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### THEMATIC PECULIARITIES OF CHARACTERS IN POSTMODERN LITERARY TEXTS FOR CHILDREN

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*The research focuses on the thematic peculiarities of characters in postmodern literary texts for children. Accordingly, a brief analytical analysis has been foregrounded considering innovative character images in postmodern literary texts for children (characters with special needs and self-realised characters) and implementation of the peculiar for British linguistic culture character of a disadvantaged child in postmodern narratives. In the postmodern period, important social issues such as personality development, motivation, inclusion, equality, family relationships, and environmental protection are introduced to children's literature. Such themes are realised in literary texts, particularly through their characters. Diversity and inclusion belong to the most important themes reflected in postmodern fiction for children. They are implemented in postmodern fairy tales and other narratives through the portrayal of characters of different genders, races, nationalities, religions, social classes, and characters with special needs. Through literary texts centred on a character with special needs, a child-reader learns to recognise negative stereotypes about people with special needs, and develops tolerance, awareness and sensitivity to diversity. Another peculiar feature of postmodern literary texts for children is the self-realised character who succeeds in a particular activity due to hard work and effort. Such success stories inspire the child-reader to move towards their goal. They can be unconventionally realised through animalistic characters. The analysis also revealed that the protagonist of postmodern literary texts for children (particularly those written by R. Dahl) can be a disadvantaged child-character, which is typical of British linguistic culture. The prototypes of such characters are the pivotal child-characters of C. Dickens' narratives. Through such characters, postmodern literary texts for children address important social issues (social inequality, material disadvantage and single-parent families).*

**Key words:** *character with special needs, disadvantaged child-character, child-reader, diversity, inclusion, postmodern fairy tale, self-realised character, tolerance.*

### ТЕМАТИЧНІ ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ПЕРСОНАЖІВ ПОСТМОДЕРНІСТСЬКИХ ХУДОЖНІХ ТЕКСТІВ ДЛЯ ДІТЕЙ

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*Наукову розвідку присвячено тематичним особливостям персонажів постмодерністських художніх текстів для дітей. Відповідно, нами поставлено завдання виявити та описати інноваційні персонажні образи постмодерністських художніх текстів для дітей (персонажі з особливими потребами та персонажі, що досягли успіху), а також розкрити реалізацію традиційного для британської лінгвокультури образу знедоленої дитини у постмодерністських художніх текстах для дітей. В епоху постмодернізму відбувається впровадження в дитячу літературу таких важливих соціальних питань як становлення особистості, мотивація, інклюзія, рівність, сімейні стосунки, а також порятунок навколишнього середовища тощо. Ці теми реалізуються у художніх текстах, зокрема, через їхні персонажні образи. До найважливіших тем, які знайшли своє відображення у постмодерністських художніх текстах для дітей є різноманіття (diversity) та інклюзія (inclusion). Вони реалізуються у постмодерністських казках та інших наративах через зображення персонажів різних гендерів, рас, національностей,*



релігій, соціальних прошарків та персонажів з особливими потребами. Завдяки художнім текстам, в центрі яких знаходиться персонаж з особливими потребами, читач-дитина вчиться розпізнавати негативні стереотипи щодо людей з особливими потребами, а також розвиває у собі толерантність, обізнаність та чутливість до різноманітності. Ще одним характерним персонажем постмодерністських художніх текстів для дітей, є самореалізований персонаж, який досягає успіху у певній діяльності внаслідок наполегливої праці та докладених зусиль. Такі історії успіху можуть бути реалізовані через анімалістичних персонажів, що є неконвенційним. Вони надихають читача-дитину рухатися до своєї мети. Проведений аналіз також уможливив з'ясувати, що головним героєм постмодерністських художніх текстів для дітей (зокрема, авторства Р. Дала) може виступати знедолений персонаж-дитина, що є характерним для британської літератури. Прототипами таких персонажів вважаємо стрижневих персонажів-дітей художніх текстів Ч. Дікенса. Завдяки таким персонажам у постмодерністських художніх текстах для дітей розглядаються важливі питання: соціальна нерівність, матеріальне неблагополуччя та неповна сім'я.

**Ключові слова:** інклюзія, знедолений персонаж-дитина, персонаж з особливими потребами, постмодерністська казка, різноманіття, самореалізований персонаж, толерантність, читач-дитина.

**Introduction.** The regulatory function of postmodern literary texts for children, particularly fairy tales, acquires new horizons, as it focuses not only on forms of behaviour and ethical or security norms but also on the internal problems of the child and his harmonious interaction with the outside world. The contemporary world gravitates to tolerance and democratisation in all spheres of life. Issues related to personality development, motivation, inclusion, equality, family relationships, and environmental protection are brought to the forefront and, therefore, are reflected in literary texts for children, in particular in fairy tales. Ukrainian (Tsapiv, 2019b, 2020; Mykolyshena, 2018; Yefymenko, 2018) and foreign (Bacchilega, 1997, 2013; Webb, 2002) scientists devote their research to contemporary literary texts for children.

**Diversity and inclusion** belong to the most important themes of contemporary literary texts, which leads to portraying characters of different genders, races, nationalities, religions, social strata and characters with special needs. The literary text *"The Snowy Day"* (Keats, 1962) by the American author and illustrator E. D. Keats was one of the first books, the main character of which was an African-American boy. The publication of this book was an important event for children's literature, as it teaches the child-reader tolerance regarding racial stereotypes. The main character, a boy named Peter, spends his day playing in the snow. Even though the text does not mention his appearance, the illustrations serve as a means of calling for racial equality since they depict Peter with dark skin. Such democratic narratives encourage child-readers to reflect and develop their humanity and impartiality (Tsapiv, 2019a; 2020).

Important social themes are realised through the characters of postmodern literary texts for children and their actions and life stories. Important social themes are realised through the char-

acters of postmodern literary texts for children and their actions and life stories. By relating to the characters' actions, traits, and experiences, children learn to love themselves, achieve success and move forward despite certain physical, social or material obstacles. Therefore, our study **aims** to clarify the thematic peculiarities of characters in postmodern literary texts for children. Accordingly, we set the **tasks** to identify and describe innovative character images in postmodern literary texts for children (characters with special needs and self-realised characters) and to reveal the implementation of the image of a disadvantaged child traditional for British linguistic culture in postmodern literary texts for children.

### **Chapter 1. Characters with special needs.**

Literature has the potential to influence the attitudes and feelings of the reader. Therefore, it can increase awareness and sensitivity to diversity. Literary texts centred on a character with special needs can make society more tolerant and inclusive. Such narratives can challenge negative stereotypes about people with special needs that were generated by ignorance (Andrews, 1998: 420-421) and the concealment of this topic in the media. In particular, the main character in D. O'Leary's fairy tale series *"Toto the Ninja Cat"* (O'Leary, 2017; 2018; 2019/2020; 2020/2021; 2021/2022) is Toto, the ninja cat with vision problems: *"She was as blind as a bat and had been since birth. Actually, that's not totally true"* (O'Leary, 2017: 8). Toto sees objects that are in a close proximity to her; however, she is able to see only the outlines of figures in the distance: *"And secondly, well, she could see something ... Up very close her eyesight was just about OK, but from further away all she could see were light and dark shapes. She could recognise outlines of things (like Mamma and Papa), cats (like her brother), birds outside (they looked tasty!) and really anything that*

*moved*” (O’Leary, 2017: 8), “*I’ll only be able to see this Elias Copinger up close, and me going from cat to cat staring might draw attention to us*” (O’Leary, 2018: 62), “*The big warehouse was well lit, so she could make out the shadowy shapes below her*” (O’Leary, 2019/2020: 16).

Because of this, in many situations, the ninja cat relies on her brother Silver, who loves his sister and tries in every way to make her life easier by being her constant assistant: “*But she always liked to have Silver by her side. Yes, he was a pain at times, teasing her, but like most big brothers he was fiercely loyal and loved his sister very much ... not that he would EVER say that in public*” (O’Leary, 2017: 8-9), “*Toto was almost completely blind, and could only see light and dark shapes. Silver acted as her eyes and, as far as she was concerned, they came as a team*” (O’Leary, 2018: 7-8), “*Besides, I might need your eyes once we’re inside*” (O’Leary, 2019/2020: 8).

Despite these physical obstacles, Toto has a quick reaction and excellent fighting skills, worked out due to complex training. She relies on her other senses, which she develops much better than other cats: hearing and smell. She not only leads an active lifestyle but also belongs to the secret Ancient Order of International Ninja Cats and protects the animal society from evil forces. Thus, through postmodern literary texts for children and their characters, the child-reader learns to interact with the world according to the important social trends: tolerance, equality and inclusion.

## Chapter 2. Self-realised characters.

The stories of the success of famous people (inventors, scientists, artists, actors, designers) are becoming especially popular in the postmodern period. Although, for the most part, biographies are more characteristic of the literature for adults, they occupy a special place in children’s postmodern literature. Such success stories of outstanding people are intended to inspire child-readers to move forward boldly and show that it is necessary to make efforts to fulfill one’s dreams. In particular, the phenomenon of postmodern children’s biographical literature is a series of bestselling books by the Spanish author M. I. Sánchez Vegara, “*Little People, BIG DREAMS*”. The author published the first book of the series in 2014 in Spain independently through the publishing house *Alba Editorial* under the title “*Pequeña & GRANDE*” as a gift for her twin nieces. Currently, this illustrated series of biographies is international. The series’ books have been translated into more

than thirty-three languages, and over 12 million copies have been sold. As of 2024, more than 100 stories of outstanding people have been published within this series, particularly dedicated to *Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, Charles Dickens, Coco Chanel, Marie Curie, Agatha Christie, Audrey Hepburn, Ada Lovelace, Jane Austen, Stephen Hawking, Bruce Lee, Mary Shelley, Martin Luther King Jr., Astrid Lindgren, Alan Turing, Greta Thunberg, Steve Jobs, Elton John, John Lennon, Hans Christian Andersen, J.R.R. Tolkien, Elvis Presley, Freddie Mercury* and other inspiring people (Goodreads, n.d.). The author believes that her books are popular because children like to read real stories about other children’s experiences, lives and journeys. It gives them the strength and courage to believe in themselves and have BIG DREAMS (About Little People, BIG DREAMS, n.d.). Such texts inspired stories aimed at stimulating and supporting the child-reader in his/her personality development.

Postmodern fairy tales also focus on character success stories. Since the basis of typical success narratives is the biographies of famous people, their implementation through animalistic characters in fairy tales is unconventional. Characters in postmodern narratives are no longer required to have supernatural origins to possess extraordinary abilities and achieve the physically, logically, or humanly impossible (Alber, 2016: 222). Instead, their success depends on hard work, perseverance, systematic training, and self-development. For example, Toto, the protagonist of D. O’Leary’s fairy tale series “*Toto the Ninja Cat*” (O’Leary, 2017; 2018; 2019/2020; 2020/2021; 2021/2022), received her instant reaction, speed and strength not due to magic or supernatural origin, but thanks to a complex training from a young age: “*Toto was in fact one of the most skilled ninja cats on earth, a member of a select elite club of cat ninjas, with skills she’d learnt as a kitten from her master in Italy, an old ship’s cat called Ventura, who had in turn learnt from his master in Japan, who in turn could trace his ninja skills back hundreds of years*” (O’Leary, 2017: 9). At the beginning of the events in the tale, she is already a professional ninja, so the literary text does not describe her training. Her brother Silver notes that it has been long and has required much practice: “*He knew he could never be an ACTUAL NINJA, like his sister – that would take ages and lots of practice and training, and he was far too impatient and HUNGRY for all of that*” (O’Leary, 2018: 3). Having acquired her skills, Toto joined



the Ancient Order of International Ninja Cats to maintain balance in animal and even human societies. Toto achieves her professional success without supernatural help. Having the opportunity to use Old Tom's magic collar, which allows animals to communicate with people, she does not want to use it even once to communicate with her human Mama and Papa: "*Bro, we have enough trouble trying to make sense of animals – don't even get me started on humans*" (O'Leary, 2020/2021: 191).

Supernatural characters in postmodern fairy tales who have access to magic also succeed through hard work. For example, the character of R. Dahl's fairy tale "*The BFG*" (Dahl, 1982/2016d), the Big Friendly Giant, after a joint with people victory over the evil giants, settles in a special house in Windsor Great Park. During the main events in the fairy tale, he spoke with many mistakes. However, later he expresses a desire to learn to speak correctly and devotes much time to it: "*The BFG expressed a wish to learn how to speak properly, and Sophie herself, who loved him as she would a father, volunteered to give him lessons every day. She even taught him how to spell and to write sentences, and he turned out to be a splendid intelligent pupil. In his spare time, he read books. He became a tremendous reader. He read all of Charles Dickens (whom he no longer called Dahl's Chickens), and all of Shakespeare and literally thousands of other books. He also started to write essays about his own past life*" (Dahl, 1982/2016d: 198). In an effort to become a writer himself, he decides to tell readers about his adventures with Sophie. Writing the book has not been easy for him, but it ends in a huge success: "*He worked hard on it and in the end he completed it*" (Dahl, 1982/2016d: 198). At the end of the fairy tale "*The BFG*" R. Dahl uses a typical for his literary texts play with focalization: the child-reader learns that the text he just finished reading was that the Big Friendly Giant wrote.

The main character of another R. Dahl's narrative, "*Matilda*" (Dahl, 1988/2016c), Matilda, gradually develops a supernatural power to move objects without touching, just by looking at them. Realising her powers, the girl decides to use them to take revenge on Principal Trunchbull for herself, other students and especially her teacher, Miss Honey. At first, her strength was not strong enough, but as a result of daily training, she becomes able not only to hold various objects in the air but also to force them to perform the needed movements: "*From then on, every day after school, Matilda shut herself*

*in her room and practised with the cigar. And soon it all began to come together in the most wonderful way. Six days later, by the following Wednesday evening, she was able not only to lift the cigar up into the air but also to move it around exactly as she wished*" (Dahl, 1988/2016c: 208). After Matilda carried out her revenge plan and helped to achieve justice, her supernatural powers disappear. Miss Honey explains this to her by the fact that Matilda has been transferred to a class for children twice her age. Hence, the energy that previously accumulated in Matilda and was the source of her supernatural power now has another use. However, the girl is glad she no longer has such supernatural power: "*I'm glad it's happened,*" Matilda said. "*I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker*" (Dahl, 1988/2016c: 224). Thus, success stories in postmodern literary texts for children can relate to professional development or mastering specific skills. However, they all aim to encourage the child-reader to take active actions for their development.

### Chapter 3. Disadvantaged children-characters.

Modernism and postmodernism mark the expansion of the audience of literary texts for children, the decrease in the class division among authors, readers and characters, and the representation of a significant amount of social strata by characters and settings (Townsend, 1996: 684). A peculiar character of British linguistic culture is that of a disadvantaged child. In particular, the prototypes of such characters in postmodern fairy tales are the core characters of the literary texts of C. Dickens. The most famous children-characters in literary texts by C. Dickens are the boys Oliver Twist (Dickens, 1838/2003), David Copperfield (Dickens, 1850/2004), Pip (Philip Pirrip) (Dickens, 1861/2009), and the girls Nell Trent (Dickens, 1841/1987), Florence Dombey (Dickens, 1848/2002), Amy Dorrit (Dickens, 1857/2008). In addition, one cannot ignore Tiny Tim, a character in C. Dickens' story "*A Christmas Carol*" (Dickens, 1843/1992). Although the boy is not the protagonist of the literary text, he is an important part of it, as he personifies innocence, kindness and hope and becomes one of the catalysts for the redemptive arc of Ebenezer Scrooge.

The main characters of the novels and novels of C. Dickens are forced to confront the cruel world around them. They have to face poverty, social injustice, poverty, exploitation of children, problematic family relationships, a criminal world, and diseases. However, despite all the trou-

bles, they preserve moral purity and embody hope and perseverance. Since the child-reader does not yet have enough attention, experience, and concentration to read large-scale literary texts, this topic has been adapted for texts oriented toward the child-reader. Such adjustment to the cognitive capabilities of the reader is intended to pass him important knowledge, particularly considering the development of a child, regardless of his material circumstances, origin, family dynamics, etc.

The literary tradition of focusing on the main child-character to highlight important social problems is continued in postmodern literary texts for children. In particular, the main character of R. Dahl's most popular fairy tale "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" is Charlie Bucket (Dahl, 1964/2016a). Charlie is one of five children who get a unique opportunity to visit the chocolate factory of an extravagant inventor and confectioner, Willy Wonka. The boy comes from a low-income family, which is shown in comparison with other owners of the Golden Tickets: Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde and Mike Teavee, whose parents are wealthy or even incredibly rich. He is the only one of the children who comes to visit the factory, not with his parents but with grandfather Joe, not owning even a coat: "*Charlie Bucket? He must be that **skinny little shrimp** standing beside the **old fellow who looks like a skeleton**. Very close to us. Just there! See him?' 'Why hasn't he got a coat on in this cold weather?' 'Don't ask me. Maybe **he can't afford to buy one**'" (Dahl, 1964/2016a: 68).*

This contrast allows the author to convey to the child-reader a simple truth that wealth is not always the key to happiness. In contrast to Charlie, the other children-characters are disobedient, spoiled, intemperate and capricious. Therefore, all of them get their comeuppance at the factory. In contrast, Charlie and his family receive Willy Wonka's factory as a gift for his good qualities.

The themes connected to the material disadvantage are embodied not only in postmodern fairy tales but also in other genres, the addressee of which is the child-reader, in particular, in R. Dahl's literary text "*Danny the Champion of the World*" (Dahl, 1975/2016b). Two important topics are introduced through the main character of the narrative: material disadvantage and a single-parent family. When Danny was only four months old, his mother died suddenly, leaving his father as the only close relative of the boy. They lived very poorly – in a trailer

behind a small gas station that stood on a small country road and belonged to Danny's father. The trailer was old and cramped and had only 1 room without electricity: "*There was only one room in the caravan and it wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized modern bathroom. It was a narrow room, the shape of the caravan itself, and against the back wall were two bunk beds, one above the other. The top one was my father's, the bottom one mine. Although we had electric lights in the workshop, we were not allowed to have them in the caravan. The electricity people said it was unsafe to put wires into something as old and rickety as that*" (Dahl, 1975/2016b: 6).

After the death of his wife, Danny's father not only worked hard to earn a living for himself and his son but also did all the work of raising and caring for his son, which traditionally is expected of one's mother: "*While I was still a baby, my father washed me and fed me and changed my nappies and did all the millions of other things a mother normally does for her child. That is not an easy task for a man, especially when he has to earn his living at the same time by repairing motor-car engines and serving customers with petrol*" (Dahl, 1975/2016b: 2). Even though Danny grew up in a low-income and single-parent family, he never felt deprived but grew up happy and healthy because his dad loved him dearly: "*But my father didn't seem to mind. I think that all the love he had felt for my mother when she was alive he now lavished upon me. During my early years, I never had a moment's unhappiness or illness...*" (Dahl, 1975/2016b: 3). The character images of Charlie and Danny and disadvantaged child-characters in the literary texts of previous periods contribute to developing the children-readers' empathy and awareness of important social issues, teaching them compassion, kindness and hopefulness.

**Conclusions.** Postmodern literary texts for children are devoted to disclosing important themes driven by democratisation processes of all spheres of life: personality formation, motivation, inclusion, equality, family relations, and environmental protection. Diversity and inclusion are among the most important themes of contemporary literary texts, particularly aimed at the child-reader. These themes are implemented through the portrayal of characters of different genders, races, nationalities, religions, social backgrounds, and characters with special needs. Other important social themes are also realised through the characters of postmodern literary texts for children and their life stories. By relating to the actions, experiences



and traits of the characters, children learn to love themselves, move forward and achieve success despite physical, social or material obstacles that might stand in their way.

Innovative characters in postmodern literary texts for children are characters with special needs and self-realised characters. Postmodern literary texts for children that portray characters with special needs challenge stereotypes about people with special needs and teach the reader-child tolerance, awareness and sensitivity to diversity. Literary texts for children centred on a self-realised character inspire the child-reader to fulfil their dreams by taking action and being persistent in their development. At the same time, the realisation of success stories through animalistic characters in fairy tales is unconventional since this theme is more characteristic of adult literature and such texts are mainly based on the formation of real outstanding people.

Another popular character of postmodern literary texts for children is a disadvantaged child, which authors usually use to highlight important social problems, especially in British linguistic culture.

Prototypes of such characters in British literature of previous periods are the core characters of the literary texts of C. Dickens, who are forced to confront the cruel world around them, poverty, health problems, social injustice, exploitation of children, problematic family relationships, and the criminal world. This literary tradition continues in postmodern texts for children, particularly those of R. Dahl. Important postmodern themes, such as social inequality, material disadvantage and a single-parent family, are implemented in the author's literary texts for children. The characters of these narratives contribute to developing readers' empathy and social awareness.

**The prospects for further research** include narrative and multimodal analysis of postmodern picturebooks for children to identify the peculiar features of their characters' portrayal.

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