, cuts the leather and stitches it together to make a shoe! His whole being shows interest and pride in his workmanship. There is a leaning-in to the stitching, as his eyes look at what he is creating. His soul nature surrounds the shoes he is making. After all, the true archetypal shoemaker is making a shoe that supports humans walking their way through the world, each with an individual destiny. We all are shoemakers in our inner life.

The farmer stands sturdily in the field and views the land. They will dig and plant, water, and nurture the earth and the plants that grow in their care. They are the caretaker of earth, and grow the food that gives

us sustenance. The sun shines on their hat, the rain falls on their back. Through wind, snow, morning and night the farmer steadfastly takes care of the land and the growing of things. We honor this profession in the rhythmic, earthy nature of the farmer’s gestures.

I look for opportunities in every story, from nursery rhyme to fairy tale, to bring forward the rhythm of practical work. The baker kneads the dough, her whole body moving in the action of kneading. Her whole heart is in each stage of the process. We can clearly bring the gestures to the children, the mixing, the rolling, so that the texture of the dough will become visible. When she puts it in the oven, we will see her smelling the sweet smells, and when she tastes it, mmmmm, we taste it too! All this we pour into our character from our own inner imagination, awakening insight into these practical, yet ensouled gestures.

Whatever the worker is doing, we establish a relationship... the shoemaker cares for the shoes he is making, the farmer’s crops are important to their soul. The baker finds joy in each loaf of bread she makes. But when the worker character’s work is caring for sheep, or a cow, or the chickens, or a child, the relationship is elevated because there can be a visual and believable response from this other character. When the shepherd tends to the sheep, and pats the sheep’s head, the sheep can look up at the shepherd and respond to the caring gesture. We see what lives in the interval of the relationship. What is between them is made visible. ♦

Suzanne Down is the founder and director of *Juniper Tree School of Story and Puppetry arts in Colorado*. The school offers a full-year online training in puppetry arts, summer in person intensives, puppetry tutorials, and story writing workshops. All of these offerings weave together pedagogical, artistic, and therapeutic aspects of puppetry. Visit her website at junipertreepuppets.com for details.