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BRIEF EVOLUTION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: FROM FOLKLORE TO EPIC NOVELS

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КРАТКАЯ ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ ДЕТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ: ОТ ФОЛЬКЛОРА ДО ЭПИЧЕСКИХ РОМАНОВ.

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Abstract. The article examines the evolution of children's literature as an independent part of literature. When did the children's literature become a satisfying branch of literature and scholars find it distinct for being researched? An understanding of children's literature is a central issue in the development of every sphere of our life: from home sittings to ELT classrooms. While teachers are all wound up with teaching young learners in ELT classrooms reading tales, stories and poems remain unnoticed part of education, overall, knowing what evolutionary way children's literature passed through gives us an opportunity to develop ELT classrooms better and hence straighten out our young learners with correct motivation into literature.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается эволюция детской литературы как самостоятельной части литературы. Когда детская литература стала самостоятельным направлением литературы и когда ученые стали изучать ее? Понимание детской литературы является центральным вопросом в развитии всех сфер нашей жизни: от домашнего чтения до классов ELT. В то время как все учителя заняты обучением молодых учеников в классах ELT, чтение сказок, рассказов и стихотворений остается невостребованным. В целом знание того, каким эволюционным путем прошла детская литература, дает нам возможность эффективнее развивать классы ELT и, следовательно, сильнее мотивировать учащихся вопросах приобщения к литературе.

Keywords: literature, children, folklore, puritanism, Bible, Aesop's fables, education, Christianity, maturity, children's literature.

Ключевые слова: литература, дети, фольклор, пуританство, Библия, басни Эзопа, образование, христианство, зрелость, детская литература.

Many adults — many well-known authors in fact — re-read books that in childhood had a big impact. So why is children's literature not considered worthy of major awards?

Who today remembers the plays of A. A. Milne or the political writing of Erich Kästner? Yet their children's books are read all over the world. Neil Gaiman tells the similar story of A. A. Milne, who is no longer remembered as a West End playwright or features editor of Punch, but only as “the author of two books of short stories and two books of verse for small children”.

It's striking how long children's books can last. One explanation may be the way in which they're read. They become part of our emotional autobiographies, acquiring associations and

memories, more like music than prose. Another explanation may lie in the fact that children's books are designed with re-reading in mind. For all children's writers are conscious that our books may be re-read by children themselves.

Children's literature as a separate genre is relatively a new phenomenon since it was considered subordinate until the middle of the eighteenth century. Only after the system of adult literature had been fully established, literature for children began to develop as its independent part. According to Peter Hunt [1], children's books began to move from the didactic to the recreational by the 1850s, and by the 1950s, children's literature was fully recognized as a distinctive area of the literary world. Since then, it has developed and expanded significantly. Nevertheless, there has always been a tendency to treat children's literature as 'the Cinderella of literary studies' [2]. The main reason is the fact that books for young readers are written for minorities; their primary audience (children) are considered peripheral in many cultures, or at least not a concern of high art and culture. The criticism of children's literature as an academic discipline has developed only during the last 30 years. However, the first signs of interest in the cross-cultural influence and the international spreading of children's literature appeared much earlier within the discipline of Comparative Literature defined by Susan Bassnett [3].

It is impossible to provide an exact definition of children's literature as a genre, because its boundaries are very indefinite. Rudvin and Orlati [4] refer to Peter Hunt stating that:

"[...] any definition of classification of children's literature is condemned from the outset to oversimplification and over-generalization".

The answer to the question 'What is children's literature' might seem simple at the first sight, e. g. the books written for and read by children, or the books written for the readers under the age of 4–18. Nevertheless, when looking closer into the subject matter, it becomes clear that to define what is actually meant by the term children's literature is much more complicated. Even the theorists of this field have not reached consensus and their definitions vary according to their point of view. Already a simple thing as the age when young people are not considered children anymore is not perceived the same. Nowadays, the official end of childhood is reached at the age of 18 in most countries, however, as Gillian Lathey [5] says: "... what is regarded as the permissible age for purchasing cigarettes, alcohol or engaging in sexual activity has changed a number of times in the latter half of the 20th century." Ivana Bobulová [6], for example, see the boundary at the age of 16:

"Children's and juvenile literature is a set of literary texts ... written especially for children between the ages of one and sixteen."

So, what is "children's literature"?

The main criteria that allows isolating children's literature of "literature in general", — "category of child-reader" [7]. Based on this criteria, literature distinguishes three classes works: 1) directly addressed to children; 2) included in the circle children's reading (not to create specifically for children, but which have found their response and interest); 3) composed by the children themselves (or, otherwise, "baby literary work") [7].

The first of these groups are often available and meant by the words "children's literature" — literature, created in dialogue with imaginary (and often — and very real) babies, "tuned" to the children's perception of the world. With full confidence attributed to this group or that otherwise work is not always easy. How we can find the main criteria: a) the publication of works in the children's publishing (magazines, books with marked "for the children", etc.) during the life of and with the knowledge of the writer; b) the dedication to the child; c) the presence in the text of the work appeals to the juvenile reader. But they are not reliable (the reference to the child can only be welcome, dedication — made "for the future", etc.), and using them mechanically is impossible.

There is only an applicable set of biographical data, the nature of the work and these criteria, in each case, individually. And even if this is not always everything is clear (for example, some poem V. Kamensky still remain a mystery) in this sense. In the history of children's literature usually "allocated the same periods, and direction as in the general literature process" [8]. But imprint on the development of children's books is applied, on the one hand, pedagogical ideas of this or that period (and, more broadly, the relationship to the children), and with other — questions themselves young and young readers, who also change historically. However, more important for defining the term of children's literature is the question if the subject should be approached from the point of view of the readers and the actual audience, or from the point of view of the authors and their intention to write for children. Kirsten Malmkjaer [8] expresses the author's point of view by stating:

"For us children's literature is any narrative written or published for children and we include the 'teen' novels aimed at the 'young adult' or 'late adolescent' reader." Still, the author's intention to write a book for children does not necessarily mean it is really read by them. As Peter Hunt [1] suggests, some books for children are either not read by them, or much more appreciated by adults, who find their own meaning in the text (e. g. Alice in Wonderland), or probably not children's books at all (e. g. The Wind in the Willows). On the other hand, some books considered classics of children's literature nowadays were originally written for adults and children adopted them into their system (e. g. Robinson Crusoe). In other cases, books meant for adults originally shifted into children's literature due to the translation (e. g. Gulliver's Travels).

Besides, children do not judge books according to the same criteria as adults, so what adult society finds appropriate for children might not be attractive for young readers at all. Peter Hunt comments on this fact by the following words:

"Those books that have been accepted into the scheme of 'literature' or have been awarded the highest prizes are most likely to remain unread by children".

Göte Klingberg [9] in his definition of children's literature admits that children read much more than is actually intended for them, but still, he advocates the author's point of view:

"Literature for children and young people is defined not as those books which they read (children and young people read and always have read a wide range of literature), but as literature which has been published for — or mainly for — children and young people". Riitta Oittinen [10] presents an interesting opinion:

"There is little consensus on the definition of child, childhood and children's literature. The definition is always a question of point of view and situation: childhood can be considered a social or cultural issue; it can be seen from the child's or adult's angles, I see children's literature as literature read silently by children and aloud to children".

Having attempted to define the genre based on different points of view; let me mention different types of children's literature. Ivana Bobulová [6] describe three basic subcategories of children's and juvenile literature:

Children's folklore — Non-intentional literature for children and young adults (literary texts that passed from adults' to children's literature Intentional literature for children and young adults (literary texts written primarily for young readers) The individual genres of children's literature will not be discussed here in detail, as that would be a topic for another thesis. Nevertheless, nowadays there are as many different kinds of books for children as there are for adults. Moreover, as Prue Goodwin [11] says, in children's literature there are multiple versions of each genre. Since a six years old child will not enjoy the same books as a teenager, there are novels, poetry, and so on for each stage of childhood.

“... to refer to children’s books as a homogenous group is incorrect and confusing: the range of subject matter, genres, literary quality, illustrative style is diverse and the impact of this diversity as significant as that associated with adult publishing” [12]. Taking into account the age of the readers, a majority of publishing houses specialized in publishing literature for children accept the division into four main categories: pre-readers, early readers, chapter books, and young adults [3].

Due to the important role children’s literature plays in education, it can hardly avoid being educational in some way [6]. Consequently, it is also influenced by didactic as well as psychological conceptions as they appear in time.

“... children’s books are an important tool in reading education and are thus prey to a whole area of educational and psychological influences that other literatures escape” [3].

The history of children’s literature is closely connected with the development of the notion of childhood, and the changes it underwent during the last two centuries were directly reflected in the production of children’s books. As John Rowe Townsend [13] suggests, “before there could be children’s books, there had to be children – children, that is, who were accepted as beings with their own particular needs and interests, not merely as miniature men and women”.

Thus, before children’s literature could develop as a separate genre, two conditions had to be fulfilled. Firstly, the awareness that childhood is essentially different from adulthood and therefore requires special treatment; secondly, the social conditions that enabled children to learn to read and be educated [7]. Nevertheless, children read and enjoyed books long before there were books actually produced for them, therefore, as Peter Hunt [1] points out, “all pre — 1700 texts can be considered as (also) children’s texts”. On the following pages I will mention the most significant conceptions of childhood that emerged within history and the works of children’s literature accompanying them.

The beginnings of children’s literature lay in times long before the first stories actually meant for children appeared, and before the first books were written down. In the medieval times, not specialties of childhood were accepted due to the established theological concept and the harsh conditions of life. Thus, the differences between the children and adults were not recognized. In those times, no real distinction was made between the entertainments for children, so children simply used the adult works that were attractive for them. “In the Middle Ages ‘children’s literature’ ... was simply the literature of the entire culture” [3]. Literature existed mainly in the form of fables, folk stories, and legends that were passed from generation to generation in oral form. Children were listening to these tales around cottage fire and when they grew up, they told the same stories to their own children. Although not originally meant for children, such stories were acquired by them quickly, as they were full of wonders and mystery that children always liked. Oral tradition continued playing an important role much later, when the first literature was written down by the monks [6]. Since there were very few children who had the chance to see a manuscript or book, the oral literature was the only one for poor children.

With the invention of the printing press, books became more accessible and children in general became more literate. However, during the sixteenth century, still there were no books just for children and their enjoyment. The society believed that “the young should read only what would instruct and improve them” [12]. The books for children written in these times were purely didactical, e. g. rhymes for learning numbers or days of the week, grammar books, books of manners, or religious writings.

Therefore, children continued adopting books they liked, such as Aesop’s Fables (1484). Although William Caxton did not originally mean them for children, they soon became very popular among them. One of the first books for children that were not purely didactical and showed

more human attitude to them was John Amos Comenius's famous *Orbis sensualium Pictus* in 1658.

The seventeenth century saw the rise of religious writings for children and new models such as *catechism* and stories about young innocent dying children were introduced [2]. The Puritanism emphasized the importance of salvation, children were seen as born sinful, as souls to be saved or damned. As a result, education had a form of warnings and threats, children were constantly reminded of the pain and suffering in hell [6]. This attitude was directly reflected in the books available to them in those times. They were mainly books of manners, primers and the Bible, or Puritan tales full of horror also used by adults. This developed into the idea of childhood as an independent stage, which was accepted more and more, just like the children became irreplaceable part of families and society.

As a result, the eighteenth century meant a breakpoint for children's literature. It brought a completely different attitude to children and their education. Children at that time were recognized to have special characteristics, and therefore special needs. Consequently, a new kind of children's books appeared — secular literature. Its main goal was to amuse and entertain children, rather than educate those [6]. One of the first books of this kind was John Newberry's *Little Pretty Pocket* book published in 1744, which is sometimes referred to as the 'first children's book.' At this time also the first collections of fairy tales appeared. Probably the most famous one was Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* translated into English by Robert Samber and published by John Newberry in 1729. Some of the eight original stories are still popular among children, such as *Sleeping Beauty* or *Cinderella*. Despite the popularity of fairy tales, there were still critical voices against them pointing out the lack of morals and no religion found in the tales, as well as supernatural beings [6]. However, even though not accepted as appropriate reading matter for children by the educationalists in the eighteenth century, fairy tales were still loved by children, who continued reading them just as they were listening to them centuries before.

The eighteenth century also introduced the genre of adventure stories following the model of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The famous adventure was originally meant for adults, but due to its immense popularity with children, it soon affiliated into the world of children's literature to become its essential part. Adventure stories and fairy tales together with historical novel and girl's fiction introduced in the nineteenth century remained dominant genres of children's literature until the 1950s [14].

When the nineteenth century came with the Romantic Movement, the interest in folk and fairy-tales increased considerably. It finally created the atmosphere where stories that were actually impossible were not seen harmful for children, and not only fairy tales, but also fantasies became widely accepted [6]. Children's literature was no longer seen as inferior and the domain of women writers, but first-class authors started to write for children as well. As Ivana Bobulová says:

"This was a great step forward in improving children's books as well as the beginning of so-called Golden Age of Children's literature, which lasted throughout the whole 19th century plus a few decades each side."

The contributing facts were compulsory education, the raise of minimum age for employment, and the drop in child mortality. Many new translations of fairy tales appeared. The Grimm Brothers' collection was published in 1823, Hans Andersen's fairy tales followed in 1846. The second half of the nineteenth century also brought books aimed especially at children's interests and needs. The stories for boys and about boys appeared in different forms, such as adventure novels, historical novels or detective stories. Charles Dickens certainly belongs among the great authors of this genre and his *Oliver Twist* in 1838 is one of the best novels focusing on a child protagonist. The books written especially for girls appeared almost at the same time as boy's literature. Let me

mention Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) as an example. As children still loved animal stories, the originally adult genre shifted into the children's literature and by the end of the nineteenth century, many animal fantasies for children were written. One of the first such books were Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), and Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). Both of them have been regarded as classic of children's literature since then.

In 1865, new era of children's literature began when Lewis Carroll's *Alice in the Wonderland* was published. Not only was it one of the first and also the most successful modern tales or rather fantasy, but also for the first time we can see empathetic, rather than directive-narrative [15]. It is written purely for children's enjoyment without any instructions, it is full of free fantasy and imagination, and not bound up by classical stereotypes of good and bad. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many other great fantasies were published. Charles Kingsley wrote the famous *Water-Babies* (1863), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by Lyman Frank Baum was published in 1900.

The twentieth century brought the blossom of children's literature that was again closely connected with a new approach to childhood. The interest of society in all children was growing and the stress was laid upon emotional needs of the child. The importance of books in children's life was widely recognized and literature was seen as an important tool for children's enrichment. The books were no longer written to teach children social and moral concepts; children were no longer seen as immature men that must grow up quickly, but as individuals of their own with unique mental, physical, and social needs [3].

By the 1920s, the quantity of books for young readers increased rapidly and with it also the variety of literary form, subject, and approaches. During the interwar period the 'acceptable face' of 10 children's books developed, children's literature became literate and stable [1]. The rapid growth of children's literature during the seventies brought not only gradual improvement of the status and quality of children's literature, but also a shift in the selection of topics [2]. Subjects and genres that belonged solely into adult literature for a long time suddenly appeared in the books for young readers. As Cornelia Meigs [3] suggests:

"Important books of the nineteenth century had shown that books for children could be literature; the first twenty years of the twentieth century saw the concept of children's literature reach maturity".

The current state of children's literature is closely connected with overall perception of childhood, which is considered an important period of life that might influence heavily the future life, in both positive and negative ways. I will close this chapter by quotation of George Orwell that Peter Hunt [1] used for opening his *Introduction to Children's literature*:

"It is probable that many people who would consider themselves extremely sophisticated and 'advanced' are actually carrying through life and imaginative background which they acquired in childhood".

The reason for the persistent presence of the classics of children's literature is not the result of marketing techniques and expensive advertising campaigns. These books continue to be read because children and adults discover that what they reveal about our lives and our world is not just true at a certain period of time or in a certain location for a particular group of people, but are always true, everywhere for everyone. Another reason for their appeal rests on the intuitive knowledge of the true and good everyone who encounters them, who discovers a better and higher thing to enjoy and be schooled by a work of art than to analyze it. Since the themes of the stories reveal timeless truths about the human condition, from the humorous to the tragic, we see that one of the marks of a classic is its universal appeal. We experience a sense of unity with nature and

human nature when we give ourselves to the classic stories and poems of the Good Books. There is a sound reason and one not difficult to discover why *Aesop*, *Huckleberry Finn*, the works of *Homer* and *Shakespeare* continue to be translated into nearly every language in the world.

However, we must admit our modern times have not been encouraging for reading and conversing about what we have read. Conversing is an aspect of leisure that naturally accompanies the act of reading that has been terribly undermined by the visual and to some extent the audio stimulants of contemporary culture. It has become commonplace for reading enthusiasts to recognize and blame television for luring children and their parents away from reading books and conversing about them, and instead spend their free time staring into the bright and flashy electronic window of movement and color accompanied by high fidelity and stereo sound from the TV set and now the computer screen. The implications for social life and reading were obvious. With extensive viewing healthy family life deteriorated where the children became remote from the family circle. Deprived of essential real-life experiences when it came to reading either informational or imaginative material the child lacked sensory and intellectual memories of reality to form images and ideas from what they were reading. Book publishers and authors continue to produce more materials for children, but since the television and video screen revolution many of these books are written in language far below age level and illustrated with garish colors and distorted figures (such as those used by Theodor Geisel, Dr. Suss and Maurice Sendak) to compete with the flashy visual displays on the electronic screen.

To read good books is to participate in the great tradition of learning through delight and wonder that leads to wisdom which is to discover and do the good which is the heart's deepest longing, to be united to the good, the true and the beautiful which is happiness on earth. Without pedantic "teaching or preaching", every Aesop Fable is a dramatized story of the virtues, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, often instructed by the defect or excess of the virtue. We really do not need the "moral lessons" at the end of these perfect stories — attentive readers see their meaning integrated within all the elements of the story, not as a simplified afterthought.

The books are read when students are older, for example, those by Louisa May Alcott, or Robert Louis Stevenson, or Mark Twain, portray characters memorable for their bravery or cowardice, compassion or bitterness, prudence or bad judgment, impatience or long suffering. And yet for all the positive things we can say about the Good Books as instruments of cultivating the imagination upon truth and forming the character upon goodness there is another appeal to the reader that resides in the experience of beauty that is characteristic of all art, a mysterious dimension of wonder and pleasure that is impossible rationally to explain.

There are also other modern themes that have entered juvenile fiction: loneliness, alienation, failed friendships, themes directed toward early adolescent girls in particular. Popular fiction for adolescent boys is dominated by fantasy and the fantastic, and violence, exploiting boys' natural inclination for action and adventure. 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 this literature 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. Again, it is very important to repeat that this overview of the current state of children's literature is by necessity a generalization because these features and trends are generally true; however, there are writers and illustrators of children's books today who are innovative and place their stories in modern settings yet compose their themes and illustrations within an artistic and ethical tradition of literature for younger readers. Even though reading the Good Books are their own reward, that is, their worth is found in the delight and knowledge they give, not in material

reward; it is also true that a grounding in this literature cultivates our emotional and mental life to receive the ideas and questions presented by the Great Books of Western civilization that begin with such authors as Homer, Euclid, Plato, Aeschylus, and Aristotle. In other words, if a child has been well nourished on Mother Goose and Robert Louis Stevenson, he or she is ready to read Shakespeare. A student thus promoted passes from reading the good books to the first great books generally somewhere between the end of the elementary experience and the beginning college years.

Education by good books that leads to the great books, enriching the soil of the soul's higher faculties achieves something greater than cultivating literate and literary-minded students – it passes on the best of our culture. And what has been that culture? It is the best of what man can achieve for civilized society, it is excellence of character by which we measure our goodness and our faults, it is the citizen of civilization which requires a life based on principles rather than within relationships in the family, government, economy, labor and leisure, and religion. It is freedom to enjoy the life of the mind as well as the good of the body; it is the hope to build society upon moral principles whose very atmosphere encourages its citizens to excel as individuals within a community of like-minded men and women regardless of ethnicity, race or cultural differences.

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