

MENTAL ENLIGHTENMENT SCIENTIFIC –
METHODOLOGICAL JOURNALMENTAL ENLIGHTENMENT SCIENTIFIC –
METHODOLOGICAL JOURNAL<http://mentaljournal-jspu.uz/index.php/mesmj/index>

MODERN TRENDS IN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: children's literature, genre, narratology, narrative strategy, fantasy, fiction, literary culture, phenomenon, syncretism, modern tendencies.

Received: 11.08.23**Accepted:** 13.08.23**Published:** 15.08.23

Abstract: This research seeks to identify the main trends and themes in children's literature, and determine how narrative devices and strategies are used in the modern literary works for children. In this paper, using analytical and synthetic methods of scientific investigation and the main principles from structural narratology, the specifics of children's literature in the light of the genre classifications have been explored. These specifics are considered in terms of themes, motifs, genres and selection of literary characters. It has been found out that the subject of Children's Literature is at the advantages of form, language and ways of presentation the artistic material. The author proves that contemporary English children's literature is characterized by fascinating thematic richness and a great variety of layers.

INTRODUCTION

Early twentieth century became known as the “Golden Age of Children's Literature” as this period witnessed the publication of many books acknowledged today as classics. England was at the forefront of the development of European children's literature and continues to hold a leading position due to Harry Potter novels and not only. Harry Potter has truly influenced the literate world by bringing people of all ages back to reading. He has garnered much attention by expanding people's imaginations in print and film, bringing a world to life. He also tells a good story using a variety of elements to capture a wide range of interests. *Harry Potter* is a phenomenon to education and reading. “The Chronicles of Narnia” by C. S. Lewis is now considered a classic of children's literature and over 100 million copies in 47 languages have been sold since its first publications.

Children's books are, as it is generally accepted, one of the most important forms of writing in literature, and the most overlooked. It is children's authors from whom, as much as from parents, a child receives an idea of how the world could or should be. These books are the first real visual and literary culture that an unformed person receives, and this seems to be a reason why we tend to remember children's books as our favorites during all our life. They tell a child that life is much bigger and more complex than he or she might have imagined, and there are people who are both like and unlike themselves. A great true children's book portrays an environment in which the youngest are not powerless. Such books confront their deepest fears of being lost, hungry or in mortal danger, and they reinforce a child's inner ability to cope with this fearfulness. They allow a child to escape from what is real and return to reality being equipped better to survive in it.

However, the educationalists, psychologists and parents are alarmed about how electronic devices are pulling children away from books. Teachers, parents and university professors often complain that pupils at school and the students don't read anymore because their eyes are glued to their phones and computers. There exists an opinion that we are raising a generation that doesn't understand the value of literature and its importance for the development of personality.

The emphatic turn towards the child-reader heightens the need for very different narrative strategies. The number of those who research academically on children's literature in our country and abroad are increasing with every day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recently, in 2004 at the World Congress of researchers of children's literature at the Trinity College (Dublin, Ireland, the organizer - IRSCCL) the problem of the integration of the representative literature for children into general literary process has been hotly debated. The goal was to create appropriate conditions for literary criticism studies of this specific phenomenon within the history and theory of literature in general.

Professor Boris Shalahinov in his article "Children's Literature: the Concept of Historical Periodization" speaks about modern tendencies to "adaptation" of works of adult classics to the children's audience: "Nowadays the original *syncretism* in literature definitively disintegrates with its inherent, rather uncertain, age addressability and gives way to the emergence of the features of specifically "child" aesthetics of art, including social and psychological themes and issues. It is noteworthy that some of the works of previous epochs are purposely adapted to the needs of children's reading ("Don Quixote" M. de Cervantes, "Gulliver's Travels" J. Swift, "Robinson Crusoe" D. Defoe, etc.) [1].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Nevertheless the most essential questions are: what kind of literature, topics and trends we want to explore with children and how various genres and forms of texts shape the conveying of ideas and values to young audiences.

The goal and the specific tasks of the article. The main aim of the article is to shed a little light on and provide clue to such issues as:

- Which trends do we observe in children's literature these days?
- Is it mostly entertaining, didactical or about taboos?
- Is it possible to write about violence for children without taking away their faith in life?
- Which position can and should children's literature have in the society? and
- What are the most popular narrative strategies in literary works intended for children?

By employing both narratological research methods and descriptive content analysis of the texts of children's literature, in this research we seek to show narrative strategies importance and their substantial contribution to the development of fiction for children.

Narratology, the study of the narrative, helps to answer questions that arise from reading children's literature: why narrative appeals, how the storyteller tells the story, what keeps the reader excited and captured up to the end of the story, and how to recognize what is important for the narrative.

Some of the main principles from structural narratology that are usefully applied in this research are:

- unreliable narration [2];
- distinguishing between story and discourse (what is told as opposed to how it is told) ;
- differentiating between the focaliser and the narrator (the “actor” experiencing the story and the narrator telling the story) [3].

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Since the time the first texts intended for children appeared, they have been considered to be a powerful instrument of the adult's world to form a child's character and the effective way of socialization of children. Literary works for children represent special, peculiar type of communication, in which the addressee of a message a priori finds himself in unequal position on the addresser, obliging the latter - adult author - to be able to see the world with childish look, feel and empathize in a childish way the seen and experienced by a child. Analysis of texts of children's books shows that authors often just reproduce the so-called stereotype of communication with children or realize their vision of how children communicate, as English writer Lewis Carroll does in his works.

Once-taboo topics, like violence, became increasingly acceptable. Some parents, teachers and critics praise the steady turn toward realism in children's literature, promoting efforts to be more honest with children. Others, however, are alarmed by it.

This struggle over the role of children's literature is not new. Since the appearance of works for young readers, authors, parents and critics have debated these questions: Is the role of these books to educate young people about the world in which they live, including its unpleasant aspects? Or, is it their responsibility to shield children from such elements? This way or another, one can hardly overstate how crucial it is to the world we want to live in.

In the present time, it's quite possible for a child to get acquainted with a book through any of the following: a film, a TV programme, a computer game, a website, a radio programme, a music CD or download, a magazine article, toy, along with some of the more traditional ways of mediating a book such as the classroom, library presentation or cultural club. Characters, such as Winnie the Pooh, which once existed only in specific, authored books, may now live in several different formats and the original text may or may not be known to the child watching the TV programme or playing with the toy. The modern picture book now tackles such subjects alongside the happiest and lightest of themes.

There are a number of narrative techniques seeking to entertain children and educate them about the fundamentals of life. Authors of children's books are usually individuals whose names carry a high degree of ethos. Someone writing a book intended for children is entrusted with providing a sound and positive moral and ethical impact on children. Children are extremely impressionable and they tend to be heavily impacted by the stories they read. All children's literature is inescapably didactic. Since children's literature is didactic it must by definition be a repository, almost the quintessential source, of the values that parents and others hope to teach to the next generation [4].

Although considerable number of papers have been devoted to various issues of the literature for children, further research is needed to verify the key themes in the recent writings for youngsters.

The findings of this study, reliable sources and data suggest that abandonment, alienation and homelessness as well as violence are increasingly the themes covered in modern literature for children. As it has been already mentioned, new themes in children's literature, such as death, war, disasters, violence, are the themes which have been taboo, and thus silenced for a long time. They *can now be traced in current children's literature as a means of accompanying children throughout their gloomy moments in life, those hard situations that they must face in the surrounding world and the conflicts that affect many generations. These themes have not been deeply analysed yet, but fiction must approach them to discover the world and the dangers that life poses. It is obvious that children's literature can deal with any topic if readers' feelings are duly considered. Let us consider the theme of bullying, as an example.*

While *bullying* may not be the major theme, many books contain some minor episodes of bullying since the subject of bullying is casually mentioned or embedded in the storyline.

The fact is that nearly every child will face or witness the effects of *bullying* at some point in their lives. Children's authors recognize this as a major concern for kids and they have become more adept at weaving bullying themes into storylines.

The use of *fear and violence* in folk and fairy tales is a controversial issue which illuminates disparities between those firmly entrenched in beliefs of virtue and others who believe there is no harm in frightening children with stories. Others believe that children need to be shielded from all displays of violence, especially violence found in video games, television, and folk tales, because children might imitate or copy it and bring harm to themselves or others. But it is worth mentioning, that studies, trying to prove that displays of violence in print and visual culture lead to fear and violence in our youth, are quite frequently inconclusive at all.

In our opinion, the truth is that it is hard to keep children safe these days. Our world is consumed by images of war and disaster which is impossible to hide from young inquisitive minds. Bringing these adult themes into children's literature may provide a gateway for parents to talk to their kids about such difficult topics. Such themes as orphanhood, or dealing with tragedy, family relationships, and the importance of friendship can help strengthen the knowledge of the world around and allow readers to develop their own ideas and opinions.

Contrary to what the critics believe, violence in children's stories is not a recent phenomenon, but stretches back to the very first children's stories, which were used as a didactic element. Take, as an example, the classic "Hansel and Gretel". Kidnapping, forced imprisonment, cannibalism - and we all cheer when Gretel pushes the old witch into the oven and she burns to death. And we're reading these to our kids just before they go to sleep! One can only guess what effect violence in fiction might have on them but let us hope it will help them to cope with increasingly violent world rather than to perpetuate that violence.

Though violence has played a part in children's literature throughout the ages, Maureen Nimon points out in her essay about violence in children's literature, that "it is only in recent decades that the place of violence in children's books has been so vigorously questioned" [5]. M. Nimon explains that violence has appeared for centuries in didactic stories in which the wicked are punished, often with physical violence, and the virtuous are rewarded [6]. Dianne Koehnecke, reviewing two recent children's books, Eve Bunting's "Smoky Night" and "The House That Crack Built" by Clark Taylor, discusses the books' controversial themes of violence and drugs respectively, as well as their didactic format. She states, that "the didactic nature of these two books is clearly not a revolutionary concept in children's literature", then goes on to give a brief history of didactic literature which often includes violent content or undertones [7].

Violence is an important, if unpleasant, aspect of the world that has endured for centuries and continues today, therefore, it is a relevant and worthwhile topic to focus on in children's literature. When used in an effective and careful manner, violence can serve important purposes in literature. It does not seem to correlate with violent tendencies in children, but it can spark interest in reading, and it can enhance a child's understanding of the ways to surmount the conflict or violence which can arise in their own lives and they may have a better chance of facing a world of violence responsibly in the real life.

Alongside, we are facing the problem connected with the way of conveying these important themes to children. Some of the stories and novels for this age group are written and illustrated almost entirely for visual excitement that creates a state of stimulation much like the viewing of video games and “action-adventure” movies. In these samples of works there is no depth of character upon which to reflect and very little moral distinction between the hero's use of force to win the day and the villain's barbarism. There are many examples of this narrative strategy in contemporary writings for children.

Another way of looking at this problem is to focus on how books influence readers through narrative technique. It has been claimed, for example, that some books over-explain and so patronise the child-reader, whilst others offer complex narrative techniques (unreliable, “self-conscious” or multiple narrators, flashbacks and flashforwards, deliberate gaps in narrative, inconclusive endings and so on). Jennifer Mary Armstrong, an American children's writer known for both fiction and nonfiction, has utilized multiple types of narrative structures. J. M. Armstrong believes that a short story is only one of many narrative structures. “We create narrative with jokes, ballads, tales, novels, poems, anecdotes, etc... While there are many satisfactions to be found in the conventional beginning-middle-end narrative that is common in short fiction for kids, I believe young readers can respond to many other forms of short narrative” [8].

The reading and writing of fiction is completely different today than it was ten or even five years ago. Far from being exceptions, textual transformations rather tend to be the rule in contemporary children's literature, such as translations, parodies, mashups, sequels, film or computer game versions, as well as transpositions to other genres and media. At least two of them are worth mentioning in the context of the purpose of this study and they are: mash-up narrative style and fractured tales.

A literary mash-up is a hybrid of genres: half creative fiction in its own right, and half criticism or commentary on the original work, producing a very enjoyable new work of fiction. A “mash-up” is when you take two or more established styles of anything and mix them together to make something completely new and unique. As far as it concerns writing for children the concept is still fairly new. The term appears to have first been coined in a review of Seth Grahame-Smith's novel “Pride and

Prejudice and Zombies”. Initially calling it a “parody” and “literary hybrid”, Seth Grahame-Smith pioneered the style with novels like “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies” and the wildly popular “Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter” [8].

Humorous revisions of fables and tales to facilitate children's interest to reading have become a popular and valuable genre of books for children. Authors and illustrators provide new takes on traditional fables laying emphasis on the role of reversal and changes in point of view the characterization and setting. These “remakes” have been labeled as “fractured fairy tales”.

What is a fractured fairy tale? It is a fairy or other folk tale that has been modified in such a way as to make us laugh at an unexpected characterization, plot development or contrary point of view. The most successful among them, in our opinion, are those based on traditional wolf tales, such as “The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig” by Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury and Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf”. The authors conjure and undo not only the tales but also the protagonists through the mishmash of humour, intertextuality and even hypertextuality. “Whereas some revisions retain the wolf as a villain, others mirror the relatively recent rehabilitation of the wolf in ecology and society, transforming the wolf from a metaphor of human predation and gluttony to one of benign and even admirable behaviour” [9].

Fractured tales assume that their readers know the traditional version. It's quite natural as the young reader must read the tale on which the story is based to understand and enjoy the fractured one.

There are lots of ways to change a fairy tale: 1) change or swap the roles of the main characters; 2) have the story take place somewhere else; 3) have the story take place in another time period; 4) tell the story from a different character's point of view; 5) make the problem of the story different; 6) change an important item in the story; 7) you can even change the end of the story (maybe they don't live “happily ever after”).

Among the writers for children's literature, Roald Dahl is one that is famous for this special style of narrative strategies. What makes Roald Dahl different from many other children's authors is really his extraordinary style. His cynical and ironic approach to the subject matter and characters can be seen in almost all his works for children. He has a unique way of describing characters and this adds unusual twists to his stories.

According to Birketviet, Dahl's “tone of texts is confiding, conversational and funny” [10]. Although some of his works create controversies, these controversies bring him fame and attract many readers especially adolescents.

In the collection “Revolting Rhymes” he retells six well-known fairy tales. What is special about this collection is that all the six fairy tales are twisted so that the contents of the verses are different from the original fairy tales [11]. The author uses a very simple, basic and colloquial language throughout the book. His simple descriptive style with colloquial lexis is modern and

unpretentious Roald Dahl strives to create semantic fields with images of death, cannibalism, war and murder in his tale for children. He describes the giants using terms of brutality and death, using their names to describe their eating habits and techniques when eating humans. “Fleshlumpeater”, for example is highly evocative as a compound word for he tears lumps of flesh from his victims. The semantic field and use of imagery in terms of butchery, murder and violence is consistently maintained throughout the novel but it does not have a troubling effect on the child readership [12].

The narrative voice is a very important element in Dahl's children's books, be it either a first person or a third-person omniscient narrator. They all share in various degrees the following features: they are intrusive, all-knowing and overtly in control of the narrative. The implied reader is frequently addressed with questions, pieces of advice and instructions, thus demanding the reader's attention and participation in the story. These children's literature narrators are not neutral, but take sides and often make comments about the events retold and the characters depicted, expressing freely their opinions.

All these stylistic devices and narrative strategies make his books an interesting and enjoyable experience for young readers. Roald Dahl knows how to make use of the fact that young readers like to read fresh stories which are different from average ones.

Another interesting development is the increase in narrative nonfiction, in which the facts of a subject are no longer reported in a dry, straightforward style, but are wrapped in engaging, interesting narrative, so that the experience of reading is a much richer and more memorable one.

Particularly, they are an important part of children's literature due to their special characteristics (like themes, artistic images and text-image interaction) and are extremely stimulating from the point of view of aesthetic, emotional and cognitive development of children. It is not a “genre”, as sometimes sustained, but a “medium”, which is used for different types of narrative [13]. The words and pictures continually recall and refer to each other and constitute an indivisible whole in which neither form of expression has its own narrative autonomy [14].

In modern picture books, words and images interact in a great variety of textual forms. This complexity encourages a way of reading which is characterized by an active and interpretative process, because the reader connects constantly words to images as well as images to words. Picture books and illustrated books are precious tools for building a bridge between children and books, for encouraging in children love to books and reading, for acquiring narrative skills.

CONCLUSION

The above mentioned facts can be considered as an indicator for increasing value given to the role of children's literature in education and upbringing. The works, that add coloring to a child's perception of the world, not only enrich his imagination, but also can help him to use the language understandably and effectively. The authors writing for children must be able to introduce to them

the life from a realistic standpoint. They should respond to questions that child can not find the answer in life, and should help to complete the missing information.

The future of children's literature seems to be filled with endless possibilities. It is a medium that will constantly be growing, changing, and evolving, and so it seems, as long as there are children, there will always be a need for a story, cultivating the healthy development of next generation's spiritual life. The world is becoming smaller and smaller due to the globalization processes. Issues in respect of war and peace, ecological environment and natural disaster prevention, animal protection and sustainable development, the existence dilemma of modern human being, the degeneration of ethnics and morality and sharp increase of juvenile delict, all these troublesome problems for all mankind will undoubtedly become the focuses, hot topics and difficult points in world children's literature which has no boundaries, and is really universal literature in respect of realization of the joint culture ideals and interests.

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