

## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – A FEW WORDS ABOUT GENRES

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*Abstract: The purpose of this article is to offer a glimpse into the history of children's books, and of children's literature as a whole both looking into the form and at the traditions in the development of children literature. This rather short survey wishes to introduce this subject, perhaps less familiar to Romanian scholars and to explore some of the major genres of children's literature which were born together with the advent of children's literature three centuries ago.*

*Keywords: literature, children, history, genres*

Children's literature is a quite unique branch of the academic literary study: it is a newer field of research, it is still developing, and it is the only type of literature defined in terms of its intended readership, although it is not by children, necessarily with children but just aimed at them. Its academic study is of no interest to this target audience, though.

The classification into genres of children's literature has existed ever since it entered into print culture and this article makes use of the taxonomy suggested by Matthew O. Grenby<sup>1</sup> in his work on literature for children that underlies the importance of children's books of the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century on the formation of today's children's literature and on establishing of its genres.

Peter Hunt asserted that only texts 'written expressly for children who are recognizably children'<sup>2</sup>, only texts that are interesting for children themselves can be considered proper children's literature. There is a plethora of texts written for children and sometimes it is difficult to choose from. As Margaret Meek states, there is a wide 'range of texts, diversity of topics, differences between readers, and vagaries of critical reactions in literature for adolescents'<sup>3</sup>. So a taxonomy was and is very much needed.

Zohar Shavit argues that children's literature develop following in the footsteps of adult literature and with an input from the educational system and its stratification, reflects a response to popular literature, a pattern Shavit states is applicable to all literature.

*I intend that the very same stages of development reappear in all children's literatures, regardless of when and where they begin to develop. That is to say, the historical patterns in the development of children's literature are basically the same in any literature, transcending*

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<sup>1</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 26

<sup>2</sup> Hunt, Peter, *Passing on the Past: The Problem of Books That Are for Children and That Were for children*, in *Children's Literature in Education*, 21, 1996-1997, p. 200

<sup>3</sup> Meek, Margaret, *Encyclopedia of Children Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. By Peter Hunt, Routledge, 2004

*national and even time boundaries. It does not matter whether two national systems began to develop at the same time, or if one developed a hundred or even two hundred years later (as with Hebrew, and later with Arabic and Japanese children's literatures). They all seem to pass through the very same stages of development without exception. Moreover, the same cultural factors and institutions are involved in their creation*<sup>4</sup>.

Grenby distinguishes in his critical guide to children literature<sup>5</sup> seven genres of children literature: fables, poetry, moral or instructive tales, the school story, the family story, fantasy and the adventure story.

Fables are perhaps the oldest form of literature targeting children, although not only them. A fable represents a concise and short literary form offering a moral lesson through the use of an animal story, most often, although sometimes plants, forces of nature and animated objects are being used. Fables may originate in the oral folk tale tradition. In time, like fairy tales, fables became associated mostly with children.

Sir Roger L'Estrange, a reputed collector of fables who published a collection of them in the late seventeenth century, redesigning the fables to be appropriate for children, as he considered suitable, wrote that 'it is beyond all dispute that the delight and genius of children, lies much toward the Hearing, Learning, and Telling of Little Stories'. Therefore children authors need be 'Indulging and cultivating of this *Disposition*, or *Inclination*, on the one hand, and the applying of a profitable *Moral* to the *Figure*, or the *Fable*, on the *Other*'<sup>6</sup>. L'Estrange theory mirrors that of John Newberry, the famous publicist, stating centuries later that children's literature should 'instruct and delight'.

Grenby argues<sup>7</sup>, in fact, that fables can be considered the first form of literature dedicated to children, being as old as two thousand years and their discovery on the cuneiform tablets used by the Sumerians would indicate that they were used in educating the children. In fact, a great number of fables and their derivate were used over time for the youth and with great success. Most famous in the West are the fables written by Aesop, who was most probably a real historical character, a slave from Asia Minor around the sixth century, mentioned by Plato, Plutarch, Herodotus and other Greek writers. His collection of tales in verse dates from the Roman period and seems to be the source of all subsequent fables. Fables will, in time, take different forms and lengths, but their main role would remain that of their morale, the lessons they teach through an interesting allegorical story with appealing characters.

The next genre of children's literature as cornered by Matthew Grenby is poetry, a genre as old as the seventeenth century. Unlike fable, discussing poetry implies certain problems, such as, first of all, how to define children's poetry. This is a serious issue, much debated by critics, as several poems written for adults have landed in children's anthologies; at the same time, poetry written specifically for children at a certain time stopped being of any interest to them and now seem rather old and inappropriate, such as the case with pre-Victorian poetry.

It is generally agreed that the first good authors of poetry, still appealing today, are Robert Browning ('The Pied Piper of Hamelin', 1842), Edward Lear (*A Book of Nonsense*, 1846), in America, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*The Song of Hiawatha*, 1845) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). Earlier children's poetry has a strong religious tone and emphasizes mostly moral education, such as the famous John Bunyan's *Country Rhymes for Children* (1686).

<sup>4</sup> Shavit, Zohar, *Poetics of Children's Literature*, University of Georgia Press, 1986, p. 133

<sup>5</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p.6

<sup>6</sup> Müller, Anja, *Picturing Aesops: re-visions of Aesop's Fables from L'Estrange to Richardson*, no. 10, 2004, pp. 32-66

<sup>7</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 34

Animal stories, other important genre of children literature, are in close connection to the fable and Grenby places them in the same category. John Goldthwaite correlates the rise of the animal story in the late nineteenth century to the invention of 'empire, electricity, and later the automobile, and, perhaps most importantly, of urbanization'<sup>8</sup>. These developments severed people's links with nature but simultaneously encouraged a nostalgic Arcadianism that created the demand for books like Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* or Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, as Grenby explains<sup>9</sup>.

Grenby distinguishes another genre of children literature which he calls moral and instructive tales – the type of children literature that blends 'realism (the accurate depiction of everyday life)

and didacticism (instruction for a specific purpose)... not to say that some fairy tales or fantasies are not didactic, nor, say, that school stories or adventure tales cannot be realistic. But there is an important and distinct tradition of children's literature, visible from the seventeenth century to today, that deals with ordinary children in ordinary situations being taught to deal with ordinary problems.'<sup>10</sup>

In his classification, Grenby is very much in line with the opinion of writer Nina Bawden, in her 1980 essay: 'The most important realism that children need,' Bawden argued, 'is the realism of the emotional landscape in which the book is set'. A children's book, in her opinion, 'should be judged for the pleasure it gives, for its style and its quality', not according to how well it serves 'factions and interests and ideologies'.<sup>11</sup>

The puritan, moralizing literature of the eighteenth-century was filled with overt didacticism. In time, though, this decreased in popularity and by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century the morale was more to be intuited than imposed. The main characteristic of the old moral tales was that they tried to teach morality and maturity to children. Later on, however, the children's own values, although it must be noted that not those values expressed by children themselves but rather by children authors in their name, became the norm.

In the later twentieth century the didactic novel for children began to overtly confront political and social questions and whereas 'early moral tales showed that most problems could be solved by better behavior or more sensible thinking, the modern 'adolescent novel of ideas' seldom offers simple solutions to the problems it presents'<sup>12</sup>.

Some important authors for this particular genre of children's literature are:

The moral tale of the period before the nineteenth-century heyday transformed into the problem novel of the 1970s because, as some histories of children's literature state, a plethora of more popular sub-genres emerged: adventure stories, nonsense verse, Carroll-type fantasies, family stories, the once more popular fairy tales, and so on.

The fourth category in Grenby's taxonomy is that of the school story. This genre was so popular in Great Britain that George Orwell considered it a typical British thing, although Germany and The Soviet Union had many popular books of this type and so did other countries, most notably America with classics like John Knowles, Susan Coolidge, Louisa May Alcott and L. M. Montgomery.

Grenby, however, favors the opinion of George Orwell, stating that the classic type of the school story: 'narratives in which the school features almost as a character itself, and in which

<sup>8</sup> Goldthwaite, W., *Natural History of Make-Believe*, OUP, 1996, p. 251

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 43

<sup>10</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 85

<sup>11</sup> Bawden, Nina, *Emotional Realism in Books for Young People*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, no.56, 1980, pp. 17-33

<sup>12</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 106

children fit happily into their school, each helping to form the character of the other – does seem to be rooted in British culture<sup>13</sup>. Grenby argues that the American authors, however popular and representative, wrote series of books in which school simply happened to be the stage for the action itself, while the German school literature suffers from too much seriousness, while the Russian version paid tribute to the Soviet collectivism and party regimentation.

It is perhaps the long tradition of British public schools – the opposite of what the term represents in the American culture – what led Orwell, Grenby and other alike consider the school story a perquisite of the literature in Great Britain. The not too old phenomenon of Harry Potter's Hogwarts makes no exception.

School literature designed for children has a very early onset. Grenby<sup>14</sup> mentions a composition inscribed onto clay around the year 2000 BC, telling a school anecdote in Mesopotamia: entitled 'School Days', accounts for the story of a school boy, who gets in trouble at school for not being a good student. This very early text is quite similar to those from medieval England, called *colloquia scholastica*, schoolbooks teaching Latin or literate English and largely produced from the fifteenth century onward. They consisted of dialogues between a master and a pupil, or between fellow schoolboys, usually about the troubles at school. Early school narratives revolve around incidents and attitudes which are implicit in, not extrinsic to, school life.

The focus of school stories is often, especially with the development of the genre, on socialization: characters learn how to integrate successfully into a community and how to make friends and to resolve the demands of self and society. Another main theme of many school stories is the balance between submission and defiance, authority and autonomy<sup>15</sup>. Students are all the time in conflict with teachers or even some of their peers. A very important feature of the school book is its longevity. This, in Grenby's opinion, 'is largely due to its adaptability: it has successfully combined with other genres, appeared in a range of different media, and has absorbed and responded to changing social conditions.'<sup>16</sup>

The family story occupies a special place in Grenby's taxonomy, as, obviously, home and family represent the main stage for most children's stories. Even in the case of a black and white, dry and unwelcoming Kansas, a child protagonist like Dorothy warmly voices some of the most famous six words of the American cinematography: 'There is no place like home!', not to mention the yearn of all the children in Neverland for a home and a family.

However, family stories are more often than not, especially from nineteenth century onwards, stories of sadness, of problems, of struggle to regain a lost family member, of fracture or dysfunction. Jan Mark suggests that the absence of complete families takes is explained by the fact 'that children with two harmonious parents were likely to have little to unsettle them'<sup>17</sup>. However, as Grenby states: 'the absence of whole and happy families from family stories is not merely a device to give children freer rein or to allow pathos and adventure into the narrative. Rather, the absence of one or more parents serves to endorse the importance of family.'<sup>18</sup> Even those authors, who write about the constricting effect of families, particularly on girl characters, suggest that in fact families are liberating and comforting and something to strive for.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.111

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-115

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 136

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mark, Jan, *Family Stories, The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English*, ed. Victor Watson, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 250

<sup>18</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 136

Next, Grenby discusses in his taxonomy the controversial topic of fantasy literature as a genre. Fantasy is a wide-ranging, fluid and a bit vague genre, not easy to define, although many authors have attempted. As Grenby puts it, 'It can incorporate the serious and the comic, the scary and the whimsical, the moral and the anarchic. It can be 'high' – taking place in alternative worlds – or 'low' – set in the world we know. Or it can combine the two.'<sup>19</sup>

Besides the setting, as mentioned above, the topics of this type of literature is comprehensive and obviously, fantastic, comprising 'stories of magic, ghosts, talking animals and superhuman heroes, of time travel, hallucinations and dreams'<sup>20</sup>. It has elements from other genres of children literature, such as adventure stories, fairy stories and nowadays, when it became extremely popular worldwide, even with school stories, animal stories and perhaps, honestly put, with all other genres.

Brian Attebery calls the various forms of fantasy 'fuzzy sets, meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a center' and 'there may be no single quality that links an entire set'.

But as a concept, fantasy is clearly central to any understanding of children's literature. Some have argued that fantasy is the very core of children's literature, and that children's literature did not properly exist until the imagination had been given an entirely free rein to entertain children in unreservedly fantastical books like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz*, *Narnia*, *Harry Potter*. It has been argued that all children literature is in fact a fantasy, a figment of imagination and, more often than not, a space populated with marvelous creatures and events. As Grenby puts it:

*The fantastic can be regarded as spatial – or perhaps psychological – representations of childhood, places from which one is exiled as soon as one grows up. But it has also been argued that all children's literature is necessarily a fantasy. In the same way that an author writing about Narnia or Neverland is creating a fantasy world which they imagine but cannot actually inhabit, so all adults writing about childhood are describing a world that they can no longer directly experience.*<sup>21</sup>

In the same lines, Jacqueline Rose argues, in *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, which even the most realistic children's story is actually an adult's fantasy of what childhood is, or should be. And then in another sense, it might even be claimed that, because it relates that which has not taken place, all fiction should be understood as fantasy – although most critics have preferred to limit the genre to those texts depicting what *could not* (rather than *did not*) happen<sup>22</sup>.

Tvetan Todorov discusses extensively the fantastic in his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, defining it, subjectively, as referring to a very small canon of literary works. What Todorov understands by fantastic is a bit particular: that particular realm of literature on the threshold of two other literary genres: the uncanny (*das unheimlich*) and the marvelous. The uncanny refers to what is at the same time strange and familiar. The marvelous, on the other hand, refers to a more traditional view of fantasy. The first involves a reaction in the character whereas the latter does not. The uncanny is incomprehensible or pure and simply incredible but the marvelous is easier acceptable.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 168

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan, Or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993

What the fantastic, according to Todorov, refers to that short moment of hesitation between belief and disbelief of the supernatural, scintillating between literary genres, as well.

*The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.*<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, Perry Nodelman argued that ‘children’s literature is frequently about coming to terms with a world one does not understand – the world as defined and governed by grownups and not totally familiar or comprehensible to children’<sup>24</sup>. Good quality fantasy literature dramatizes this experience,

*...transporting its characters into a past time or new world where all is strange and perplexing. Perhaps this mirroring of their own daily experience helps to explain why children relish fantasy so much. Or perhaps it is because in a new world where nobody knows the rules, children are not placed at a competitive disadvantage, and consequently feel the equal of adults in a way that they do not in their real lives.*<sup>25</sup>

Last but not least, Grenby refers to the genre of the adventure story, thus concluding his classification. Despite having some of the most illustrious exemplifications of all genres, Grenby considers it difficult to define compared to the other genres of children’s literature. Some classical examples of adventure stories are: Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Sir Walter Scott, Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, Jules Verne, Henry Rider Haggard. Grenby states that ‘perhaps only those novels placing children, not adults, at the centre of events can be regarded as truly archetypal, like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.’<sup>26</sup>

If early stories of the genre depicted adventure as something to be avoided, during the nineteenth century it became something desirable and appealing. Adventure stories represent stories of empowerment for children, describing a heroism that children enjoy and dream about.

Despite its genres and various taxonomies or studies, children’s literature, although often being the Cinderella of academic studies and a disregarded field of research for many years, has finally come of age. It is not only being taken much more into consideration by specialists worldwide, but it has gained such popularity in the last decades that it had crossed over to the realm of adult literature, with an overabundance of grown-ups interested in it. It represents therefore a type of literature that, if it can be said so, will make history.

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<sup>23</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell UP, 1975, p.23

<sup>24</sup> Nodelman, Perry, *Some Presumptuous Generalizations About Fantasy*, in *Only Connect: Readings on Children’s Literature*, ed. Sheila Egoff et al., 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 1996, p.175

<sup>25</sup> Grenby, M. O., *Children’s Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 192

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