

FORMATIVE, EDUCATIONAL, ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC VALUES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Children's literature, viewed as a diverse array of literary genres and forms encompassing the works of both national and international poets and prose writers, represents an inexhaustible source of examples that can be offered to children throughout school activities—especially within those aimed at developing language and oral communication skills—in the effort to nurture kindness, fairness, and expressiveness. Literature stands as one of the most engaging and valuable tools available to teachers in shaping children's moral character. It contributes to the systematization and expansion of life knowledge and influences not only consciousness but also emotions and affective life, as it reveals the human being's inner world: feelings, thoughts, interests and their entire personal universe. Through the messages it conveys, the expressiveness of language, and the beauty of artistic imagery found in literary texts, aesthetic and moral values are transmitted. Romanian Children's Literature thus stands out as one of the most complex and beautiful educational disciplines, both for young pupils and for literature lovers in general.

Keywords: literature, children's literature, educational, ethical, aesthetic

Rezumat

Literatura pentru copii, privită ca o gamă diversă de genuri și forme literare care cuprinde operele poezilor și prozatorilor naționali și internaționali, reprezintă o sursă inepuizabilă de exemple ce pot fi oferite copiilor pe parcursul activităților școlare - în special în cadrul celor care vizează dezvoltarea limbajului și a abilităților de comunicare orală - în efortul de a cultiva bunătatea, corectitudinea și expresivitatea. Literatura se prezintă ca unul dintre cele mai atractive și valoroase instrumente disponibile profesorilor în formarea caracterului moral al

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copiilor. Ea contribuie la sistematizarea și extinderea cunoașterii vieții și influențează nu numai conștiința, ci și emoțiile și viața afectivă, deoarece dezvăluie lumea interioară a ființei umane: sentimente, gânduri, interese și întregul său univers personal. Prin mesajele pe care le transmite, expresivitatea limbajului și frumusețea imaginii artistice regăsite în textele literare, se transmit valori estetice și morale. Literatura pentru copii românească se remarcă astfel ca una dintre cele mai complexe și frumoase discipline educaționale, atât pentru elevii mici, cât și pentru iubitorii de literatură în general.

Cuvinte cheie: literatură, literatură pentru copii, educațional, etic, estetic

Literature in general, children's literature in particular, represents a form of knowledge conveyed through artistic imagery, rejecting all forms of schematism. As an art form, literature possesses distinct and specific characteristics. *It reflects reality through sensorially concrete images, which become meaningful in our consciousness through the expressive power of words. In literature, language is not merely a tool or vehicle, but a structure in which the writer embeds both their own worldview and that of society.* (Key, 1979:195)

As the art of the word, literature, embodied with expressing and reimagining beauty through artistic imagery, conveys to young school-aged children some of the purest ideals, thoughts, emotions and aspirations through profound literary works, in ways that are constructive and educational. *Suggested through a wide range of themes (homeland, historical heritage, nature and its beauty, living beings, school, everyday life, work and professions, childhood), as well as through human prototypes depicted in varied circumstances, this universe can become an important spiritual legacy, provided that the literary work as a whole meets the multiple demands posed by aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and patriotic education. By creatively capitalizing on the artistic, ethical, and aesthetic message of each literary creation, a child's interest and passion for literature and thirst for knowledge can be awakened and nurtured.* (Stoica, Vasilescu, 1991:8)

Regarding the emergence of children's literature, Vistian Goia states: *Children's literature encompasses all works accessible to young readers, regardless of whether they were written specifically for them or not. It constitutes a domain of literary creation and can be evaluated based on its aesthetic criteria.* (2003:13)

Children's and young adult literature exists first and foremost as literature and only secondarily as literature for a particular audience. This distinction arises from age-related preferences rather than from any aesthetic separation. True children's literature is that to which one returns with the desire to reread it. It appears that the primary requirement for a professional writer is to view the world from a child's



perspective and to treat that perspective with seriousness. Children's literature must remain a bearer of elevated ideas about humanity—it should inspire, shape and inspire moral values (kindness, gentleness, generosity, sensitivity, empathy, simplicity, modesty) and foster attitudes essential to any meaningful formative process.

Literature, especially at a young age, facilitates understanding. This takes shape through the exploration of the “human condition,” the revelation of human nature, and the portrayal of universal human experiences across complex situations. Literature introduces children to the institutions and norms of society. Daily life is governed by rules, norms and change. Family, kindergarten, school and church all encourage—and at times demand—responsibility and constant adherence to certain standards. Sometimes these demands exert intense pressure, seeming threatening, restrictive or even oppressive. However, literature helps children clarify their responses to such situations by offering possible alternatives: acceptance, rebellion, withdrawal or indifference. The struggles of heroes in children's books against life itself are, in many ways, analogous to their own. Some literary works depict the generous nature of society, while others highlight its impartiality.

Literature represents an inexhaustible source of direct experimentation with reality. Through literary works, children venture into long-forgotten worlds, take part in age-old battles, explore unknown depths, visit unknown eras and universes, imagine themselves as kings, pharaohs, astronauts, aviators, find themselves in cities and places they may never see in real life, live the adventures of sailors aboard ships or explore the interior of a castle. The opportunity to experience, indirectly, a universe other than the one they already know is virtually limitless.

Literature contributes to the development of imagination and creative thinking. These components emerge through the multiple perspectives and ways of perceiving or conceptualizing the surrounding world. Children's texts often depict how certain problems have been solved or offer alternative solutions. Through the indirect experiences they provide, these texts transport young readers into worlds different from their daily reality. As a source of direct imaginative exploration, literature allows children to immerse themselves in ancient times, engage in historical struggles, explore mysterious realms and envision themselves in extraordinary roles and settings.

The ability to access and understand an unfamiliar world through literature is practically infinite. Through their artistic beauty, characters, and events, literary works offer behavioural models, making literature an educational tool that helps preschool and early school-age children discover their own identity—especially in a world where values are



increasingly unstable. The literary text thus becomes a source of examples and counterexamples that can be used for the moral education of pupils, making the educational effects generated by reading complementary to the broader educational actions undertaken.

Children's books preserve not only the national spirit of a people but also that of humanity. Each story lovingly describes the native land while also venturing into unknown territories inhabited by people much like ourselves. As such, they contribute to a deeper understanding of one's own cultural identity, acting as ambassadors that travel beyond mountains and across oceans to the most remote corners of the world in search of new friends.

Each nation gives and receives, time and again. "Thus is born the universal republic of childhood," as Paul Hazard observed. Children's literature is inherently open to plurality—whether it takes the form of innocent reading, interpretive engagement or critical analysis. It exists first and foremost as literature, and only then as literature for a specific audience. The children's literature author must capture the attention and interest of both the young reader and the adult intermediary who facilitates the reading experience. Only by understanding the characteristics and reading needs of both audiences can one create authentic literature—literature for all ages—that resonates with the inner structure and essence of every reader.

Children's literature encompasses all works accessible to young readers, whether or not they were originally written for them. It belongs to the domain of literary creation and adheres to its aesthetic standards. Its specific traits, simplicity, clarity, and vividness, shape the construction of the literary work in such a way that it increases its accessibility and its power to influence young readers.(Stanciu, 1968:19)

Children's literature represents an integral part of both national and international literature. To support the importance and universality of children's literature, in his 1964 work *The Optimist's Chronicles*, while writing about Jules Verne and literature for children, George Călinescu emphasized the role of childhood within human personality—as an emotional state, childhood is a permanent presence in our lives: "In order to be works of art, writings for children and young people must also interest mature and educated adults. Childhood never truly disappears from within us; it remains the constant source from which all the meanders of our lives flow." (1964: 274)

To be considered part of children's literature, literary works must meet certain criteria:

- They must possess artistic and aesthetic value;
- They must be accessible to various age groups;



- They must have educational value and a moralizing character;
- They must explore the universe of childhood.

The scope of children's literature is remarkably broad, encompassing almost all literary genres and forms. This wide-ranging scope is attributed to the natural curiosity and vivid interest characteristic of this age group.

Children's literature begins with folk literature—fairy tales and stories—which remain the most beloved literary forms in this field. It continues with legends, anecdotes, and then with lyrical creations, both folk and cultivated, as well as narratives and novels covering an extensive variety of themes. Ion Buzăși himself argues that “Children's literature begins with folk literature, with the fairy tale—the most cherished literary genre in children's literature—followed by legends, humorous stories, then lyrical creations—both folk and scholarly—and a wide range of themed stories and novels.” (1999: 9)

Children's literature holds ethical value by presenting life in all its complexity and offering life models—or, conversely, negative examples that young readers are encouraged to avoid. Fairy tales and folk stories possess a strong foundation in reality, having originated from the people's longing for a better life and their desire to overcome evil and the hardships brought about either by natural forces or by oppressive social classes. The instructional and educational value of fairy tales and stories is considerable. They contribute significantly to the development of cognitive processes, emotional understanding, the formation of willpower and character traits, and, more broadly, to the shaping of children's personalities.

Reading fairy tales and stories has particular educational importance through the portrayal of heroic qualities that serve as admirable role models for children. They learn to be brave and resilient, perseverant and determined, modest and hardworking, honest and fair. They also learn the values of true friendship, while the moral embedded in the story helps form social conduct norms.

By engaging with these tales and stories, children enrich their vocabulary with poetic expressions and phrases drawn from the living language of the people, which helps them acquire a deeper command of their mother tongue.

As for poetry, the musicality of the verses attracts children from the earliest years of life. The conciseness with which facts, ideas, scenes, or feelings are conveyed makes poetry accessible to children and easy to memorize. At the preschool age, the educational effects achieved through literary works focus primarily on the internalization of moral concepts and the sensitization of the child's emotional life. Closely tied to this



affective dimension is the observation that the success of literature with preschoolers is largely due to the strong emotional charge of the text.

Closely tied to the aesthetic value of literature is its ethical value, as literary works provide life models—both positive and negative—which children need to be aware of and learn to assess as either worthy of emulation or not. Equally important is the way in which certain character traits of heroes in fairy tales and stories are highlighted for children, including their qualities, behaviours and attitudes. “The shaping and development of character, training children in norms of civilized behaviour and cultivating moral and patriotic feelings (humanism, love of country, courage, perseverance, and respect for work) are goals to which literary works contribute significantly through their specific means.” (Stoica, Vasilescu, 1991: 8)

In order to fully realize the instructive, educational and formative value of children’s literature, educators must themselves be passionate about reading, understand the psychology of various age groups, be familiar with age-appropriate literature and know how to recommend it in engaging formats such as storytelling, explanatory reading, book reviews, literary gatherings and commemorative events dedicated to writers. *Traditional folk productions in prose or verse (fairy tales, stories, anecdotes, ballads, lullabies, proverbs, riddles, sayings, etc.) have always formed the golden core of this literature. ... Folk creation has been a constant source of inspiration for cultivated literature due to the depth and diversity of its ideas, as well as the beauty and expressiveness of its language.* (Ibidem: 6)

Thus, folk literature, with its distinct characteristics, also serves as an inexhaustible source of motifs, themes, leitmotifs, positive and negative characters, and exceptional heroes for children's literature and literature about children. The particular nature of children’s literature, according to Eva Monica Szekely, arises from its specificity during early developmental stages, based on criteria such as “the lower degree of psychological development (thinking, language, emotions and aesthetic feelings; the sphere of interests, needs and concerns centered around play, carefreeness, constant questioning of the world, and the limited capacity to identify artistic messages – children must be initiated.” (2006: 11).

Just like Romanian literature in general, children’s literature encompasses the three main literary genres: epic, lyric, and dramatic. It includes literary genres and species identical to those found in national literature, but through its thematic content, it explores the child’s own universe of knowledge, desires, and aspirations related to family and childhood. Although there is no literature exclusively dedicated to children, the works that fall within the scope of children's study and



reading are numerous and complex in terms of ideological richness and aesthetic receptiveness. "Writers devoted either entirely or tangentially to our miraculous first age, or rather to the unforgettable ages of childhood and adolescence—which themselves are infinitely 'divisible,' with boundaries that blur and intersect. This fusion between beautiful storytelling and richness of ideas and emotions, between expression and substance, is what we call literature, and sometimes great literature—in other words, art." (Cândroveanu, 1988: 8).

Therefore, childhood as a motif, subject, or theme must be present in literature intended for children, as it evokes profound and intense emotions, experiences, and attitudes not only in young readers but also in adults.

Although Hristu Cândroveanu does not fully agree with the term "literature for children," oscillating instead between this and "literature about children," he nonetheless offers a relevant classification of authors and works addressed to young audiences. The exegete presents both foreign authors such as Charles Perrault, H. C. Andersen, Daniel Defoe, Mark Twain, Lewis Carroll, Carlo Collodi, Edmondo De Amicis, Oscar Wilde, Jack London, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Jonathan Swift, Rudyard Kipling, Alexander Pushkin, Jules Renard, Ferenc Molnár, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, and Homer, as well as Romanian writers such as Ion Creangă, Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale, Ioan Slavici, Mihail Sadoveanu, Dumitru Almaș, Marcel Breslașu, Iordan Chimet, Constantin Chiriță, Vladimir Colin, Călin Gruia, Alexandru Mitru, Octav Pancu-Iași, Mircea Sântimbreanu, Alexandru Șahighian, George Șovu, Radu Tudoran, and George Zarafu. (Ibidem: 7–26). None of these authors wrote works exclusively for children; however, their writings often include themes, motifs, events, and narratives that speak to the world of childhood, captivating young readers through the beauty of artistic imagery, as well as their aesthetic, educational, and moral value.

As a body of literary texts addressed to both children and adolescents, children's and young adult literature has a long-standing presence in world culture, from ancient Arab tales and Christian parables to contemporary works of fantasy and science fiction. In modern Romanian culture and literature, it began to take institutional form in the first half of the 19th century, through the contributions of writers from the 1848 generation and the Junimea literary society. This period saw the creation of memorable characters such as Nică and Păcală, and the celebration—in lyrical, songlike verses—of the picturesque beauty of nature and the glorious moments of national history.



From an early age, the child is curious, eager to explore not only the surrounding world and objects but also the beauty and expressiveness of literary and artistic creations—provided these are presented in a language and at a level appropriate to their age and cognitive development. For example, the world of childhood, often evoked with both nostalgia and joy, is a recurring theme not only in Ion Creangă's *Memories of My Boyhood*, but also in works by other Romanian and foreign authors, such as Mihail Sadoveanu's *The Enchanted Grove*, Ionel Teodoreanu's *The Street of Childhood* and *The Medeleni Trilogy*, Edmondo De Amicis's *Heart*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, and Hector Malot's *Nobody's Boy*, among others.

However, the domain of children's literature is not limited to prose; it also encompasses lyrical creations by authors such as Mihai Eminescu, Tudor Arghezi, Otilia Cazimir, Elena Farago, Adrian Păunescu, Constanța Buzea, Aristide Buhoiu, Ion Gheorghe, Gellu Naum, among others. *The language and style of any literary work—especially those that fall under the category of children's literature—must be characterized by correctness, precision, clarity, and conciseness. Naturalness, simplicity, harmony, expressiveness, and originality—distinct qualities of style—facilitate the understanding of the artistic message while also offering genuine aesthetic satisfaction.* (Casangiu, 2007: 50)

Structurally speaking, the concept of children's literature has two meanings:

A. As a field of academic study – it is present in the curricula of institutions that train primary school teachers, kindergarten educators, and literature teachers for lower secondary education, such as pedagogical high schools, university colleges for primary education, and faculties of philology.

B. Children's literature comprises the entirety of literary works, both national and international, either canonical or folkloric, that are used in the educational process during the preschool, primary, and lower secondary stages, with the aim of supporting all aspects of education (excluding physical education)." (Gherghina, Ghidirmic, Buzași et al., 2005: 156)

The literary texts studied in the field of children's literature must be selected with care, according to specific criteria, to ensure they are comprehensible and meaningful for young readers. The moral and behavioral development of children, modelled on the positive traits of literary heroes, must be approached with the utmost attention and responsibility. By highlighting human courage throughout time through imaginative artistic transformation, these works acknowledge that, first



and foremost, *A child is born curious about this world and eager to find their way in it; only literature that fulfills this innate desire will truly delight them. To be considered a work of art, literature for children and youth must also captivate and interest adults, for the true mark of great children's literature lies in the fact that one finishes reading it with renewed respect for humanity.* (1964: 276)

Starting from the aesthetic-educational relationship and moving from theory to practice, we may observe that one of the direct benefits of literature—particularly in early childhood—is its capacity to facilitate understanding. This is achieved through the exploration of the human condition, the revelation of human nature, and the depiction of complex situations within the human experience. For instance, the magical world of childhood is delicately captured in Otilia Cazimir's prose written for and about children, a prose of recollection, warm and evocative, devoid of later life's worries and struggles. It is a realm of the joy brought by a first doll, the early thrills of school life, days untouched by sorrow, of games and simple pleasures. Her short story collection *Luchi Has Died* portrays a world that astonishes with the seriousness, complexity, and tenderness with which seemingly "minor," yet very real, issues of childhood are addressed.

Among the particular features of texts belonging to children's literature, Eva Monica Szekely notes:

- *the presence of strong conflicts involving characters grouped as either positive or negative, originating from the world of fairy tales. These characters symbolize good and evil—even in short stories or sketches, where the universe of insects or larger creatures is anthropomorphized (especially in fables), thus facilitating a better understanding of human relationships and social norms;*

- *children's literature enables a valuable form of dual identification, whereby the young reader either sees themselves in another character or refuses to identify with a negative model. Before truly understanding their own self, the child encounters other selves, discovering a multiplied alter ego in every character with whom they sympathize or, conversely, feel aversion;*

- *therefore, it is essential to explore the full potential of the text by harnessing not only its cognitive and aesthetic merits but, above all, its moral values—whether through a dense narrative, suspenseful conflict, or simple poems...* (Szekely, 2006: 12–13)

Children's texts often describe how a particular problem has been resolved or offer alternative solutions. By analogy, young readers may discover ways to address real-life challenges they face in their everyday lives.



Through its characters and events, literature provides behavioural role models, thus becoming an educational tool that helps children shape their identity in a world where values are increasingly unstable. The literary text thus becomes an inexhaustible source of examples and counterexamples that can be harnessed for the purpose of moral education, complementing the formal educational efforts in this domain.

Children's books keep alive both the national spirit of a people and a broader sense of humanity. Each story lovingly portrays a familiar, native setting, while also venturing into unfamiliar territories inhabited by others much like ourselves. In doing so, these works contribute to a deeper understanding of one's cultural identity, while acting as ambassadors that travel beyond borders to the farthest corners of the world in search of new friends. As such, literary creations become a boundless source for exploring various situations and experiences—whether direct or indirect—that help children relate to diverse perspectives and differences in attitudes, values, and interests. Literature fosters the development of interpersonal connections by encouraging children to become more attuned to the feelings and needs of others.

In conclusion, children's literature can be seen as a projection of the adult world's need to frame within a value system those artistic creations that, at their core, celebrate childhood and the child. It evokes, unconditionally, joy, emotion, vivid imagery, and profound experiences. More importantly, it has the power to shape a child's cultural development and thinking, to the extent that this dimension is cultivated and appreciated.

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