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Creations of Characters in Educational Comics for Children Versus Identification and Transmission of Knowledge

Kreacje bohaterów w komiksie edukacyjnym dla dzieci a identyfikacja i przekaz wiedzy

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

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The educational comic book is a popular artistic genre in children's culture: its power of communication and impact lies in the correlation of the verbal and visual layers (iconotextuality). However, not only images and text have a fundamental impact on the reception of the medium: the key element for each comic book is the hero (see Toeplitz, 1985), who, combined with its cartoony character, makes identification easier for young readers. The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between the character of the hero and the transfer of knowledge and identification with the protagonists. The adopted classification is to distinguish four types of heroes present in comic books for young audiences: child, adult, animal and fantastic creature. The analysis showed that the protagonists are constructed in such a way as to reduce the distance between the reader and the book, and this makes it easier for the young readers to identify with the characters. The creations of the characters significantly influence the reader's way of reading and emotions, therefore providing an opportunity to address a variety of topics and convey complex content.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

bohater, komiks,
literatura dziecięca,
edukacja,
identyfikacja,
cartoon

Komiks edukacyjny jest popularnym gatunkiem artystycznym w kulturze dziecięcej, jego siłą przekazu i oddziaływania tkwi w korelacji między warstwą werbalną i wizualną (ikonotekstowość). Jednakże nie tylko obraz i tekst mają decydujący wpływ na odbiór wspomnianego medium. Elementem kluczowym dla każdego komiksu jest bowiem postać bohatera (zob. Toeplitz, 1985), która w połączeniu z cartoonowością wpływa na ułatwienie identyfikacji młodym czytelnikom. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie relacji pomiędzy postacią bohatera a przekazem wiedzy i utożsamieniem się z protagonistami. Klasyfikacja, która została przyjęta w rozważaniach, polega na wyróżnieniu czterech typów bohaterów obecnych w komiksach edukacyjnych dla młodych odbiorców: dziecięcego, dorosłego, zwierzęcego i fantastycznego. Analiza wykazała, że protagoniści są konstruowani w taki sposób, aby zmniejszyć dystans pomiędzy czytelnikiem a książką, a tym samym ułatwić młodemu odbiorcy identyfikowanie się z bohaterami. Kreacje postaci w znaczący sposób wpływają na proces lektury i emocje czytelnika, a tym samym dają możliwość poruszania różnych tematów i przekazywania skomplikowanych treści.

Introduction

A comic book is a pictorial narrative story that presents a story by means of a sequence of images, usually placed within frames, i. e. smaller visually separated units. In a comic book narrative, the verbal layer, which is secondary to the image, usually consists of a commentary by the narrator, statements by the characters (often placed in speech bubbles), and onomatopoeia (Szyłak, 2013, pp. 147–148). Just like picture books, comic books are iconotextual in nature, i. e. they are a message, consisting of both a verbal and a visual layer, that is read in the act of reading (Hallberg, 2017, p. 52). One can also encounter textless comics (Szyłak, 2013, p. 148).

The study of comic books in Poland is becoming increasingly popular (see, inter alia, Szyłak, 2000, 2013; Birek, 2014; Toeplitz, 1985), but the researchers have not been really interested in children's comics (Birek, 2014, p. 149; Tałuć, 2017, pp. 255–257). Works for the youngest readers, apart from their ludic value, often focus on educating young audiences (see, among others, Samojlik, 2017, 2019; Flood, 2019).

The aim of this article is to analyse comic books and the literature on the subject, pointing to the formation of relationships between the comic book character and the transmission of knowledge, as well as children's identification with the protagonists. For my considerations, it is crucial to distinguish four types of protagonists appearing in educational comics for children, which I will characterise and interpret in the light

of the fulfilment of the educational goal of the books I discuss. Educational intentions play an important role both in psychological terms, influencing emotions, and in educational terms, shaping attitudes.

A Character in a Comic Book

As Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz writes, “an indispensable condition for its [A. S. the comic book’s] existence is the permanent figure of the hero” (1985, p. 54). This remark is important, as the author points out that the figure of the protagonist significantly influences the nature of the comic book and its structure.

The creation of a protagonist also leads to such significant effects as capturing the reader’s interest, arousing his or her sympathy or antipathy for the main character and (which seems crucial), enabling identification with the protagonist (McCloud, 2015, p. 42). This tendency does not change in the case of a comic book aimed at a young reader, and, in my opinion, it is even more important because children’s reading perception is largely based on emotions and identification with the protagonists (Michułka & Gregorowicz, 2018, pp. 46–47, 52). The phenomenon of identification may be particularly relevant in the case of literature the assumption of which is education, as learning is largely based on imitation.

In comic books, characters are created in two ways: through the verbal layer and the visual layer, which, importantly, are in constant relationship. This is a different way of creating the protagonist than in traditional literature where the reader “meets” him or her through the text itself, as such publications are usually devoid of illustrations.

The perception of a character largely depends on the visual representation and style in which it is drawn. Referring to the basic division, characters can be portrayed in a more or less realistic way, but usually, in the case of the comic, a simplification of the image is common. Scott McCloud refers to such a drawing style as cartooning and sees it as one of the qualities that positively influence the readers’ engagement (2015, pp. 21, 35–37). In characterising the nature of comic images, he emphasizes the simplified representation of the character. The protagonist, who will not have special features that significantly distinguish him from the rest, does not merely represent himself/herself, but becomes an icon. This, in turn, makes it easier for the reader to identify with the character: the more simplified the appearance of the character, the more “transparent” he/she becomes (McCloud, 2015, pp. 30–31).

The second element that influences the perception of the presented character is his/her shaping by the verbal layer: narrative verbal commentary, dialogues and (less important from this point of view) onomatopoeias.

Any narrative commentary distances the reader from the comic book as the narrator makes a certain interpretation of the world depicted in the work. Jerzy Szyłak (2000, p. 92), using Boris Uspienski's terminology, perceives a narrative commentary as an external point of view. The narrator's utterance may seem modelled, as it is not a vivid dialogue, but a description of an event or character. The reader's feelings (his or her sympathies and antipathies) are therefore largely constructed by the narrator's utterance. First-person narration in comic books can be based only on the monologues or dialogues of the protagonist: then it is closer to the internal point of view; the protagonist-narrator imposes in it his/her opinion on the events in which he/she takes part. Presenting the character in this way encourages people to adopt his or her point of view and makes it easier for them to identify with him/her. Third-person narration, which allows for a descriptive presentation of information about the protagonist and the world depicted, works differently and proves valuable especially in conveying educational content. The verbal commentary, in this case, seeks to objectify the content and is a manifestation of the informative function of language. Such a use of the narrator's statements can be encountered in the comics of the "Naukomiks" ["Scientomics"] series, e. g. Joe Flood's *Sharks*: "Oxygen-rich water flows through the gills and oxygen is absorbed into the shark's bloodstream" (2019, p. 23).

Unlike verbal commentary, dialogues in comics contain the characters' thoughts communicated directly. The reader is then able to form his or her own opinion on the character: whether he or she is likeable, funny, good or bad. This is closely linked to drawing conclusions about the character on the basis of his or her statements and actions, and, consequently, facilitates identification with the protagonists.

Child Hero

Child protagonists often appear in books for young audiences, and it is usually the reader's peer who becomes the protagonist and tells his/her story as if he/she is addressing a friend, who is the virtual audience. Such a procedure is important because it reduces the distance between the reader and the book, making it easier to absorb the content.

As Zofia Zasacka (2015, pp. 38–39) pointed out, one of the factors influencing the evaluation of a book as boring is the reader's perception of it as something distant and incomprehensible. The reasons for this include, for example, the long lapse of time between publication and reading, and the associated accumulation of archaisms (2015, p. 38). It seems to me that a book can also be perceived as distant when a young reader is confronted with an uninteresting, unreliable protagonist creation that evokes neither sympathy nor empathy, but rather irritation. The protagonist,

as the key character in the comic book, significantly influences readers' engagement (or lack thereof). A publication that has educational value but does not present interesting characters may be rejected by young readers precisely because of the repulsive creation of the protagonist.

Bridging the gap between the reader and the book is made possible precisely by the presence of child protagonists. This is because such characters use colloquial language that is familiar to a young audience, as in the case of *Na ratunek Mateczce Ziemi* [*Saving Mother Earth*]: "After all, it's pointless to poison the planet we all live on" (Samojlik, 2019, p. 12). Often, simple language is also used by adult characters when they explain something to these children, as in the case of the comic book entitled *Róża, a co chcesz wiedzieć?* [*Rose, and What Do You Want to Know?*] e. g. "Computers connected to the Internet have to recognise each other. They do this by using special names, which are actually numbers. We call them IP numbers" (Kurasiński et al., 2019, p. 39). Such a procedure helps authors to make the message and scientific content more comprehensible, as academic jargon could be too complicated, and for child readers colloquial, understandable language is an advantage to better assimilate the content (Zasacka, 2015, pp. 38–39). This does not mean, however, that comics, as an educational medium, must strive to simplify and avoid specialised terms which are often explained in the glossary or footnotes included at the end of the publication (see, among others, Reed & Flood, 2018, pp. 122–123), and which sometimes also appear in the main text: "Metamorphic rocks are formed underground by the high temperature and pressure of other rocks" (Reed & Flood, 2018, p. 22).

An interesting child protagonist is the title character of the book *Róża, a co chcesz wiedzieć?* [*Rose, and What Do You Want to Know?*] (Kurasiński et al., 2019). This is because the comic presents information about programming and technology, which is stereotypically associated with a boy's or man's interest. The publication in question contradicts this point of view, as, for Róża, the virtual world and artificial intelligence are interesting topics. Such an approach may allow female readers, who face gender segregated interests in their environments, to increase their self-confidence and follow their dreams.

Children's comic characters help readers realize that children can be active rather than passive, and thus the protagonists encourage readers to behave in a similar way. Such an attitude can be encountered in Samojlik's comic book *Na ratunek Mateczce Ziemi* [*Help Mother Earth*], in which the author depicted mainly child characters caring for the planet and promoting an attitude to protect it (Samojlik, 2019).

As Katarzyna Tałuc (2017, pp. 265–267) notes, Samojlik's comics have a didactic and educational function, and the same is true of *Na ratunek Mateczce Ziemi* (Samojlik, 2019), as the author, by means of the children's characters, presents the readers with behaviours that can positively influence the condition of the planet. The aim of

such a creation is, therefore, to identify readers with the characters, so that children, having seen the attitudes of their peers portrayed in the comic, may fulfill them in their own lives. It is worth mentioning that the children's characters are full of energy and have many ideas, and are also willing to discuss with adults in order to make their own point. This sends a positive message to the readers as they observe actions that are worthy of imitation and encouraging them to take an active stance.

The visual creation of the characters in the comic book *Na ratunek Mateczce Ziemi* by Samojlik is simplified, with all the child characters resembling each other (2019). They have long and slim legs and round faces; the girls have large eyes, while the boys have dots in their place. The features that allow the characters to be distinguished from each other are the clothes and hairstyles, so this can be considered the cartoon style described by McCloud (2015, pp. 30–31). The characters are depicted in a simplified way, which allows the reader to identify with them more easily, as it leads to the idea that any child could be a cartoon character and all audiences can take the actions depicted in the cartoon narrative. Thus, an important characteristic element of the iconotextual form of the comic book becomes apparent: the synergy of the two layers (verbal and visual) allows for a complete reading of the content presented.

Children's characters provide many opportunities in transferring knowledge to young audiences, as they bridge the distance between the book and the reader. Importantly, child characters, like real children, ask many questions (Redyk, 2008, pp. 87–88), which can become a starting point for explaining a variety of issues.

Adult Hero

In educational comics, adults may be the only characters, if only when they become the protagonists of the story, as in the case of *Reformator [The Reformer]* (Rzecz-
nik & Nowacki, 2017) in which the title character and narrator is Martin Luther telling the story of his life. In turn, in publications in which children are the main characters, the adult is usually a parent, a guardian or a teacher, while less often he or she may be the antagonist presented in opposition to the children (see Kurasiński et al., 2019).

The figure of the adult is interesting from the point of view of communicating educational content through the comic book, as he or she can be considered an authority on the subject matter and accompany the children in acquiring new information, as well as encouraging them to be active.

The adult, as a mentor, introduces the child protagonists into life, and passes on his or her knowledge to them: this character construction can be encountered in the comic *Róża, a co chcesz wiedzieć?* (Kurasiński et al., 2019, pp. 65–66), in which the

main character is Róża, a girl gaining knowledge about technology and programming. In this case, it is the parents who are the important characters, as they impart new information to the girl about how social media works and how to use it responsibly.

It is also worth looking at a fragment of the comic plot that outlines the functions of the adult protagonist. Róża, through one of the social networks, made contact with a user called Klara99 and sent her funny videos. When the parents found out that their daughter was sending photos and videos to strangers, they became concerned and explained to the girl that there were many dangers on the Internet. In the words of Róża's dad: "sometimes, unfortunately, there are also those [A. S. people] who may have bad intentions. You don't know who this Klara99 really is. It could be an adult woman or even an adult man" (Kurasiński et al., 2019, p. 52).

In the comic book in question, adults are portrayed as figures who convey values and try to protect children from the dangers that can be encountered in real life. It should be mentioned that the skills acquired by the reader of this comic range from information about robots and artificial intelligence to advice on programming their own game. The presentation of this information is made easier by the characters: in this case, it is the adults who are shown as educators transferring various facts to the readers.

Such an idea of the comic is valuable in terms of raising awareness among young readers, as the book refers to real-life situations and the behaviour of Róża's parents can be considered exemplary. Interestingly, the comic touches on new technology that is important for children in the 21st century, as they are surrounded by it from an early age. The youngest children often have advanced technical skills, but this does not mean that they are aware of all the dangers they may encounter on the Internet. Informing them about such phenomena is important and, as *Rose* shows, comic books can also be used as a medium to convey this type of content.

Adult characters in comic books make it possible to convey a great deal of educational content to young readers, as, in real life, they are associated as authorities and role models, and this is also often the role they take on in the comics in which they become mentors. In addition, the adult characters often take on the role of parents or guardians, which makes it possible to arouse sympathy in young readers.

Animal Hero

Animal protagonists are worth noting because they often appear in comics that talk about nature, in which it is the animals that become the most important characters (see, among others, Samojlik, 2017; Flood, 2019). They may be the only protagonists or, sometimes, humans are also depicted in opposition to them. An important

phenomenon that can be observed in the creations of animal protagonists is their anthropomorphisation, as they adopt behaviours typical of humans. This is certainly intended to make it easier for the reader to identify with the animal protagonist, as well as to introduce the plot through the actions and dialogues of the characters who are characterised by will, intention, activity, and who communicate with one another. The artistic measure I want to focus on is the creation of animal characters as child characters, which further stimulates the reduction of the distance between the young viewer and the comic book.

Such an approach was used by Samojlik in the comic *Ryjówka przeznaczenia [Shrew of Destiny]* (2017). The animals are anthropomorphised and behave like children. One of the pages depicts shrews attending classes taught by Sork (2017, p. 19). The little animals say goodbye to their teacher who addresses them: “little ones”, and then greets the older shrews, calling them “oldies”. The main character, Dobrzyk, behaves similarly to a child, expressing his satisfaction by shouting “yippee” and “woow” (2017, p. 19). This presentation of the character allows the viewer to be interested in his story, as well as conveys educational content that is directly woven into the characters’ dialogues: “W-W-we, rhinoceros beetles, we eat dead wood” (2017, p. 48). Young readers, who develop a fondness for animals as children, will be more willing to follow the story, and they will also have the opportunity to notice the dangers awaiting for shrews (e. g. getting stuck in a plastic bottle) and learn how to minimise the harmful effects of humans on forests.

In one of the frames of the comic book *Rekiny [Sharks]* by Flood, a brown shark (fig. 1) was anthropomorphised in an interesting way (2019, p. 71). The shark is shown as a teenager listening to music (or perhaps playing a console?) in his room. The room can be described as stereotypical of a 15-year-old, although shark motifs are prevalent: there are movie posters on the walls (e. g. *Jaws*, *Deep Blue Sea*), the room is messy, and the “teenager” is eating oyster crisps. The shark’s parents are complaining, saying: “I don’t think we’ll ever get rid of him from the house...” (Flood, 2019, p. 71). The main informative aim of this frame was to depict the age at which brown sharks reach maturity: in order to introduce this to a young reader, the author chose to anthropomorphise them and compare them to a teenager who can annoy their parents with their behaviour.

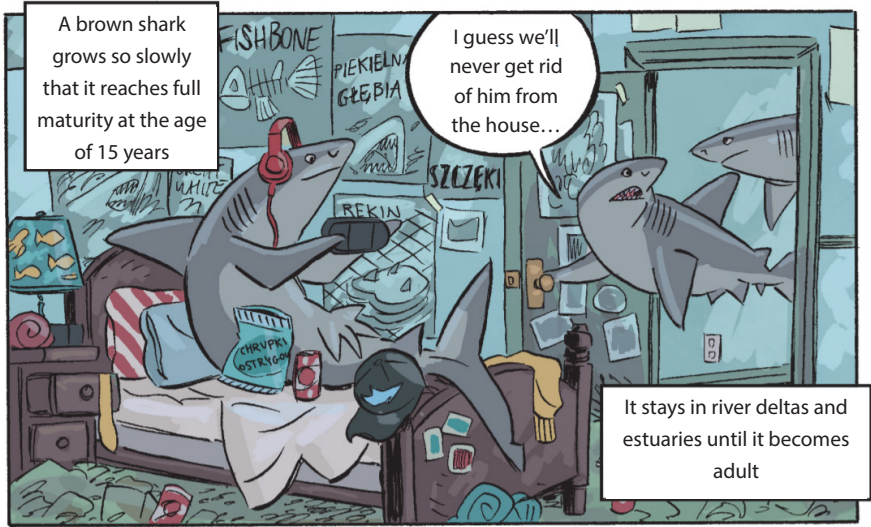


Figure 1. A Frame From the Comic Book *Rekiny* [Sharks] (Flood, 2019, p. 71)

This also serves another purpose, in line with the idea of the book: to change the reader's attitude to sharks and show them as animals whose main activity is not attacking humans. Indeed, within the pages of the comic book, it is possible to encounter notes that negative stereotypes about sharks may stem from films such as *Jaws*, or from exaggerated media reports portraying these animals as bloodthirsty and dangerous (Flood, 2019, pp. 9–10).

This is a different representation from that in *Ryjówka przeznaczenia*, as, in the case of Samojlik's comic book, the reader is introduced into the main characters at the beginning, whereas in *Rekiny* the narrator's extended verbal comments dominate, and the dialogues are limited, and there is no single main character or group of protagonists. The collective protagonist includes various species of sharks whose representatives are sometimes anthropomorphised (Flood, 2019, pp. 26, 32). The fact that not all animals have human characteristics is an interesting phenomenon, as one can usually find a common anthropomorphisation of all animal characters in comics. In *Rekiny*, when the verbal layer conveys facts about them, e. g. "The white shark can travel very long distances in open ocean waters" (Flood, 2019, pp. 9–10), the animals depicted in the drawings are not usually anthropomorphised. In my opinion, such a procedure helps to convey the content in a more objective way, as a shark can represent an entire species in this way.

Animal characters, who are very often presented as child characters in comic books, significantly reduce the distance between the book and the reader. Their presence, however, has the additional advantage of being able to convey content primarily related to nature and not only to culture (associated mainly with child or adult characters). The use of animals by comic book authors also allows the reader to become more familiar with a particular species and to develop respect or affection towards it, so that readers do not harm animals in real life.

Fantasy Hero

The last type I will highlight is the fantasy hero. Fantasy characters are subject to similar transformations as animal characters, and so are often presented as anthropomorphised protagonists as children. Such protagonists can be found in comics such as *Między dniem a snem w Wilanowie [Between a Day and a Dream in Wilanów]* (Karska & Kielbus, 2010).

The protagonist of the first part is the caretaker of the Wilanów Palace Museum, Genilisek, who arrives at the royal residence from the land of Zeen, home to the *genilis loci* (from the Latin *genius loci*, meaning the protective spirit of the place). The protagonist is portrayed as a child; he is inexperienced: “How can I take care of this residence effectively when I do not know how to behave in the simplest situations” (2010, p. 21). That Genilisek is a protagonist from the fantasy order is also confirmed by his supernatural powers, such as invisibility, the ability to fly and to assume the human form of a child.

The visual representation of Genilisek indicates that the protagonist is a fantasy figure. He has wings and floats in the air. He also has pointy ears, which is reminiscent of elves, and a headband on his forehead. These elements may seem like insignificant details, but they are as important an indicator of his fantastic identity as his wings, since all *genilis loci* from the land of Zeen possess such attributes (Karska & Kielbus, 2010, p. 26). What is also interesting about Genilisek is his name, which takes the form of a diminutive. Adults often address children in diminutive forms in order to reduce the distance and express their emotional attitude towards children (Gałczyńska, 2008), while in the comics this procedure emphasises the childlike identity of the fantastic hero.

Genilisek is not the only unusual character the young reader can encounter in the pages of the comic book; there are also animated putti, trees, or a sculpture of a boy with a swan. The entire world presented in the comic is filled with fantasy and so are the characters. The portrayal of the protagonist as a child makes it easier to identify with the character while reading. The reference to a fantasy adventure story scenario in

a comic book aimed at a non-adult audience is also important from the point of view of the reading interests of children and adolescents. Indeed, adventure fantasy is the genre most often chosen by young audiences (Zasacka, 2014, pp. 89–92).

The comic book *Between a Day and a Dream* has noteworthy educational values. The visual layer, which realistically presents the Wilanów Palace Museum, the gardens and the numerous sculptures that can be seen there, proves to be an important element. The flying figure of Genilisek, who, as a *genius loci*, takes care of the residence, allows the young viewer to be introduced to the richly decorated chambers, thus encouraging them to visit the former royal estate.

As I have already mentioned, fantasy characters, like animal ones, are often portrayed at a child's age, and therefore allow the distance between the book and the reader to be reduced. Thanks to such characters, the educational message can be more specialised, as they appear in unusual roles and have the opportunity to depict places that would be difficult to show with a realistic convention.

Summary

As the analysis shows, the creation of characters is important for the transmission of knowledge to young audiences. The protagonist is important for the comic book as an artistic genre (Toeplitz, 1985, p. 54), also in its versions aimed at young readers, as the credible creation of the character has a positive impact on the reading experience. The creation of the protagonist also becomes crucial in the perception of a comic book as an educational medium; usually it is one protagonist or a group of them that conveys information to the readers. The types of heroes that can be encountered in comics for young audiences are: the child hero, the adult hero, the animal hero, and the fantasy hero. Each of these characters influences the reading process and the perception of the content presented by the reader in a different way, but they share a similar structure, which is intended to facilitate the identification of the reader and the assimilation of the content presented in the comic book. The human characters are useful in shaping an attitude of dialogue between adults and children, and treating everyday topics. The animal protagonists are valuable for dealing with nature and fostering an attitude of respect for the environment. Fantasy characters, in turn, make it possible for themes to be addressed in a non-realistic convention which can influence the stimulation of imagination in young readers. In the visual layer, simplified drawing, referred to by McClouda as a cartoon, is important, as it serves to facilitate identification with the protagonist (2015, pp. 30–31), while the presentation of the story from the point of view of the main characters through verbal messages provides the opportunity to engage in the adventures experienced by the protagonists.

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