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## Philosophical Cracks in the Prose of the First-level Student – an Overview of the Categorization of Texts

### KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

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In the face of a brutal war in Europe, there is an even more urgent human need to take fundamental questions seriously, to find points of reference, to search for the essence and meaning of existence. This applies not only to mature people, but also to non-adult society, including younger students. At the same time, there is a need for a re-definition of pedagogy which should emphasize the need to view education and upbringing from the point of view of the philosophical triad: axiology, ontology and epistemology. Such opportunity is offered by a modified first literary communication that highlights texts that do not give up their literary uniqueness and are characterized by a latent philosophical code. This especially includes prose which contains works the structure of which is reinforced in the literary tradition. Moreover, such works belong to the category of audiovisual literature or common literature. The main focus of interest in such texts is the philosophical thought that leads to the necessary reflection of the recipient and to the metaphorical reading of the world, i. e. to a non-obvious grasp of the key questions.

The subject of the article is the attempt to categorize philosophical literature for children the arrangement of which was suggested in a way analogous to the study of musicality and audiovisuality in literature.

The text highlights a group of works in which philosophical questions appear as contexts, and for which the didactic model is based on a conversation in the sense described by Zofia Agnieszka Kłakówna (Kłakówna: 2016).

## Introduction

The crisis of values caused by hedonistic visual culture has recently been amplified and intensified by the brutal war in Ukraine. In such a situation, considering fundamental questions, searching for the meaning of existence or finding the truth, become unquestionably urgent activities also when working with a younger school child. And although appeals and directions for this type of action have been attempted by researchers before, today, more than ever, the need for a redefinition of pedagogy is highlighted. Such pedagogy should pay special attention to the requirement of education and upbringing from the point of view of the philosophical triad: axiology, ontology and epistemology.

It is, therefore, once again worth emphasizing the scholarly analysis of Maria Szczepska-Pustkowska whose questions concerning, for example, the content, quantity and quality of the existence of a socio-political world in children's experiences, are inevitably currently gaining momentum (Szczepska-Pustkowska 2011: p. 9). Still applicable are also the theoretical and practical guidelines that Hans-Ludwig Freese discussed in his book: "Children are Philosophers. How to Talk to Children about Serious Matters" (Freese 2008). At the same time, it is worth recalling the works of Łukasz Krzywoń (Krzywoń 2019), Helena Diduszko (Diduszko, Piłat 2004) or Anna Buła (Buła 2010), to whom we are indebted for the methodical framework for school philosophical investigations.

Meanwhile, children whose development is connected with natural curiosity, exploration of the world and asking questions, are able to ponder on various puzzles of this world, addressing issues that prominent thinkers have been considering (Freese 2008). Such issues are sometimes addressed by physics, psychology, theology, philosophy and, as Zofia Agnieszka Kłakówna writes, "obviously, literature, which endlessly uses imagination to shape time travel, expeditions to the origins of time, or ideas of building a utopia" (Kłakówna 2016: 268). In school reading encounters, this means a method that is primarily based on the careful selection of a specific literary text that provides opportunities to reflect on fundamental issues while respecting reading with literature rights (Kłakówna 2016). Influenced by literary education organised in this way, the child assumes the role of a representative of *homo philosophus*, i. e. a reflective, rational human being analysing fundamental questions concerning the essence of being, time, death, or other questions that have been asked by humankind since the dawn of time (Leszczyński 2006, Ungeheuer-Gołąb 2011).

Therefore, what is meant here is prose written primarily with students in mind and, it seems, simultaneously with a mature recipient who accompanies the child as a mediator of reading. Their task is to help the non-adult reader to become increasingly involved in decoding the ambivalence of the terminology found in the text, but

also to support them in unravelling the meanders of life issues in relation to the truth. “A young person”, said John Paul II, “is sensitive to truth, justice, beauty and other spiritual values, seeks true values and appreciates those who teach them and live by them” (Adamek 2016: 180).

By reading the texts that are the subject of this article, it is evident that they are created with the hope of a particular way of reading which brings generations together and provides the opportunity to speculate, reason, and analyse based on a child’s naivety and an adult’s experience, while, at the same time, allowing for reflection, imagination and the creation of further issues.

I suggest that we categorise and assign such literature to two areas which could take a numerical designation: philosophicalness I and philosophicalness II. The systematisation is related to the methodology of the research I have undertaken, which was based on a research procedure derived from the course of analysing musicality in a literary work and proposed by Andrzej Hejmej (Hejmej 2012), and on the consideration of audiovisuality in literature, introduced into scientific reflection by Adam Regiewicz.

## Categories of philosophicalness in children's literature

Thus, philosophicalness I will include the books in which the reference to philosophy is explicit and direct. Such books usually consist of short stories which, taking on a literary form, explain trendy or important theories, make readers familiar with the theses of prominent thinkers, and decipher fundamental concepts. They are created in order to draw a young reader’s attention to philosophy as a science, and their authors are often representatives of the field. The type of philosophical literature thus identified is commonly well-known. This is, in fact, the case of texts that have become firmly established in literature, culture and education, such as Leszek Kołakowski’s *13 Fairy Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia for the Big and the Little Ones and Other Fairy Tales* (Kołakowski 2015), Michael Piquemal’s series of *Philosophical Fairy Tales* (Piquemal 2011), Sophie Boizard’s collection: *Philosophers for Children* (Boizard 2011), or even Eliza Kačka’s *Elysias* (Kačka 2017), published in 2017. These are works that have their supporters and have quite an extensive catalogue of literature discussing them.

It seems, therefore, that for the purposes of further argument, the scientific spotlight should be directed towards a category characterised by non-obvious philosophical threads. Its texts have not yet been described in terms of philosophical possibilities in an organised initial literary education.

Philosophicalness II will thus include works whose structure qualifies them as variants of children’s prose that are well-established in the literary tradition. They may belong to the categories of audiovisual literature and common literature, as discussed

in detail by me in the monograph *Raising for Reading 2.0* (Warzocha 2019). However, their focus of interest is the literary philosophical thought and the non-obvious grasp of philosophical issues which lead to the necessary reflection of the recipient. The writer weaves fundamental, ontological questions into the plot in a latent or verbalised form, eliciting speculation from the reading audience.

It is filled with works which, if we were to accept Krystyna Zabawa's findings on the nature of currently produced books for children and young people, fall into the range of fantasy and fairy-tale, as well as realistic prose (Zabawa 2016: 204), but also belong to literature that combines literary and media narrative (Warzocha 2019).

However, an essential, constitutive feature of this type of texts is the presence of philosophical cracks that give rise to a reflective analysis of key questions in relation to theories of cognition, values, aesthetics, language, etc. I am thinking, therefore, of literary texts that, like Jolanta Brach-Czaina's "cracks of existence" (Brach-Czaina 1999), contain fundamental thought written in words, but also between the lines, in an over-structured content, an illustration, an analogue or digital character, in an attached app or a hyperlink.

In such literature, the philosophical voice, like the existential instance by Brach-Czaina, is not so obvious; it is obscure and unforced, but also unselfconscious and as if waiting to be discovered incidentally. Hence, if there is mobilisation of the recipients' attention: the child's and the reading mediator's towards him or her, which "will result in comprehension and communication, and if they can, at least partially, hear the answers to the question of who we are, and if they achieve this in such a non-egocentric way as turning towards what is near us, then the effort should not be lost" (Brach-Czaina 1999: 21).

It is, therefore, about literary imponderabilia, the symptomatic clearances that Marek Bieńczyk has recently written about: "As for the books, however, it would be about the gentle radiation coming out of the nooks and crannies hidden on one page or another. The accumulated bulk of words cannot be salvaged, I ultimately feel cretinous, but sometimes when I stare at the shelves, the light from the nooks and crannies reaches me. I can see a clearance: indefinite looming of a small detail, a word, a situation, a paragraph. That one sentence by Chandler, that one image in Frost's poem and the other one in Coetzee's novel. Through the clearance there comes a touch, a warmth that cannot be reduced to nothingness" (Bieńczyk 2021: 87).

At the same time, these are the kind of works that are characterised by a specific code leading to a constantly renewed dialogue during the reading, by means of which there is the possibility of deciphering and finding yourself and your place in the world. They are multi-layered texts which provide the child with the opportunity to comment, give opinions, prioritise meanings, organise thoughts, but also ask further questions.

Finally, this is a category of books whose content is distinguished by its focus on a specific problem with a mission apparently assumed by the author. It therefore constitutes exceptional literary storytelling that includes “mini lectures on maxi issues” in the plot, just to use the title of one of Leszek Kołakowski’s books (Kołakowski 2009).

Leszek Kołakowski himself, in a philosophical short story: *Who of You Would Like to Cheer Up an Unlucky Rhinoceros* (Kołakowski 2005), written in 1966 for his six-year-old daughter, explores serious questions of identity, of discovering the essence of human relationships. He approaches the topic of independent thinking, the courage to maintain individuality, even when the price is temporary failure, dissatisfaction and not being understood by yourself and others. “As Ilona Lasota notices, the text is constructed in such a way that the little reader has the opportunity to question, doubt, disagree, and discuss. An adult discussant is designed in the story as he/she is clearly present in the work. This is reflected in the specific layout of the paragraphs assuming “stops” while reading: a time for discussion and reflection. The narrator reproduces the main character’s reasoning, but the phrases are provocative: the readers are expected to wonder or to object, and this is where participation of an adult seems necessary while reading. Not in order to instruct (the story does not have such intentions at all), but in order to develop a philosophical attitude by, for example, reading aloud and using the particular rhetoric of the text in order to become a partner for children’s explorations in this area” (Lasota 2006: 5).

It is worth noting that the issue of identity is one of the most common topics in recent literary texts for children. Such a situation may be related to the ambiguity of the concept, to its constant evocation and consideration by the people of science for whom humanism is an “ideological attitude” (Suchodolski, Wojnar 1988: 12), and for whom the essential reference is the values established and derived from the best cultural heritage as well as philosophical and religious reflections (Suchodolski, Wojnar 1988: 11-19). It can also be assumed that today’s literary analysis of the vision of the self is a reflection of the most frequently and, for a long time, repeated claim about modernity which emphasizes the crisis or even loss of human identity. Such a condition touches upon the nature of postmodern times of global audiovisual culture (Hopfinger 2003; Burszta 2015) and is the result of the unstoppable digital development and appropriation of the new media (Hopfinger 2010; Bodzioch-Bryła, Pietruszewska-Kobiela, Regiewicz 2015; Kasprzak, Kłakówna, Kołodziej, Regiewicz, Wałigóra 2016; Warzocha 2019;), but also of social activity in the current secular age (Bielak, Tischner 2020).

Meanwhile, in the introduction to the book: *Philosophy, the Most Beautiful History*, its authors Luc Ferry and Claude Capelier conclude in the course of their dialogue that “in the crisis-stricken world, which, with the logic of total competition inherent in globalisation, seems to be rushing blindly in such a way that no one, neither the heads

of the great powers nor the CEOs of multinationals, is able to grasp its course, philosophy certainly arouses increasing interest and perhaps also gives us hope for finding some points of reference and meaning of our existence” (Ferry, Capelier 2017: 5).

Thus, in the defined second category of literary stories, the topics taken up by the authors may be a desire to find oneself in a situation characterised by a sense of disinheritance from destiny, in which the ideals or inspirational texts (spiritual, patriotic ones) that inspired the sublimation of our lives have lost their power of persuasion. At the same time, they ask existential questions, raise issues related to the human condition and differences in worldviews, often creating a vision of the world or seeking a better version of it.

The model for philosophicalness II of contemporary children’s literature understood in this way is *Pelican. A Tale of the City* (Krohn 2016), a work that captivates the readers with its content, composition, multi-layered structure and metaphoricity, and triggers their need to philosophize individually or in a dialogue. Its author, a Finnish writer Leena Krohn, has developed a literary world in which she has created a space for the search of wisdom, truth and beauty. Taking on a fantastic and adventurous nature, the text is about a human being and the world in which he lives. The background for the considerations is the plot in which two main characters appear. The first one is a boy who is going through and, at the same time, is trying to understand, the break-up of his family. The other one is an adult bird that, being fascinated with a human, is trying to become one at all costs. The reader witnesses the child’s struggles to deal with life and emotional difficulties, but also learns about his sensitivity, kindness and willingness to help others in a selfless way. At the same time, in describing the stages of humanizing the pelican, the author sets up a literary spotlight and illuminates social activities, but also human imperfections.

“Would you care to inform me [...] how you managed to find out about my (here the pelican hesitated for a moment) origins?”

‘What do you mean?’, the boy was surprised. ‘After all, there is nothing to find out here. It is visible’.

‘People can’t see’, the bird said. ‘People have such strange eyes that they can only seem to see with them. But you may not be human at all’” (Krohn 2014:24).

The story of Emil and pelican’s friendship is a moving parable about loneliness and acceptance, freedom and the lack of it, anchored in culture and civilisation. The writer notices the child’s wisdom, describes a person’s relationship with themselves and others, analyses the accepted norms, notices social habits, draws our attention to existential needs, deliberates on the complexity of human concerns, and even gives short lectures on important, fundamental topics known in the philosophical tradition. The author devotes separate chapters to them, marking their specific features with titles such as: *A few words about dreams*, *Conversations about time and angels*, or *The sad man*.

“Emil drew the curtains and switched on the light.

When he was young, he used to avoid dreams and be afraid of the dark. But he doesn't any more. You can't run away from it for long anyway; eventually it always got him, just like everyone else. Fish also slept at night, even the swift high in the sky, ants, and hedgehogs all through the winter. What is called reality and alertness could not be endured without a break, even for one day. Sleep, so real and hard, took everything away from a human, absolutely everything, but it was a great reliever.

Gone were the lights, colours and sounds, gone was the house there, far away, which Emil would carry about with him, gone were the fields around the house and the dark forest behind it. There was no mum and dad anymore, no books or stuff [...].

And then came the dreams. Everything was coming back, but in a slightly different form. He didn't need eyes, he didn't need light, and yet he could see.

Quite well” (Krohn 2016: 18-20).

Such parts of a text take on a function of initiation for a philosophical discussion on topics that are relevant, interesting and those that children and adults, regardless of their age, ask about. In this case it is about sleep, a mysterious phenomenon that occupied Plato or Descartes (Freese 2008: 121), but that has also been interesting to ordinary people. People often wonder about the meaning of dreams, often enjoying or fearing their imaginary explanations. The above passage makes the recipients think, motivates them to an internal dialogue, but also to a community conversation, which, leading the interlocutors along the path of philosophical investigations, results in an attempt to explain a particular concept in relation to scientific findings. It is therefore possible to juxtapose this literary text with a scientific one to point out the results of research, such as the one that describes sleep as “a form of imagining something or even thinking while sleeping” (Windt 2016). In the case of children, whose reflection on dreams can blur the boundary between the unreal and the reality, such a juxtaposition takes on the function of an illustration that helps to clarify the problem for those who consider it.

The chapter *Conversations about time and angels*, on the other hand, brings to mind countless considerations that have accompanied great philosophers over the years. The philosophical understanding of the problem of human identity is the question of its duration in time, which is connected with the question of how a human being remains himself/herself even though there are so many changes going on around him/her and within themselves. The question of time, as we know it, is directly linked to subsequent issues concerning death, history, culture, etc. Ultimately, it is a cause for asking one of the most essential questions, that is, the question of who a human being is.

In one of his most important works, *A Little Book about Man*, Roman Ingarden writes:

“There is, however, another way of experiencing time in which time seems to be something radically different than what it was before. It leads to a completely different view of myself. And this experience is gained in two ways: 1. by becoming aware of the destructive role of time for my existence; 2. by becoming convinced that I, as a person, am only just establishing myself in various experiential time perspectives” (Ingarden 2003: 49).

In *Pelican* the author seems to be following this pattern of considerations, ensuring that the reader defines his or her notion of a human being through an aesthetic, literary experience, in line with the beliefs that are well-established in science. Such an assumption can lead a developing student to a reflective search for the truth while maintaining objectivity. This is a form of learning to read contextually, which leads to deciphering metaphorical communication in the world. It often requires a foundation in the form of a child-adult conversation to explore the reading and to give deeper meanings to the reading (Kłakówna 2016: 283).

“When I was a bird’, he said, ‘I never thought about time. I knew, of course, that when the sun goes down, the stars and the moon light up, and when they go out and the moon goes away, the sun comes back. But I had never counted time using celestial bodies, I had never said ‘tomorrow’ or ‘last night’ or ‘next week’. When my chicks were born, I looked for food for them and fed them because it was the right thing to do. But I didn’t think about how food would one day make them big and strong. And once they grew up, I didn’t remember that they used to be as small as my webs... I didn’t know there was a History. I didn’t have a perspective, that’s the thing. Perspective is an important thing and now I have it’.

‘What is perspective?’, Emil asked. [...]

‘It means looking a little further ahead. And more from above. When you are too far away, everything looks as if it was on the same level and meant as much or nothing. You have to look from close up first and then from a distance. Or the other way round. First, look at the thing, and then beside it. First, at what is now, and then at what was yesterday, and what might be tomorrow. That’s how you gain perspective” (Krohn 2016: 158-159).

The understanding of time is conceived in the text as establishing oneself in the perspective of experiences, feelings, events, joys and worries, which can be directly associated with evoking the concept of identity. L. Khron talks about time perspective, the relationship between a human and time. Such Ingarden’s definition of time allows for considerations that present a human being in relation to history, his/her relationship with others, with the natural world and with things. At the same time, reading the referenced passage can become a trigger for further teacher’s actions that do not allow him or her to “treat children’s knowledge of measuring time as an indicator of



their understanding of fundamental aspects of the concept of time or of their metaphysical sensitivity to the phenomenon of time” (Freese 2008: 129).

*Pelican. A Tale of the City* is a text that contains many other important and undeniable points of reference. One of them, for example, is the issue of death which post-modern, spectacular times of glitz culture have tried to invalidate. Meanwhile, as Chantal Delsol wrote in her book: *Hatred of the World. Totalitarianisms and Post-modernity*, the condition for the establishment of one’s identity is rootedness for which an understanding of finiteness and mortality is a fundamental issue (Delsol 2017: 174-175).

The response to this approach in the reading referred to is a consideration that defines death from the point of view of the essence of humanity, religion and hope.

“[...] Death itself, which was the word the man in black constantly repeated, was a concept I was not familiar with. Because, among us, death as he referred to does not actually exist. The man talked about it as an inevitable end to all earthly life. Obviously, we have also seen dead friends who were killed by a human or another animal, but it was a matter of randomness, not principle. I myself had never thought that I would die, but when it happened – as it came to mind for the first time now, in my human life – I don’t believe that I will still be able to soar on my own wings (Korhn 2016: 172)”.

The issue of death is present in the book most strongly in the chapter *The sad man*, when the writer chooses to speak about it directly to the reader, describing a funeral ceremony and, at the same time, leading the reader to certain generalisations. Here, death is an episode of human life, its principle, which is linked to human fragility and weakness. But, at the same time, as in Delsol’s book, death is connected with hope, which unites and builds social bonds, but also allows for choices and risks, and requires taking responsibility for the future. Such an understanding of hope is consequently connected with Tischner’s thought which leads us directly to a discussion on freedom (Tischner 2014).

Therefore, the quoted passage from the reading referred to is a treasury of philosophical topics. When juxtaposed with other cultural texts and, at the same time, framed by a thoughtful conversation, not only does it make the difficult subject of death more familiar to younger students, but it also helps them understand feelings and thoughts connected with the issues that are rarely discussed in the early school setting.

Either way, the Finnish work, for which the *leitmotif* is the question of who a human is, intrigues us with philosophical cracks, and makes us delighted with the way the argument is carried out, and with logic in addressing topics that create a direction for us to find the meaning of life and decode the essence of humanity. It allows for the development of an idea and vision of a better world, but also of one’s place in it.

It is a work that develops the competence to read the world in the sense specified by Umberto Eco.

The poetic, fairytale world captivates us with its literary specificity and, at the same time, maintains the aesthetic values ascribed to good literature. It mixes prose with poetry, giving the recipient the opportunity to feel a rhythm that organises and calms the emotions evoked by the reading. Organised in this way, the work makes the images it evokes remain in the reader's memory for a long time.

It is also worth noting that *Pelican* falls into the category of audiovisual literature, which makes use of a hybrid narrative, combines speech of traditional and technological origins, thus enabling an audiovisual child to benefit from its cultural experience. Thus, it facilitates the act of reading itself.

## Illustrating practical solutions for philosophical literary texts

“Any in-depth reading of a text [...] constitutes a multiple act of interpretation”, writes George Sterner (Sterner 2000: 490), which is why, in the case of the texts referred to, it is worth paying attention to reading aloud, which allows the teacher to directly monitor students' reactions, which are the reason for organising breaks while reading. Pauses are needed to ask questions and seek answers, to doubt and convince, to clarify and loop the issue. Such an assumed methodology and the opportunity, inherent in the texts, to interrupt reading in order to exchange impressions about the issues dealt with in it, constitutes the individuality, the distinctiveness, but also the particular value of such a text and such a reading.

What is needed is a **conversation**, but one that does not involve interrogating or indoctrinating the pupils. It is about a dialogue that integrates literature into a broader, cultural context, thus allowing us to look for references in other works of culture. Hence, it is important how we explore the meaning of the literature we are reading. It involves, among other things, the careful selection of further literary works of art, but also analogous texts, paintings, audiovisuals, films. Such a juxtaposition requires the educator to have interdisciplinary knowledge and ease in navigating through cultural heritage. At the same time, as Zofia Agnieszka Kłakówna notes, “one has to be very careful in doing so, not to abuse one's position to instrumentally exploit literature, to obliterate its specific nature” (Kłakówna 2016: 283).

A work can be read in early childhood education as a whole, or it can be selected in parts, bearing in mind, however, that the direction of such reading and its quality depend on the teacher's awareness and knowledge of literary theory and poetics. An indisputable issue is to recognise the students' reception level, and their ability to understand symbolism.

The adult mediator of reading, i. e. the teacher plays the role of an active recipient who, by participating in the reading community, is genuinely involved in it, derives genuine enjoyment from it and co-experiences it. The search for wisdom takes place without his or her pedagogical dominance. The teacher's action becomes a subtle moderating activity, adding experience, knowledge and distance. In a literary and philosophical communication organised in this way, the student is the provider of creative naivety, authenticity, undiminished imagination, and tenderness. In the dialogue referred to, he or she should be a fully-fledged partner, not condemned, in advance, to accept arbitrary solutions, as it is sometimes the case in structured education.

## Summary

Contemporary children's literature is an art that increasingly more often abandons pedagogizing in favour of a reflective analysis of the reality. By taking on a fantasy and fairytale form, it enables a young person to encounter serious philosophy and confront fundamental questions. It prompts reflection on what would perhaps be too difficult to understand without a literary context. An in-depth interpretation of an artistic work results, as Steiner said, in an "original transformation" and autonomous emergence of awareness (Steiner 2000: 59). Hence, among other things, there arises the need for frequent encounters between the student and the aesthetics of philosophical literature, especially if we adopt the thesis that "our children are philosophers" (Freese 2008).

It seems that the organization of literary communication referred to should take the form of a method that is often chosen by teachers of early school-age children. It is because this method includes integrative action which supports the holistic development of the student who grows up in hedonistic and, more recently, war times that invalidate authority and learning.

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