



Faculty of
Psychology and
Educational Sciences
"Ovidius" University
of Constanta, Romania



BLACK SEA JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY



www.bspsychology.ro



9 772068 464001



***Carrot Top* – a Contemporary Psychological Novel Still Relevant**

Larisa Ileana Casangiu¹, Diana Gabriela Ciofu²

Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania

larisacasangiu17@gmail.com¹, dianadiduk97@gmail.com²

Abstract: This article aims to highlight both the relevance and the reception of Jules Renard's novel „Carrot Top” and the emotional impact the work generates on the audience in the reality of 2023. Despite portraying a rare occurrence in a civilized society, namely the persecution by the protagonist's own mother, this work finds numerous corresponding situations in contemporary social-historical reality. In 2023, we conducted a study on the current reception of this novel, and the results seem worthy of generalization, particularly for a public with relevance to children in Romania.

Keywords: Relevance, motherhood, interpretation, reception, criticism.

1. Introductory aspects

The literary work „Carrot Top”, an undisputed masterpiece, initially appeared fragmentarily in various magazines, then as a novel (1894), and later as a play (1900). The novel portrays the tragedy of a child surrounded by a mother who causes daily injustices and sorrows and a resigned father. It unequivocally illustrates the drama of a child not feeling loved in their own home, which should be seen as a sacred place where support, love, and family nuances enrich the beauty of life. The book is woven only from those moments that shattered the child's soul, the force of the story largely owed to a desire not to deviate from this subject. The writing is concentrated, the structure fragmented, yet the story progresses by juxtaposing selected moments whose only apparent connection seems to be the return of the same characters.

We believe that this novel deserves to be read today, as its significance will vary for different children: some resonating with its drama, others discovering a different facet of life through reading, and some able to sugarcoat the protagonist's plight.

In order to analyze the work's message and formulate an opinion on how it is perceived by specialized literature, studies presenting opinions, both positive and negative, of several personalities were extracted: Delphine Leloup (2011), Henri Bachelin (1909), Marcel Pollitzer (1956), Italo Caroni (1973), and James F. Mason (1940).



Contradictory opinions in specialized literature and the profound experiences of the character prompted us to conduct a detailed analysis and study to examine the emotional impact the work has on readers and to identify how widely it is read and appreciated. In this regard, we conducted a questionnaire survey with 81 subjects, fourth-grade students aged between 9 and 11. The research instrument used was designed with accessible items, and the obtained results confirmed that each reader was emotionally impacted and appreciated the work differently.

2. Critical exegesis

Jules Renard never accredited the idea that he narrated his own life within the novel; however, numerous commonalities exist between the autobiography and the novel: red hair, the nickname, a taste for hunting. In his journal, published posthumously, Jules Renard refers to his true parents as Mr. and Mrs. Lepic and adopts the pseudonym „Carrot Top”.

Regarding the opinions of literary specialists on the work, a French preface to the novel by Stephane Gouglmann includes a statement from Tristan Bernard to the author, confessing that all his friends believe „Carrot Top” is the best among Renard's creations (Renard, J., 2002). The preface also discusses the work as departing from naturalistic literature, emphasizing its realism without alluding to social context, omitting details about location, dates, and characters' ages (Renard, J., 2007). It notes the absence of panoramic photographs, elimination of secondary stories, and a reduction in the number of supporting roles, asserting that the only thing that matters is the story of a red-haired boy: Carrot Top (Renard, J., 2002).

Among the literary figures who have expressed their point of view on the literary work „Carrot Top” we can mention:

Delphine Leloup – author, interpreter, critic, and study guide. In the work „Poil de Carotte de Jules Renard. Analyse complète et résumé détaillé de l'oeuvre” published in 2011 by lePetitLitteraire.fr, she appreciates the fact that the author's objective is to take stock of his life, with the maturity gained through a lengthy experience. Thus, the time interval between the moments of events and their recording can sometimes involve modifications to the memory. The author commits, through the autobiographical pact, to be sincere. However, autobiographical writing sometimes deliberately takes the path of fiction: through autofiction – the author merging with the role of narrator and main character, recounts the events of his life in a slightly romanticized form: dates, places, etc., are changed, and through the autobiographical novel – „Carrot Top” being to some extent a fictional character, strongly inspired by the author's own life. Therefore, these aspects highlight the fact that Jules Renard does not completely tell his own story but that of a boy inspired by what he once was, having the opportunity to take the form of a manifesto about how important the family environment is for a child, the catastrophic impact of the lack of parental love, and to what extent the child's behavior leaves something to be desired as a reaction to rejections, frustrations, and resentments due to not finding his place in his own family (Leloup, D., 2011). **Henri Bachelin** (born on March 27, 1879, died on September 21, 1941) was a writer and the author of numerous works in literary criticism and musicology. In his work „Jules Renard et son oeuvre,” published in 1909 by Mercvire de France, Bachelin thoroughly analyzes Renard's works by comparing them to other literary creations of that time. Regarding the work „Carrot Top”, he considers that within it, we discover a second, definitive version that does not reveal itself abruptly as in his other works. An important viewpoint of



literary criticism from that time regarding the work can be summarized as classifying it as „his most popular work” (Bachelin, H., 1909, p. 48) and placing the author Jules Renard among humorists, a characteristic attributed to certain passages in the work that make us laugh, only to avoid being forced to cry. Bachelin condenses the essence of the work into a brief description: it presents the story of a child martyr who may not have a body covered in bruises, but is frequently physically and psychologically affected, searching for sympathy that is elusive, daydreaming, working at home and at school, and doing about half of the maid's work.

Marcel Pollitzer (born on December 2, 1888, died on April 1, 1981) was a writer, novelist, essayist, and journalist. In his work „Jules Renard – sa vie, son oeuvre”, published in 1956 by La Colombe, he asserts that the multiple sorrows experienced by the character Carrot Top were identified with the torments that Jules Renard himself felt in childhood. It is considered that imagination played an important role in amplifying the imperfections and defects of Mrs. Lepic, given that in real life Jules Renard would never have forgiven his mother. The portrait of Mrs. Lepic was undoubtedly inspired by the behavior of Mrs. Renard. Despite the skepticism and bitterness it emanates, the literary work „Carrot Top” is imbued with so much finesse, intelligence, and kindness that, judging objectively, the reader can only consider the negative influence caused by the pain of an unhappy child.

Italo Caroni was a professor of medieval and modern law. In an article titled "Ambiguity of Perspective in Carrot Top by Jules Renard," published in 1973 in the journal „Lingua&Literatura”, he associates the work „Carrot Top” with a family album in which the reader is offered snapshots that, after a challenging chronological sequence, reconstruct the story of a child who considered himself more unhappy than he actually was. Caroni believed that the protagonist had created an image that he tried to make coincide with the same events. To delve into the soul of the protagonist, Jules Renard describes himself and at the same time, detaches himself a little from the character to judge him. The author aimed for the readers to assume the role of witnesses and to accept the idea that Carrot Top is a martyr child punished by a mother with a horrifying character. „Carrot Top's story evokes the most important moments of a child's existence in disagreement with the individuals who populate his small „universe”. Carrot Top is a being in conflict with everyone, but especially with his mother, Mrs. Lepic - a symbol of maternal tyranny. Caroni believes that the character of family members cannot be labeled, as their profiles are attributed distorted characteristics because they are painted after Carrot Top's "moral strabismus" (Caroni, I., 1973, p. 280).

James F. Mason (born 1897, died 1931) – a recognized author for numerous literary creations, in an article titled „Carrot Top by Jules Renard”, published in the journal "The French Review" in 1940, states about the work „Carrot Top” that it has the advantage of being of interest to young people because Jules Renard created one of the most beloved and well-known children in French literature. Carrot Top– a young boy with red hair and freckles – shows that family life with parents, siblings, and sisters brings blessings but also complications. Although the protagonist is often a victim of various family members, he is not discouraged when it comes to family life, emphasizing that when a particular opportunity arises, the character knows how to defend himself to protect himself. With the help of Jules Renard's clever humor and sharp observation, the work has gained the affection of countless readers, proving to be equally interesting for young americans. Jules Renard has established himself with a work of such



value that its impact has elevated it to a masterpiece, sensitive and direct. The writing is simple, sober, under an appearance of ease that makes it perceived as the object of absolute and orderly rigor.

3. Psychological Perspective on Trauma

„Carrot Top”, a controversial novel in children's literature, demonstrates that although a child initially exhibits normal behavior, they are affected as they grow by a toxic family environment, the opinions of those around them, and the lack of love and attention from parents. This leads the child to devalue themselves, decrease their self-esteem, and visualize themselves as inferior to others, resorting to inappropriate actions just to be accepted by their peers. In this regard, we bring up the Pygmalion effect (an effect that, from our perspective, can be identified with the character Carrot Top), also known as the Rosenthal effect. This effect gives rise to a psychological phenomenon, in the form of a prophecy, where individuals internalize the labels they "receive" and identify with them (Perera, A., 2023).

In the context of the events that take place in the novel, we observe that initially, the protagonist did not want to resort to acts of cruelty. However, the encouragement from his mother, who suggested that such actions would bring him joy, eventually leads him to commit these cruel acts. In Carrot Top's case, due to the lack of support from any family member and the beliefs instilled by his mother, the so-called Pygmalion process took effect, causing the character to engage in horrifying actions.

A series of events through which the main character can be analyzed include: the task of killing birds assigned to Carrot Top (he refuses, but eventually does it with a hint of violence), the episode where Carrot Top relieves himself in bed: surprisingly, Mrs. Lepic cleans everything, and the next day she even brings him food to bed (although the moment seems like one of indulgence, it can be called rather disgusting, as his mother mixed into the soup what he did the previous evening, making sure he eats every last drop). After giving him the last spoonful of soup, the mother informs the child of its content. However, the child does not seem surprised at all.

The character Carrot Top is a challenging figure to analyze and can be described from various perspectives: responsible, considering the daily tasks he fulfills (feeding the dog, taking care of the chickens, pulling weeds, cutting wood, hunting, grinding coffee, going to the pharmacy and the doctor); sadistic, through cruel actions of euthanasia and killing of animals; thirsty for love, as seen in the New Year's letter addressed to his parents; rebellious, as Carrot Top finds the courage to confront his mother and decides to resist her; partially happy, when his play-weary siblings lend him their toys.

The experiences of the character Carrot Top throughout the novel are contradictory, which could be the result of an emotional disorder - bipolarity, or a cumulative effect of traumas resulting from the unhappy experiences caused by those around him: lack of support from parents, lack of any assistance, mockery whenever possible by his mother and his siblings, who, in his mother's eyes, demean him. An example in this regard is the moment when Carrot Top borrows toys from his siblings and tries not to show any apparent joy so as not to have them taken back.



From a psychological perspective, bipolar disorder is a chronic and recurrent disorder characterized by fluctuations in mood and energy (Grande, I., Berk, M., Birmaher, B., Vieta, E., 2016). According to an article titled „Bipolar Disorder and Its Impact on Life” by therapist Claudiu Manea, published in 2023, bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme changes in mood, anxiety, and irritability. Bipolar disorder often occurs when a person feels mistreated or goes through periods of stress (Manea, C., 2023). Regarding the character Carrot Top, we believe that, according to the aforementioned symptoms, he could be affected by this disorder.

In an article titled „Diagnosis and treatment of patients with bipolar disorder: A review for advanced practice nurses” published in 2015 in the Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners by Ursula McCormick, Bethany Murray, and Brittany McNew, it is stated that individuals affected by bipolar disorder experience pathological mood states characterized by manic symptoms interspersed with relatively normal mood periods. Some examples related to Carrot Top include: the sacrifice of the hunted animal (initially reluctant, but later engaging in a visibly cruel act), his reaction when his mother is injured by the hook caught in his shirt (the mother's unusual benevolent reaction accompanied by the absence of any blows triggers an unusual response - crying), the brutal killing of the mole causing it horrifying pain, the torment inflicted on an old kitten that he first pets, caresses, and feeds, and then shoots, throws with a rifle, and finally suffocates, and the suicidal attempt he tells his father about. These events clearly indicate conflicting emotions that could be generated by those around him: the mother with her attitude toward her own son, believing him capable of the worst (having a significant psychological impact on the child), the father with a somewhat indifferent attitude and labelling the child's feelings as tantrums, the brother with the troubles caused and by conspiring against him by supporting the mother's gestures.

The gestures that children resort to when they don't feel loved are often not the most pleasant. However, the protagonist's experiences are paradoxical. Does the fact that he feels inferior to his brothers, who are clearly treated differently, justify his actions? Certainly not! However, Carrot Top's actions could be the result of internal repression that manifests in this way because he is already seen as capable of the worst, so why behave differently? Marginalization, feelings of inferiority, and the bullying actions accompanied by the mother's duplicitous attitude (being treated nicely in the father's presence and punished severely in his absence) clearly play a disturbing role in his life. There is a possibility that when Carrot Top becomes an adult, he may exhibit similar behaviors to those he experienced in childhood.

In modern times, „Carrot Top” serves as an example of how not to behave with a child and the catastrophic impact of feelings such as lack of love, support, fear of loneliness, and marginalization. Situations like these are reflected in many families, and actions that initially may seem moderate can escalate into bullying.

Bullying is defined as aggressive behaviour that is not easily identified by the victim (Aalsma, M. C., Brown, J. R., 2008). Bullying triggers emotional instability that can be challenging to "correct" even with significant efforts. The term "bullying" has existed for a long time, although it might not have been recognized as such. The bullying actions perpetrated by the mother and brothers, supporting the inappropriate behaviour of the mother, and her premeditation of the child's inappropriate actions, induced various emotions in him, transitioning from gestures of tenderness (caressing, comforting) to brutal acts of cruelty (killing).



Although the mother had horrifying behaviour towards her own child, and Carrot Top often became a pawn in her plans, being the key figure she used to carry out her schemes (such as driving away Honorine), and despite him continuing to love her, how did he end up seeing her as hateful in the end? What process took place in the child's mind and soul?

Carrot Top, treated as he was, longed for affection, love, the desire to feel like an integral part of the family. Several specialized studies, such as "The Connection Between Inappropriate Child Behaviour and the Satisfaction of Fundamental Needs," conducted by Melania Filtan in 2020, show that there are no inherently bad children; rather, children may exhibit unpleasant behaviour due to traumas they have experienced and unfulfilled feelings.

The conclusion of the work highlights an action accompanied by feelings of jealousy: he steps on his hat, stating his existential problem - that he will never be loved by anyone. When the mother appears, frightened, he adds to the statement: "except for mommy" (Renard, J., 2013, p. 143). This action manifests the child's trauma caused by the persecutory, mocking, and chilling behaviour of the mother.

4. Current Interpretation and Critical Exegesis of the Novel „Carrot Top” Quantitative Investigation.

The research was organized and conducted at Primary School No. 39 "Nicolae Tonitză" in Constanța and at General School with grades I-VIII "Piatra," throughout the 2022-2023 school year, over a period of 3 teaching weeks.

The research had the following aim: to identify how each student was emotionally impacted as a result of reading the novel „Carrot Top”.

Research Objective: Analyzing the results obtained from the questionnaires, quantitatively interpreting them with the aim of identifying the emotional impact of the work on the subjects.

The research hypothesis: It is presumed that there are differences among the fourth-grade subjects in terms of emotional impact.

The research sample consisted of 81 subjects, aged between 9 and 11 years. Out of the 81 subjects:

- Regarding the age criterion, 6 subjects aged 9 (7%), 51 subjects aged 10 (63%), and 24 subjects aged 11 (30%) participated;
- Regarding the gender criterion, 39 subjects belonging to the male gender (48%) and 42 subjects belonging to the female gender (52%) participated in the study.

The instrument used in the research was a questionnaire consisting of 7 items containing both closed, mixed, and open-ended questions. At the beginning of the questionnaire, a brief instruction was provided, including aspects related to the role of the current research, the purpose for which the obtained results are used (academic), ensuring their confidentiality, the extent to which this questionnaire helps achieve the established objective, and the approximate time allocated for completion (10-15 minutes).

Through the students' responses, the impact of Jules Renard's novel „Carrot Top” on fourth-grade students was analysed, and to what extent the protagonist's story is reflected in the reality of the year 2023. For the research on fourth-grade students, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted.



According to the analysis and interpretation of the obtained data, the following findings were observed:

- Out of the 71 subjects who confirmed reading the novel in the questionnaire, 40 subjects (56%) consider Carrot Top to be a predominantly positive character, while 31 subjects (44%) consider him a predominantly negative character. This indicates that the character is more appreciated than unappreciated by readers.

- Out of the 71 subjects who confirmed reading the novel „Carrot Top”: 3 subjects (4%) considered that the work conveys feelings of admiration, 4 subjects (6%) considered that the work conveys feelings of fear, 12 subjects (17%) considered that the work conveys feelings of disappointment, 16 subjects (23%) considered that the work conveys feelings of pity or compassion, 22 subjects (30%) considered that the work conveys feelings of revolt or indignation, 14 subjects (20%) considered that the work conveys another type of feelings not listed, such as suffering, frustration, tension, anger, courage, the desire to be loved, cruelty.

- Out of the 71 subjects who confirmed reading the novel: 33 subjects (46%) consider that Carrot Top did not behave correctly in certain situations, 34 subjects (48%) consider that Carrot Top behaved correctly, 4 subjects (6%) provided other responses not found in the predefined list, such as „depends on the situation”, „probably”, „sometimes”, „I don't know”.

- Regarding the item about giving advice to people who have been through similar situations, 42 subjects (59%) provided positive advice, while 29 subjects (41%) provided negative advice.

- Regarding recommending the novel, out of the 71 subjects who confirmed reading it: 41 subjects (58%) stated that they would recommend the novel to colleagues or friends, 30 subjects (42%) stated that they would not recommend the novel to colleagues or friends.

- Regarding the type of the novel: 31 subjects (43%) considered that the novel is accessible to children, 21 subjects (30%) considered that the novel is chilling, 19 subjects (27%) considered that the novel is poignant.

Conclusions

The theoretical foundation aimed to present aspects related to the analysis of the novel „Carrot Top” by Jules Renard, both from my own perspective and through the critical exegesis analysis, using carefully selected bibliographic sources.

As for the conducted research, it synthesized an analysis of the impact that the novel „Carrot Top” has on fourth-grade students in a sample of 81 subjects, based on a tool designed with 7 items. An objective was established and achieved as the hypothesis was investigated. For the proposed objective, a comparative hypothesis was set, analysed quantitatively with the help of Microsoft Excel, and qualitatively, conducting an analysis of the reasons for the obtained results. The hypothesis was confirmed as the data obtained were processed and analysed, following the examination of the questionnaires.

According to the obtained results, the hypothesis regarding the emotions conveyed by the work was confirmed, with the option of "revolt/indignation" towards the treatment of the protagonist registering the highest score, namely 30%, highlighting that research participants consider the protagonist to be persecuted, leading to many unnatural events.

Jules Renard's novel „Carrot Top” is read and appreciated by fourth-grade students, on



whom the investigative research was conducted, motivated by the following:

- From the initial sample of 81 people, 71 subjects (88%) have read the novel, while 6 individuals (7%) stated their intention to read it, and 4 persons (5%) affirmed they haven't read it.
- Among the research subjects who claimed to have read the novel, 41 subjects (58%) stated that they would recommend the novel to other classmates/friends, while 30 subjects (42%) said they would not recommend it to classmates or friends.

Considering that the novel „Carrot Top” is not mandatory but only recommended for reading within the reading club, we can support the statement that the novel is indeed read and is in the preferences of children despite the unfortunate events the protagonist went through. Furthermore, when asked about advice for the protagonist, respondents predominantly offered positive advice to help address his suffering related to the lack of love from his family.

The results regarding the level of recommendation of the work have shown that it is appreciated, with the novel being viewed as a model that helps raise awareness of the negative effects of an inappropriate family model on one's lifestyle and personality. The moral lesson conveyed is that bad actions have negative consequences that impact one's entire life.

Following the completion of the study, several crucial aspects were identified: Carrot Top was not a bad child but exhibited inappropriate behaviour due to mistreatment by his mother, unfulfilled feelings, and a persistent desire to feel loved. Carrot Top was a victim of bullying within the family, and despite this, he did not lose hope of convincing those around him that he deserved love. This hope persisted until the end of the novel when he took an unexpected rebellious action against his mother. The protagonist's unexpected rebellion represented a resignation, perhaps an acceptance (momentarily) of the fact that his mother did not love him and probably never would.

In summary, we consider Jules Renard's novel „Carrot Top” valuable both from a literary perspective and as an intriguing subject for psychological analysis. It can serve as a model for understanding how not to treat a child in the family environment, which has a crucial impact on the child's harmonious development. The novel also illustrates the realization of the self-fulfilling prophecy when various labels are assigned to a child, and it raises awareness of how traumatizing actions experienced by a child can lead to entirely inappropriate behaviour.

Bibliography

Bachelin, H. (1909). Jules Renard et son oeuvre. Paris: Mercvire de la France Publishing, pp. 46-64.

Casangiu, I. L. (coord)., Ciofu, D. G. (2023). Carrot Top (by Jules Renard) in critical exegesis and current interpretation. Craiova: Sitech Publishing.

LeLoup, Delphine. (2011). Carrot Top by Jules Renard. Complete analysis and detailed summary of the work. Paris: lePetitLitteraire Publishing, pp. 6-9.

Mason, J. F. (1940). „Carrot Top by Jules Renard”, The French Review Journal, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 504-505.

Pollitzer, M. (1956). Jules Renard, 1864-1910; his life, his work. Paris: La Colombe Publishing, pp. 9-103.

Renard, J. (2002). Carrot Top Presentation, notes, chronology, and dossier by Stephan Gougelmann, Paris: Flammarion Publishing, pp. 7-8.



**BLACKSEA JOURNAL
OF PSYCHOLOGY**

eISSN: 2068-4649; Print ISSN: 2068-4649

Faculty of

Psychology and
Educational Sciences

"Ovidius" University
of Constanta, Romania

The "Black Sea" Journal of Psychology

Vol. 14, Issue 2, 68-76, Fall, 2023

ISSN: 2068-4649

www.bspsychology.ro



BLACK SEA JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY



www.bspsychology.ro



9 772068 464001



Renard, J., Translated by: Modest Morariu. (2007). *Journal*. Bucharest: Nemira & Co Publishing, pp. 96-517.

Renard, J. (2013). *Carrot Top*. Bucharest: Litera Publishing, pp. 20-282.

Webography:

Aalsma, M. C., Brown, J. R. 2008. What is bullying?. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 42, p. 101, accessed online on 04-04-2023, at 14:42, on:

[https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(08\)00251-6/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(08)00251-6/fulltext)

Caloni, I. 1973. "L'ambiguïté du point de vue dans Poil de Carotte, de Jules Renard," *Revista Lingua&Literatura*, pp. 276-281, accessed online on 21-03-2023, at 08:48, on:

<https://www.revistas.usp.br>article>download>

Flitan, M. 2020. The connection between a child's inappropriate behavior and the satisfaction of fundamental needs. *Fp*, accessed online on 19-03-2023, at 09:22, on:

<https://tikaboo.ro/legatura-dintre-comportamentul-nepotrivit-al-copilului-si-satisfacerea-nevoilor-fundamentale/>

Grande, I., Berk, M., Birmaher, B., E. Vieta. 2016. Bipolar disorder. *The Lancet*, vol. 387, p. 1492, accessed online on 04-03-2022, at 08:52, on:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S014067361500241X>

Manea, C. 2023. Bipolar disorder and its impact on life. *Fp*, accessed online on 16-02-2023, at 15:28, on:

https://cabinetclaudiumanea.ro/tulburareabipolara/?psafe_param=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw__ihBhADEiwAXEazJrzo1Eq1Q41qyrhBnbPMR2UiOG_G7_ByWxfKi1G7gGmYXIRR8c9M3BoCN0AQAvD_BwE

McCormick, U., Murray, B., McNew, B. 2015. "Diagnosis and treatment of patients with bipolar disorder: A review for advanced practice nurses," *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, no. 27, pp. 530-542, accessed online on 02-02-2023, at 13:48, on:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5034840/>

Perera, A. 2023. *The Pygmalion Effect: Definitions & Examples*. *Fp*, accessed online on 08-04-2023, at 16:21, on: <https://simplysociology.com/pygmalion-effect.html>