The Genre Peculiarities of Children’s Books by Roald Dahl

Abstract

This article is devoted to defining the genre peculiarities of children's books by Roald Dahl as there is no single opinion among the critics on this question. The writer not only appeals to the folk tale and transforms it, but also plays with its features. We also find elements of other genres: cautionary tales, tall tale, Gothic tale and science fiction. In addition, Dahl’s stories are built on the principle of the game, which is caused by specific audience and the author’s intention. These features allow us to attribute his books to the genre of literary fairy tales of postmodern epoch.

Key words: genre, literary fairy tale, folk tale, transformation, the principle of the game, postmodernism.

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) tales a special position in British children’s literature and is popular due to his books Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964), Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator (1972), The BFG (1982), The Witches (1983) and Matilda (1988). Dahl is also famous for his children’s series of poems partly connected with his fairy tales: Revolting Rhymes (1982), Dirty Beasts (1983), Rhyme Stew (1989). In western critical articles devoted to his works attention is given to the following aspects: the reasons for his popularity, the peculiarities of his nationality, the most spread facts of his biography, the main types of his characters and the conflict of his works. However, there is no a single opinion on how to define the genre of his children’s books.

The publishing house “Puffin book” writes “fantastic novels”, the indication of his works as “children’s literature” or “children’s book” reflects the general tendency of foreign criticism not to distinguish between separate genres in children’s literature. Nickolson refers his works as “tales of fantasy”, explaining it by the fact that “fantasy” means not the genre but the dream, imagination. According to Freud, such tales can be interpreted as “unsatisfied wishes and every single fantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (Nickolson 2000, p. 319). Nancy Horton attributes his works to low fantasy (Horton 2005,
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p. 216). There is also a term “tales of fantasy”. In many articles and biographies the term “modern-day fairy tales” is used.

On the whole Roald Dahl’s works are defined as belonging to the borderline and little-studied genres. In western criticism there is an attempt to examine his works in the genre aspect, but most often these articles are not systematical, and do not cover the continuity of the traditions of British literature. It determines the novelty and actualization of our research.

In British literature since 1960-s fantastic literary fairy tale with the philosophical aspect and built on the principle of the play becomes dominant. However, in Dahl’s stories we do not notice such a tendency. First of all, he turns to the genre of folktale with its stock characters, possession of magical abilities in which justice and punishment have triumph, and the usual becomes fantastic.

Following the laws of this genre can be seen in the fact that the plot of Dahl’s fairy tales develops according to the scheme of Propp, and there are no detailed descriptions of everyday routine and place of actions.

There is a bit changed indefinite fairy tale past time and the pattern “once upon a time”, time movement is defined by the key events. The characters are stereotypical, described by one or two features, and clearly divided into good and evil.

The combination of folk and literary fairy tales shows that the real and magical worlds are interpenetrating, but the magical world is not large-scale, but local and is connected with one character, who can be either a protagonist or an antagonist. For example, in both stories about Charlie all mysterious adventures happen either at the Chocolate factory or in the presence of Willy Wonka who is a protagonist. In other story magic is connected with the witch-
es-antagonists. In *The BFG* Dahl introduces a secondary world, Giant Country, and then writes about Sophie’s adventures in Dream Country.

Magic is often connected with the solution of the conflict: either it is a reward of the obedient children (the Giant makes good dreams for girls and boys) or punishment of disobedient ones (in Charlie books), and also restoring or giving them full and loving family. Mixing different ingredients and composing recipes is often a characteristic feature of Dahl’s fiction and the means of introducing the fantastic element into a story. Dreams in *The BFG* become the means through which Sophie and the BFG transform their worlds; “they literally recombine the elements of different dreams in order to create a new entity and, through it, a new way of living together as a family” (Donaldson 2004, p.137).

However, the author’s innovation is the play with the traditional techniques of a folk tale and modification of the characters’ functions. Some critics, for example, Merrick and Cameron (see Pierce), doubt Charlie as a protagonist, he is the hero because it is his role in the plot, not because of any positive good of noble qualities, but because he is poor, quiet, and polite. Willy Wonka acquires the function of a good helper. The readers can guess that it was Willy Wonka who put secretly the coin to Charlie. In the factory Willy Wonka is compared to the all-mighty creator like the writer himself who punishes other children and their parents for their sins.

In *The BFG* the main hero constantly changes: it is either BFG or Sophie. In *The Witches*, according to Propp, the function of liquidation of initial misfortune or lack is absent. An open and ambiguous end appears which is impossible for the folk tale: the readers can only guess whether the boy will be turned back into human shape or will remain as a mouse. The witches-antagonists acquire a function of involuntary donor: by transforming the boy in-
to a mouse they give him an advantage over them, because they cannot smell him and destory.

The second genre form which Dahl uses is cautionary tales, which, according to Grenby (2008, p. 44), are significant for its didactic aspect. In a way they are some kind of a folk tale but have a definite function – to warn the listeners of a danger. They are distinguished by three main parts.

First, a taboo or prohibition is stated, some act, location, or thing is said to be dangerous. In the stories about Charlie this can be illustrated by the beginning of any poems of Oompa-Loompas who tell these stories to the readers: “The most important thing we've learned, / So far as children are concerned, / Is never, NEVER, NEVER let / Them near your television set — / Or better still, just don't install / The idiotic thing at all” (Dahl 2011, p. 131).

Then it is narrated that there are cases when someone disregarded the warning and performed the forbidden act, for example: “Did any of you ever know / A person called Miss Bigelow? / This dreadful woman saw no wrong / In chewing, chewing all day long. / She chewed while bathing in the tub, / She chewed while dancing at her club’ (Ibid., p. 95).

Finally, the violator comes to an unpleasant fate, which is thoroughly described in these stories. In Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator Dahl makes fun of Charlie’s grandparents’ crazy wish to become young with the help of Wonka-Vite. But the writer says the following: “And seriously, all jokes apart, / Do promise us across your heart / That you will never help yourself / To medicine from the medicine shelf” (Dahl 2007, p. 120).

In M.D. Sharp’s opinion, “the Oompa-Loompas certainly function effectively in the manner of a Greek chorus, as they give a moral commentary on the behavior of the charac-
ters. This device allows Wonka himself to be seen as less moralistic and more a figure of fun” (Sharp 2005, p. 526).

In *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* the genre of cautionary fairy tales is represented in a clear form. Roald Dahl mocks at how the grandmothers and grandfathers of Charlie desire to take a magical vitamin and become young.

The next tradition which is typical for Dahl’s children’s fiction comes from *film and comics*. It is “the inconsequential violence of cartoons (*Tom and Jerry*, for example), and an often slapstick, violent humor emphasizing bodily functions – at times approaches pantomime” (*Ibid.*, p. 526). So the writer turns not only to literary genres but related kinds of art.

The techniques used in cinematography resemble folk tale features and they do not contradict each other. Such a synthesis of two tendencies gives this well-known formula for success how to present moral in an entertaining and contemporary key.

*Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* resembles a series of episodes from the movies. All emotions, reactions and further events are easily guessed because they are already familiar to the readers who have seen such typical characters as space aliens or Americans.

Characters look like and behave as if they have recently been to the shooting area. For example, “Chief Spy had a false moustache, a false beard, false eyelashes, false teeth and a falsetto voice” (Dahl 2007, p. 27). The astronauts are eager to blow up unusual object which is the elevator the main heroes, because it is the only solution that comes to their mind. In *The Witches* Dahl mentions indecent things when he writes how the witches can smell a child from an adult. “The smell that drives a witch mad actually comes right out of your own skin. It comes oozing of your skin in waves, and these waves, stink-waves the witches call them,
go floating through the air and hit the witch right smack in her nostrils. … To a witch you would be smelling… of fresh dogs’ droppings” (Dahl 1998, p. 24).

Roald Dahl also refers to the genre of the tall tale which is more characteristic for the American folklore. “But rather than being merely a comic lie or an impossible exaggeration the tall tale is a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdote, which challenges the listener’s credulity with comic outlandishness” (Schober 2009, p. 32). The Witches clearly reflects the principle of aiming at the truth: “But this is not a fairy-tale. This is about REAL WITCHES. The most important thing you should know about REAL WITCHES is this. Listen carefully. Never forget what is coming next” (Dahl 1998, p. 23).

There are elements of other genres in Roald Dahl’s works which are introduced for definite writer’s purposes. For example, there are references to the gothic story and we find the main concepts of this genre: darkness, horror, supernatural, imprisonment, deformation, prosecution and violence. The main characters are tyrants, villains, vampires, witches and monsters. The description of The Grand High Witch is terrifying: her feet have square ends with no toes, her spit is blue, and she has huge curvy nose-holes. It amplifies the boy’s hero-ism. Dahl also creates mysterious and sinister atmosphere of the chocolate factory.

The elements of science fiction are present in Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator and indicate the historic period. The 20th century in the acute forms brought together fragile fairy tale environment and a sober reality of scientific and technical revolution. A spaceship and a space hotel appear instead of a folktale magical flying carpet which analogue is the great glass elevator.

While defining the genre of Dahl’s books we should keep in mind not only the use of the elements of different genres, but also other peculiarities of his books.
Almost all tales by Dahl are built on the principle of the play which is determined by the specific audience and the author’s intention. The category of play is one of the genre-forming features but during the development of a literary fairy tale the playful atmosphere extends on all levels of the text organization. And at the present stage it is renewed by the influence of postmodern principle of play, intensifies and acquires new features.

The principle of play is represented in three aspects. Firstly, Dahl borrows some principles of play from Lewis Carroll. We see several transformations and changes in sizes, and every time he describes them in details, whether it is form changing under the influence of Willy Wonka’s factory product or becoming a mouse.

Secondly, Dahl creates his own logic and plays with mathematical concepts. So if one takes Wonka-Vite, their age begins to decline, every drop takes 20 years off, for example, Grandma Georgina drank it and became minus two years. Thirdly, we see the realization of the metaphor, as a rule, it is connected with the names of the rooms at the Chocolate factory or its production. For example, Willy Wonka offers us to believe that “whipped cream isn't whipped cream at all unless it's been whipped with whips”.

Roald Dahl’s works are characterized by presence of clear-cut author’s position in the text. Almost all his fairy tales are third-person narratives; but we can see the narrator and the implied reader. Grammatically it is expressed in giving advice, instructions, questions and appeals to the young reader. Each story is presented in such a way as if the children have not heard anything like this before. Dahl plays with children’s expectations and demands their constant attention and involvement in the story. For example, in The BFG the writer implies that the book is written by the Big Friendly Giant.
The author’s presence is mostly seen in *Matilda*. The first chapter is dedicated to the readers and we can see the author’s irony: he discusses the methods parents use to bring up their children, how they boast and are proud of their children. The author does not only share his views with the readers but also makes them think as he does and does not give a right to choose their own preference; he imposes his interpretation of the events. It is not the position of a neutral narrator but of an omniscient author who says what is good and what is bad.

The narrator tries on different masks; he tends to take the place of one of the characters, for example, a teacher. In this role he pretends that “I think I might enjoy writing end-of-term reports for the stinkers in my class” (Dahl 1990, p. 5). As L. Valle notes, it changes his style, Dahl starts using epigrams and aphorisms: “Fiona has the same glacial beauty as an iceberg, but unlike the iceberg she has absolutely nothing below the surface” (*Ibid.*, p. 9). Thus we see different roles and changing functions of the narrator.

The peculiarity of Dahl’s stories is word play which is expressed mostly in the speech of the BFG and the names of sweets from Willy Wonka’s factory. We can single out the following groups of word building:

1) **Puns** built on: a) *homonymy*, for example “tellyphone”, “walk strate up”, and “human beans’ similar to “human beings”. b) *polysemy*. There are all types of regular cream in Wonka’s factory - “dairy cream, whipped cream, violet cream, coffee cream, pineapple cream, vanilla cream”, as well as “hair cream” (Dahl 2011, p. 82). c) *oxymoron*. Roald Dahl invents a new dish which cannot exist according to the laws of logic and physics: “hot ice cream for cold days”.

2) **Neologisms**, like *compound words*, i.e. words made up of two or three existing words, for example, “delumptious” (“delicious + scrumptious”); b) *malapropism*, for exam-
ple “exunckly” instead of “exactly”; c) spoonerism, for example, “catasterous disastrophe” (“disastrous + catastrophe”).

3) Misuses of idioms based on: a) rhyme, for example, “skin and groans” instead of “skin and bone”; b) paronyms: “cross your figglers” instead of “cross your fingers”; c) homophones: “save our solos” instead of “save our souls”; d) combination of several idioms. For example, “twiddle my leg” based on “twiddle one’s thumbs” and “pull my leg” has the meaning of the latter.

A linguistic play on words presented in the works of Dahl concerns two major points. Firstly, it is closely connected with the educating function of the fairy tale, and children understand the process of creating new words, learn the main word-formation models. Secondly, such a variety of models reflects the writer’s ideas about what the normality and common sense is, and shows the absurdity of what is going on in the modern world, thus acquiring the British national character.

Therefore, Roald Dahl’s children’s books can be defined as modern fairy tales, because such type of fiction is distinguished by the fact that the authors modernize traditional fairy tales, plot or language, or make a new continuation of the old story. Though this term does not characterize it in full degree.

Thus, there are three types of interactions with other genres in Dahl’s works: 1) inclusion of certain elements of the genres of science fiction, gothic story and cartoons; 2) the use of the genre in its original form, like cautionary tales and tall tales; 3) modification of the genre features like the transformation of a folk tale.

Such synthesis of several genres within one literary work is typical for children’s literature on the whole, and the dominant principle of the play lets us attribute his works to the
genre of postmodern literary fairy tale with its aiming at multiculturalism, the reflection of ideas of mass production, appealing to the mass reader and the world of imagination.

Works cited:


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