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# Cultural Representation of Paedocracy in the Pedagogical and Literary Discourse on *King Matt the First* by Janusz Korczak

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## Abstract

The text presents testimonies of the reception of Janusz Korczak's most popular novel, *King Matt the First* (1922), on the basis of which Iwona Chmielewska prepared an original artistic project in the form of a visual story (iconotext) entitled *How Hard It Is to Be a King* (2018). The content of scholarly discourse on the original work and its intersemiotic translation was analysed. Testimonies of the work's reception, recorded in publications published or produced by academics after 2000, i.e. in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were selected. Hitherto, these two cultural texts were considered from the paedocentric, philosophical, didactic, critical or literary perspective. In the first part, the main lines of the pedagogical-literary interpretation are recapitulated. Emblematic images and motifs from both works – the original novel and the picture book – are scrutinised in the article as examples of the cultural representation of the child and childhood and, more specifically, of the representation of paedocracy, which can be treated as the seed of a novel way of thinking about children's participation in the social world.

## Keywords

*King Matt the First*; Korczakian hero; paedocracy

## Introduction

Janusz Korczak's duology about King Matt, *King Matt the First* (1922) and *King Matt on the Desert Island* (1923), presents a story of the life and adventures of a ten-year-old king, who wanted to reform his state and make all the children living there happy. Generally, the central theme of the series is

the search for the best model to use when running a country. In addition, the book deals with the process of child's maturation, including the process of growing up to be able to act in a range of social roles. The subsequent events experienced by the central protagonist, including winning a war, mean he decides to introduce his own sort of parliamentary monarchy. In his nation, children and adults have their own parliaments. Once another war breaks out, King Mattie's nation loses and Mattie himself becomes a prisoner of the victorious enemy nations. One of the narrative threads in the book involves King Mattie's journey to Africa and his friendship with a local king. The book deals with the problems experienced by Poland as it was being reborn, mostly focused on governance and the responsibilities which come with that process, as well as the absence of children from civic and political lives.<sup>1</sup>

The two-part series is syncretic in form, combining elements of a parabolic fairy tale for children, philosophical tale, initiation novel, (anti-)utopia, political grotesque and fairy tale about political initiation. The dilemmas of power presented in the series pose a colossal challenge for the young protagonist, requiring him to reconcile his childish, naive and idealistic vision of the world with harsh realities. At the heart of the social cosmos, the author puts the child, which he treats as a quintessential human being in the prime of their creativeness and at the climax of their potentiality.<sup>2</sup> King Matt has been dubbed Korczak's Emil, as the narrator follows the boy's moral evolution from an innocent and trusting orphan, who is illiterate, to an idealistic young reformer, who needs to realise the discrepancy between dreams and reality before he is able to control his nation or himself. The book is thus, in essence, a philosophical treatise on the spiritual and temporal power, or a human comedy played with humour, warmth and compassion for the human condition. It is a story of "the eternal tragedy of every noble reformer."<sup>3</sup> Korczak's educational concept of empowering children was perfectly embodied here.

Owing to the declared idea of paedocentrism, the book is also attractive for adult readers. By reversing traditional social roles, Korczak unveils deeper regulatory mechanisms of human communities, exposes the pragmatic rules functioning in politics and business, and portrays Polish national vices as if in a distorting mirror.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The first printed edition available on the National Library's website: *Król Maciuś pierwszy: powieść* <https://polona.pl/preview/4f952622-efd3-41bf-b6db-362686e97e8d> [accessed: 18.01.2025] and Korczak Digital Repository: <https://korczak.ckc.uw.edu.pl/items/show/133#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-613%2C-192%2C3861%2C3826> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>2</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Kulturowy obraz dziecka i dzieciństwa w literaturze drugiej połowy XIX i w XX w. Wybrane problemy*, Warsaw 2006.

<sup>3</sup> B.J. Lifton, *The Spirit of King Matt*, [in:] B.J. Lifton, *The King of Children: The Life and Death of Janusz Korczak*, New York 1997, pp. 106–112.

<sup>4</sup> M. Rogoż, *Polskie edycje dylogii o królu Maciusiu Janusza Korczaka*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz*, Warsaw 2013, p. 11.

The theme of the novel is universal, as it ponders issues as important one hundred years ago as they are today, namely: “the responsibilities entailed by freedom, the trials and tribulations of building the state and creating a righteous community and society, ... mechanisms of power, and the hardships and burdens experienced by those in a position to govern and make decisions.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems no exaggeration to state that the novel’s global recognisability stems not only from an international acclaim for its author but also its timeless appeal and numerous translations, chiefly to English (which are not without their own controversies).<sup>6</sup>

Since its inception, Janusz Korczak’s original work has been subject to numerous artistic transformations,<sup>7</sup> theatrical adaptations and multilayered professional interpretations, treating the literary text as the intersection of various discourses. Interpretations have mounted over the years; it will suffice to mention those published after 2000 by both educators<sup>8</sup> and, much more extensively, literary scholars<sup>9</sup> and critics, columnists<sup>10</sup> or linguistic experts.<sup>11</sup> Equally frequently, the series

<sup>5</sup> M. Miszewska (dir.), Interview *W Polsce króla Maciusia*. Radio program: *Audycje Kulturalne*, 2018. <https://audycjekulturalne.pl/król-macius-polin/> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Borodo, Borodo M., *English Translations of Korczak’s Children’s Fiction: A Linguistic Perspective*, Cham 2020; *idem*, “*Król Maciuś Pierwszy*”, czyli polska powieść dla dzieci najczęściej tłumaczona na język angielski [Król Maciuś Pierwszy, the Polish Novel for Children Most Often Translated into English], “*Porównania*” 2021, 28(1), pp. 443–462; J. Dybiec-Gajer, *Boys’ Friendship or Something More? Re-Examining Janusz Korczak’s King Matt the First and Its English Translations*, [in:] E. Jamróz-Stolarska, M. Świetlicki, A. Zarzycka (eds.), *Navigating Children’s Literature through Controversy Global and Transnational Perspectives*, Leiden–Boston 2023. The novel was first translated as *Matthew the Young King* in 1945 by Edith and Sidney Sulkin, emigrants from Eastern Europe, and published in New York by Roy Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> The best known edition: J. Korczak, *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* [Preface by Igor Newerly; illustrated by Jerzy Srokowski], 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Nasza Księgarnia, Warsaw 1958; Film adaptations (e.g. directed by Wanda Jakubowska, 1958) and theatrical adaptations: cf. A. Uljasz, *Inscenizacje oraz adaptacje twórczości Janusza Korczaka w polskim teatrze w latach 1931–2021*, “*UR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*” 2022, 22(1), pp. 153–167.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Korczakowskie inspiracje*, “*Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji*” 2019, special issue, 46(3).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H. Kirchner (ed.), *Janusz Korczak. Pisarz – wychowawca – myśliciel: studia*, Warsaw 1997; G. Leszczyński, *Kulturowy obraz dziecka i dzieciństwa w literaturze drugiej połowy XIX i w XX w. Wybrane problemy*, Warsaw 2006; A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz*, Warsaw 2013; B. Kurządkowska, *O aktualności utworów literackich Janusza Korczaka* [The topicality of Janusz Korczak’s literature], “*Prace Literaturoznawcze*” 2014, (2), pp. 89–100; K. Tałuż (ed.), *Czytanie Korczaka. Książki, bohaterowie, postawy*, Katowice 2013.

<sup>10</sup> M. Wicha, *Occupyp Maciuś*, “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” 2012, (51), Literary Magazine supplement.

<sup>11</sup> D. Michułka, “*Król Maciuś Pierwszy*” jako szkolna lektura: pedagogiczna bajka w poszukiwaniu porozumienia?, [in:] R. Waksmund, D. Michułka (eds.), *Dydaktyka i łowy. Księga jubileuszowa dedykowana profesorowi Władysławowi Dynakowi*, Wrocław 2016, pp. 413–435; Z. Olek-Redlarska, *W kręgu kultury i literatury dla dzieci*, Białystok 2019.

has been subject to non-professional elucidation in colloquial perception, in the school context (as an item on the primary school reading list) or for popularisation purposes (as the topic of competitions).

In 2018, the fairy tale gained new life as it became the subject of an original visual-verbal (re)interpretation and the object of intersemiotic translation, initially in the form of the exhibition *In King Matt's Poland* at the Warsaw-based POLIN Museum, presenting large-format painted images by the Torun artist Iwona Chmielewska accompanied by quotes from the novel, which were subsequently edited into a picture book entitled *How Hard It Is to Be a King*.<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary educational domain, the iconotext functions in subsequent transformations as a multimodal text, as it offers the English, audiovisual<sup>13</sup> and museum<sup>14</sup> versions. Furthermore, owing to translations it is present in public discourse as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

The content of both texts, original and iconic, which are of different genres but sharing common ideas (dilemmas of power, hardships of childhood, responsibility of children and adults) has renewed significance in the wake of the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Therefore it is worth presenting not only to children and youth but also younger and older adults, as suggested by Korczak himself<sup>15</sup> and encouraged by a contemporary writer and major contributor to the popularity of Korczak's ideas:

Korczak used to say that every child holds the right to know the truth and should not be presented an embellished view of the world. Look around. Nowadays we cannot teach children that there is no evil and that they should place unbounded trust in people and the world. We need to teach them wise scepticism and distrust towards naive optimism. But do we know how to do it ourselves? This book raises important questions in this regard.<sup>16</sup>

## Historical and Biographical Context of the Novel

The message of *King Matt the First* becomes more perspicuous when seen in the historical context in which the novel was written.<sup>17</sup> It was the interwar period soon

<sup>12</sup> J. Korczak and I. Chmielewska, *How Hard It Is to Be a King*, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Wolno Publishing House, Warsaw/Lusowo 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Performative reading of Iwona Chmielewska's book by the actresses: Anna Czartoryska, Katarzyna Łaska, Anna Mucha and Katarzyna Zielińska, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEZA-Do-wiEU> [accessed: 18.01.2025]; Presentation of the book by Małgorzata Swędrowska, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjZdZ61stTg> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>14</sup> Project "www.muzeach" ("In museums"), [https://wmuzeach.pl/all-objects/IosZmU4GA-brqilZGdSpx\\_throne-/0/BQreVCLuyGSosxNGQQTV](https://wmuzeach.pl/all-objects/IosZmU4GA-brqilZGdSpx_throne-/0/BQreVCLuyGSosxNGQQTV) [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Pamiętajcie o kanarkach. O dorosłym czytaniu historii o królu Maciusiu*, "Guliwer: dwumiesięcznik o książce dla dziecka" 2011, (4).

<sup>16</sup> I. Chmielewska, *Maciusiu, dasz radę*, "Książki: magazyn do czytania" 2018, (6), pp. 20–25.

<sup>17</sup> Available in the public domain: <https://polona.pl/preview/4f952622-efd3-41bf-b6db-362686e97e8d> [accessed: 18.01.2025]. Although the title page states the year of publication at 1923,



after the end of two bloody wars that swept through Polish lands: the First World War (1918) and the Polish–Soviet War (1921). The country was ravaged, and regained independence brought both enormous joy at having been liberated after almost one hundred and fifty years of captivity and disillusionment with never-ending political conflicts, quarrels and rifts in society. In the year the novel was published (1923), Gabriel Narutowicz, the first president of the independent Republic of Poland, was assassinated. Political parties and groupings fought fiercely for power with clashing visions of the country's future, while peace seemed imperilled. Everybody expected that after almost one and a half century in bondage, sovereignty alone would suffice to make the homeland happy, but it did not. Chaos ensued, the sinister shadow of another war loomed, and it was difficult to shape relations with neighbouring states – former partitioning powers.<sup>18</sup> It was particularly difficult for children to comprehend this tense situation, as they were vulnerable to evil, terrified, timid and unsure of what was going on around them. Korczak, a sensitive tutor and educator, knew that children hardly grasped the sense of history and were not familiar with the mechanisms of power or the state organisation. They would not understand that disagreements, disputes and interpersonal conflicts are natural for any society in times of crisis.<sup>19</sup> Following long discussions with children, he wrote<sup>20</sup> *King Matt the First*, a sort of adventure novel blended with elements of political fiction. Although living in a mythical kingdom, Matt is confronted with the bitter reality, facing the same questions that tormented Marshal Piłsudski and the ministers of the newly elected cabinet of Poland: How to raise money to repair trains, build factories, replace broken windows or supply the army? How to plant schools, healthcare facilities or proper social services?

Korczak's writing is founded on the belief that the world of children and youth is distinctive: it is governed by its own rules and its own logic of events, and is marked by its own, unique dramaturgy of suffering. The set of his creative inspirations included works by Schopenhauer, St. Francis of Assisi and, above all, Nietzsche. The radicalism of his thought is deeply rooted in his generational formation: the explorations, dilemmas and heroic ambitions of his generation coupled

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in one of the existing copies there is an earlier date at Janusz Korczak's handwritten dedication to Stefania Wilczyńska. Furthermore, reviews of *King Matt the First* were published in *Kultura Robotnicza* and *Południe* magazines already in 1922.

<sup>18</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Król Maciuś zmienia świat*, [in:] A. Czerwińska-Walczak, T. Sztyma-Knasiecka (eds.), *W Polsce króla Maciusia. 100-lecie odzyskania niepodległości*, trans. Z. Sochańska-Kumor, Warsaw 2018, pp. 129–141.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> Korczak's novel was allegedly directly inspired by André Lichtenberger's book *Le Petit Roi*, which was first published in the Polish territory in 1911. Cf. R. Waksmund, *Król Maciuś plagiatem?*, "Sztuka dla Dziecka" 1987, (1/2), p. 64 (quoted by M. Rogoż, *Polskie edycje dylogii o królu Maciusiu...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12).

with the cult of the creative individual, who has the right, or sometimes even the obligation, to instigate the Promethean revolt.<sup>21</sup>

The book has been analysed in the biographical perspective, as Korczak poured his own desires and man-philosopher's sadness into the boy's character. Korczak's life and the novel bear numerous striking similarities, including the loss of father and the child's willingness to change the world. Korczak approved, or perhaps even encouraged, such an approach, by writing a personal preface and placing his photograph as a child in the book frontispiece "for the readers to see what he looked like when he was as little and vulnerable as they are." The interpreters of the novel have juxtaposed King Matt's character with the fate of the author, as autobiographical elements in the duology are poignant – they both had "a hard knock life," as Darek Makowski put it.<sup>22</sup>

Matt's bright character turned against the evil institutions of the world of adults has a high, though rather unintentional, analogy, considering that his death sentence is delivered in the name of the law and has been preceded by the treason of his friend Felek. What does Matt want? In particular, he wants all children to be able to go on holidays. This is what Korczak, a tutor of children from orphanages at summer camps, wanted himself about ten years before the publication of the novel. And there is one more connection, this time rather biographical than autobiographical in nature. The sad king would like to help Matt escape from his final, deadly dangerous predicament, but he writes: "If I didn't know you so well, I would have proposed that you come with me to my country, but I knew you wouldn't agree." Astounding prefiguration of Maryna Falska's sanctuary offer denied by Korczak in August 1942.<sup>23</sup>

Another analogy in the work of fiction to Korczak's real-world activity is the invitation for children to participate in government: King Matt the First invites children to co-governance like Korczak did in his Orphan House, which was the 'perfect community' where all, whether children or adults, were equal and had equal voice, respecting one another as partners. The orphanages thus became small laboratories of democracy with such legal instruments as courts, self-government institutions and newspapers.

## Cultural and Literary Representations

The notions of 'representation', 'ideology' and 'idea' refer to the same phenomenon of constructing the image of the world in which we live. The world image is not

<sup>21</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Kulturowy obraz dziecka...*, op. cit., p. 428.

<sup>22</sup> *A Hard Knock Life: Janusz Korczak & King Matt the First*, <https://culture.pl/en/article/a-hard-knock-life-janusz-korczak-king-matt-the-first> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>23</sup> K. Jakowska, *Janusz Korczak jako pisarz społeczny* [Janusz Korczak as a social writer], "Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego" 2013, 1, pp. 129–138.

created by signs *per se*, but only signs used for a specific purpose. The use of signs through which the world becomes both meaningful (as signs gain certain meaning with reference to the world) and purposeful (i.e. the one in which we can feel at ease) is the ideological use, therefore also representation.<sup>24</sup> There are social ways to tame (= represent) the reality, or Durkheim's collective representations, that attract various people convinced that they adequately reflect reality. Literature for children and young adults, as a sociospace shared by literary characters and readers of similar age, constitutes an array of childhood representations, which attempt to reopen the biographically half-closed spaces of memory. The strategies of literary representations of childhood in writing to and by adults were explored by a literary scholar from Cracow.<sup>25</sup> Any discourse on symbolic representation of childhood becomes meaningful exclusively from the adult perspective, when being a child is the closed stage and inaccessible space-time. However, it still seems possible to become childlike, not only as a measure which is existentially infantilising but above all contributing to and exposed in literature and arts. The function of symbolic representation of childhood is performed by toys – primary items and childhood symbols referring to the past imaginary worlds constructed in children's games.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond doubt, Janusz Korczak is also a pioneer of the children studies movement – an interdisciplinary, paedocentric approach to methodology and interpretation as well as a humanist discipline, that must overcome, on one hand, the emerging process of blurring boundaries between child, adolescent and mature identities, and on the other, the utilitarian image of the child established within pedagogy. Both Korczakian children studies and Korczak's literary texts deal with issues of non-adult participation, the complexity of relationships between adults and children, regaining and embracing the rights of the child and liberating children's voices.<sup>27</sup> Janusz Korczak is also viewed as a pedologist who set an interdisciplinary framework for children studies, thus requiring educators to adopt the results of paediatric, psychological, sociological and social pedagogical studies to better understand children and support them adequately to their needs.<sup>28</sup>

Janusz Korczak, hailed 'king of children', has been one of the few educators worldwide "to successfully set straight in his educational practice the mutual relationships between adults and children, ensuring the real conditions for equality and enforcement of the right to co-existence based on dialogue and authentic self-

<sup>24</sup> M.P. Markowski, *O reprezentacji*, [in:] R. Nycz, M.P. Markowski (eds.), *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, Cracow 2010, pp. 287–335.

<sup>25</sup> K. Wądołny-Tatar, *Narracje (re)konstrukcyjne, narracje interwencyjne, literackie reprezentacje dzieciństwa*, Warsaw 2021, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 203.

<sup>27</sup> K. Szymborska, *Po stronie dziecka. Perspektywa children studies*, Białystok 2020, pp. 65–66.

<sup>28</sup> B. Śliwerski, *Pedagogika dziecka. Studium pajądocentryzmu*, Gdansk 2007, p. 31.

governance.”<sup>29</sup> In Korczak’s pedagogical anthropology, the child is an entity by itself (*ens per se*), that is a complete human being who does not lack anything and does not need to become someone else, better and bigger, to attain full humanity, as the child has rights, freedom and self-creativity in their fullness, and is an individual capable of taking responsibility for the process of his or her development and education. Korczak’s philosophy of children’s full humanity recognises and emphasises their empowerment, competency and ability of autonomous development.<sup>30</sup> A deep belief in the child’s potential and capacity for self-determination permeates Korczak’s definition of the child.<sup>31</sup> Dorota Kubicka formulated and explicated Janusz Korczak’s ‘philosophy of the child’ based on his unexplored philosophical writing<sup>32</sup> (as he also formulated his own concept of the child in his fiction). *King Matt the First* is simultaneously a pedagogical experiment and a paedocentric culture manifesto, that expresses the author’s unwavering pursuit to determine the new conceptualisation of child’s awareness and reflects his legislative ideals of children’s participation.

## Main Directions of the Reception of the Novel in Literary Circulation

Due to editorial limitations, this article does not undertake to include the detailed problem analysis of Korczak’s works or choose proper fragments thereof to comment upon, since, as stated in the beginning, the duology has been subject to multidimensional in-depth interpretations to such an extent that today it seems possible to meta-analyse the pedagogical and literary discourse, exhibiting how the meanings encrypted in the fairy tale images have been deciphered, which codes and interpretation keys have been used by those interpreting both the original novel and Iwona Chmielewska’s project, and which issues, motifs and archetypes have been accentuated.

One of the motifs most frequently brought out in the relevant interpretative analyses is child’s solitude. Korczak’s novel undoubtedly depicts the loneliness

<sup>29</sup> B. Śliwerski, *Prawo dziecka do swoich praw* [The right of a child to its rights], “Pedagogika Społeczna” 2017, 16(4), pp. 37–58.

<sup>30</sup> M. Turczyk, *Dziecko w perspektywie antropologii pedagogicznej Janusza Korczaka. Kilka refleksji w kontekście wczesnej edukacji*, “Edukacja Elementarna w Teorii i Praktyce” 2024, 19(1(72)), pp. 11–19.

<sup>31</sup> M. Turczyk, J. Kusztal, *Dzieciństwo, dziecko i jego dobro w perspektywie Korczakowskiej. “Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji”*, 2019, 46(3), p. 11, <https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2019.46.01>

<sup>32</sup> D. Kubicka, *Doświadczenie i rozumienie dzieciństwa u Janusza Korczaka. Próba konceptualizacji filozoficznej* [Experience and comprehension of childhood in Janusz Korczak: An approach to philosophical conceptualization], Poznań 2023.



and suffering of the protagonist, accompanied by “a feeling of being misunderstood and peculiar *separateness*, expressed by an escape into the realm of imagination and internal dialogues or monologues, inaccessible for adults.”<sup>33</sup> Matt fails in a sense, and his story does not end on an optimistic note. As a king, he is neither the perfect ruler nor has solutions to all life problems. But neither have adults, and in the symbolic dimension, the book as a medium offers King Matt an opportunity to test new ideas and fail. The novel is a record of the child’s sadness.

Matt’s solitude is a state of mind of both a child and an adult who is no longer a child. His loneliness is double – towards the world of adults and towards the world of children. Matt, who so strongly believed that it was possible to make the world a better place and introduce reforms making all people happy, suffers a defeat among children and adults alike. All those whom Matt restored to freedom now drive him into slavery. Only banished to the desert island, Matt realises that children need laws, but they cannot be lawmakers. To create law people need to transcend themselves, whereas children are unable to set aside their inherent egotism.<sup>34</sup>

Professional readers have also identified the archetype of the Orphan and the topoi of the Wayfarer (*homo viator*) and Robinson in the novel. These shall be evoked briefly. The orphan’s figure is continuously present in the Old Doctor’s letters, articles, scientific studies and literary works. Matt fondly recalls his late mother and carries her photograph in a breast pocket; he thinks about her when assisting his dying father. The orphan as the inner hero experiences pain and suffering, and grieves and cries upon failures, while seeking help as he realises his life dependence. “The Orphan’s main task is to transition from his life in paradise to the harsh reality marked by privation, suffering, desolation and, ultimately, death, but above all the feeling of loneliness and absence of help. The archetype of the orphan is the first step towards internal development and moving up.”<sup>35</sup> This is the reason why King Matt the First (an inner Orphan) could not succeed, as further steps of the ‘heroic story’ – the Martyr, the Wayfarer, the Warrior and the Mage (present in other works) – mounted before him.

In both novels about King Matt, the primary resource for the plot and the presentation of the hero’s inner biography is the topos of *homo viator* (man on the journey) and its characteristic motifs.<sup>36</sup> Matt, as an underage ruler, secretly leaves the

<sup>33</sup> K. Slany, *Subwersywne zabawy Kajtusia Czarodzieja* [Subversive Plays of Kaytek the Wizard], “Pedagogika Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna” 2014, 2(1(3)), pp. 103–113.

<sup>34</sup> D. Kubicka, *Doświadczenie i rozumienie dzieciństwa u Janusza Korczaka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> A. Baluch, *Król Maciuś Pierwszy w towarzystwie innych bohaterów literatury dla dzieci*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz*, Warsaw 2013, p. 172.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. e.g. J. Ługowska, *Figury dziecka w twórczości Janusza Korczaka*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz, op. cit.*; M. Lach, *Król Maciuś Pierwszy jako homo viator* [King Matt the First as homo viator], “Dydaktyka Polonistyczna” 2016, (2), pp. 64–71.

palace to fight incognito in the war; escorted to the desert island, he escapes to seek help from common people; in his short life, he works as a meat seller's assistant and cow shepherd; he accidentally gets to an orphanage; he lives with natives on an island isolated from civilisation; finally, he is imprisoned among "the worst people in the world." Finding himself in the desert island, he reactivates the topos of Robinson, travelling the length and breadth of it and reaching the least accessible places. In the process, he discovers a mysterious tower, where the act of his metaphysical initiation or a sort of illumination occurs. Korczak's worlds of children are remarkable examples of creating carnivalised time-spaces in children's literature.<sup>37</sup>

## Matt as a Korczakian Hero

Suggestive and insightful characteristics of Korczak's image of the child have been presented in a book by Grzegorz Leszczyński:

The child (young or little man) is a strong and wild human being; an artist carving his inner self and defending his right to extreme individualism; a gorgeous and joyful strongman juxtaposed against a sick, decadent soul. Adopting the attitude of a child, as *homo ludens*, comprises a category of tragic freedom: freedom leads Matt to calamity, but simultaneously enables him to experience the fullness and absolute reality of life.<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary literary scholars concur that the Old Doctor depicted his child protagonists as the embodiment of the idea of the man of the future.<sup>39</sup> Korczak's child asks questions about the essence and laws of the world, and is founded on the attitude combining rebellion and defiance with the highest vital values actualised in the child-young man-superior human (*Übermensch*). The author did not see in childhood and adolescence any healing power or a remedy to evil in the world; instead he recognised the need to shape the man growing from the soil of rebellion and defiance (Nietzschean "holy No") and creative activism ("holy Yes"). For this rebel, there is no easy way to the sentimental triumph of the truth, goodness and beauty; on the contrary, in the hero's defeat there is a hallmark of victory (*King Matt on the Desert Island*). The fate of a suffering victor, woven in the dramatic matter of existence, awaits every Korczakian hero. In the hero's fame there is a root of defeat. This comes as a paradox: the heroes brought into existence by the author

<sup>37</sup> K. Slany, *Subwersywne zabawy Kajtusia Czarodzieja...*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Kulturowy obraz dziecka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

<sup>39</sup> W. Kostecka, G. Leszczyński and M. Skowera, *Kamienie milowe w dziejach polskiej literatury dziecięcej i młodzieżowej. Leśmian – Korczak – Brzechwa* [Milestones in the History of Polish Children's and Young Adult Literature: Leśmian – Korczak – Brzechwa], "Prace Filologiczne. Literaturoznawstwo" 2021, 11(14), p. 215.

are anxious, rise high above the world they face, and seek essential values – that will bring order and give meaning to their life. Each of them learns hard lessons of suffering; each is lonely and heroic; and each in pursuit of his goals inevitably heads for defeat. The moment of attaining the goal is also the moment of profound breakthrough, from which begins the true drama of fall and destruction.<sup>40</sup>

Insightful observations of the children's community by Korczak – pedologist have enabled him to design exceptionally plausible child characters, especially boy characters (Matt, Kaytek, Jack, Louis), that were much closer to him. Their fairy tale creations may be interpreted as an allegory of growing up and the emotional development (journey) as well as existential problems. Korczak's boy creations convey child's solitude and confusion not only in the world of adults but also in the world of children, and portray child's unequal struggle to make its most secret dreams come true. Their stories exemplify the imminent failure of a sensitive and lonely child in confrontation with the world of heartless rules and norms.

Korczak's literary works depict the desire for victory. "Is there anything more touching than the image of a little boy who with a swashbuckling gaze, wind-blown hair and a stick instead of sword in his hand marches to victory?," asks Alicja Ungeheuer-Gołąb.<sup>41</sup>

Against all appearances, the boy does not experience absolute happiness that we would want for a child. His story reflects the path to maturity and humanity, which is never painless. This is not a static figure. On the contrary, any external impulse triggers the boy into action – he wants to improve, indulges in suffering or joy, and insightfully analyses the world around. He is also introspective and deeply self-reflective. The boy hero of Korczak's fiction experiences the fate that inspires him to search for the meaning of existence. The little man has the right to be who he is and "the right to err and joyfully seek to be better." The author observed the harmful influence of adults on children. His ideas fall, to some extent, into the emancipation movement (perhaps even anti-pedagogical), which assumes that the child has the right to be itself.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, in Korczak's vision of childhood there is nothing worse than a 'tame' child, as then it is merely a child artefact. "True childhood involves a welter of thoughts, experiences and intuitions turned into vehement and desperate actions, that require a flippant attitude but even more courage. Child's insubordination is the act of freedom."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> G. Leszczyński, *Kulturowy obraz dziecka...*, op. cit., p. 434.

<sup>41</sup> A. Ungeheuer-Gołąb, *Korczaka archipelag dzieciństwa*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz*, op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> K. Slany, *Subwersywne zabawy Kajtusia Czarodzieja...*, op. cit., p. 104.

## Literary Representation of Paedocracy in the Story of King Matt the First

In pedagogical terms, paedocracy (from Greek *país/paidós* 'child' and *kratós* 'rule') is a type of relationships between adults and children. Negative, toxic paedocracy involves the submissive attitude of adults towards the child as a 'small tyrant' and the abandonment of intentional interactions; the adult should be useful for the child, getting rid of one's own self. A positive variant of paedocracy takes place in children's republics, youth communities and communes.<sup>44</sup>

The idea of child rule is a recurrent theme of discussions about children's literature, beginning with biblical stories of Jesus, stories of Buddha and Krishna in Buddhist and Hindu cultures, or the description of Cupid's power and the belief that the children of Zeus and Hera rule the entire Olympian pantheon in Greco-Roman mythology.<sup>45</sup> The motif of the child king was known before Korczak and appeared in works by 'Young Poland' writers. Korczak's duology and its iconic transformation fit in this trend of literature about rulers and leadership, as it constitutes a representation of children's autonomy and self-governance aspirations. In the children studies perspective, Matt's attempt to establish a children's republic and his political participation make him a 'political child'.<sup>46</sup> Children do not need to have high political awareness; it is sufficient to intentionally educate them to be conscious citizens.

In the discourse of children studies, a specific type of paedocratic utopia can be found in Janusz Korczak's story of King Matt the First. Matt stands at the head of the paedocracy, and by ignoring cultural restrictions he dares to reverse the order and the fixed roles of adults and children.<sup>47</sup> The protagonist draws the entire attention, becoming the main focaliser of Korczak's ideological message. He represents a figure of the wise child – in accordance with a theoretical concept expounded by Margaret Mead in her book *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation*

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<sup>44</sup> B. Śliwerski, *Prawo dziecka do swoich praw*, op. cit.; M. Kutt, *Pajdokracja w ujęciu Feliksa Koniecznego w kontekście współczesnych form zjawiska* [Paedocracy According to Feliks Konieczny in the Context of Its Modern Manifestations], "Rocznik Filozoficzny Ignatianum" 2021, 27(2). Paedocracy as a type of degenerated attitude of young activists, who in the period of ideologization of Polish schools were largely autonomous and completely independent of the school management and the teachers' board, was described by A. Nalaskowski, *Humanizm i podmiotowość w wychowaniu*, Toruń 1991 (quoted by Śliwerski, *Pedagogika dziecka. Studium pajdocentryzmu...*, op. cit.).

<sup>45</sup> Ch. Kelen and B. Sundmark (eds.), *Child Autonomy and Child Governance in Children's Literature: Where Children Rule*, New York 2017.

<sup>46</sup> E. Jarosz, *Dziecko i dzieciństwo – pejzaż współczesny: rzecz o badaniach nad dzieciństwem* [The child and the childhood – a contemporary landscape. The matter of research on childhood], "Pedagogika Społeczna" 2017, 16(2).

<sup>47</sup> K. Szymborska, *Po stronie dziecka...*, op. cit., pp. 72–97.

*Gap* (1970), in which the American anthropologist thoroughly analysed a prefigurative culture treating children as people with greater knowledge that legitimises their participation. The child reformer and revolutionist starts a cultural and social revolution, setting a new ideological order for children and adults. At the end of the novel, after losing a battle, he does not lose sympathy of the audience and definitely triumphs morally. Though Korczak clearly saw a utopia in the kingdom of children, he definitely created a system in which children dominated among adults for a while. They renewed old laws and ways of understanding the social hierarchy and the role of a child (even in the role of a king). The Białystok scholar, Karolina Szymborska proposed to read *King Matt the First* in the perspective of paedocentric criticism referring to the furthest progressive emancipation of a child.

## Matt as a Progressive Peadocrat

The application of the carnival convention of *fou du roi*, the mock king, allows to notice that the creation of Matt's character realises the model of the clown, a mocking version of the ruler and mage, two special incarnations of power – as demonstrated by Anna Maria Czernow on the basis of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalisation.<sup>48</sup> Korczak created his literary utopia by using in the plot carnival structures governed by the reversed law – a world without age with inverted norms. Carnivalisation, turning the existing order over, raises a functional child to a position higher than adults. For the duration of the juvenile festival there will be suspended rights, prohibitions, and restrictions maintaining the old order – all of which are imposed by socio-hierarchical inequality – including categorisation by age. This activates the performativity of passive child actors and turns them into actants, who control the state affairs under the leadership of the child king. Matt has a special role in this mechanism, as the particularity of his carnival nature makes him the catalyst of it. He has also no parents before whom he has to respond, nor does he have to obey any other adult trying to get control over him.<sup>49</sup>

The reign of the successor to the late king commences to the accompaniment of mocking laughter of ministers, who ridicule Matt, stating bitingly that if there is a war, he will not be able to defend the country; later, each minister attempts to block any actions of the novice, citing a long list of legal paragraphs. The ir-

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<sup>48</sup> A.M. Czernow, *Pod berłem króla dzieci: strategie karnawalizacyjne w powieści Janusza Korczaka*, "Guliwer: dwumiesięcznik o książce dla dziecka" 2011, (4), pp. 10–15; *eadem*, *Korczakowskie dzieci błazny*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz, op. cit.*, pp. 41–63; *eadem*, *The King of Misrule*, [in:] Ch. Kelen, B. Sundmark (eds.), *Child Autonomy and Child Governance in Children's Literature...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–150.

<sup>49</sup> K. Szymborska, *Po stronie dziecka...*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.



reverent commentaries of those who represent power emphasise the marginality of the child as an entirely subjugated and weak individual. Their plan for the new king is directly connected with this marginality. As before, Matt is supposed to grow up and study in distant chambers of his enormous palace. Important meetings and conferences are not meant for him; giving him real power is out of the question. An exquisite intratextual metaphor of this situation is the porcelain simulacrum, the doll-puppet which the ministers prepared after Matt had escaped to fight in the war. The stiff, passive and voiceless doll, obeying anyone who pulls the string, perfectly replaces the little king, since from the point of view of ministers' adult power it is the embodiment of the perfect child – a creature seen but not heard, a puppet in the hands of adults. However, Matt boldly rejects the porcelain doll's attitude and declares far and wide the revolutionary takeover of power: "I am the king, and I'm going to stay the king." Matt revolts against stiff principles and rules that support the official adult order ('Mr. Minister of Justice, I don't care about that.'). and his protest is particularly expressed in the use of a vulgar and, at the same time, refreshing marketplace swearword: "Will you stop plaguing me, you pest!" Matt's order to arrest the Minister of Justice marks the real beginning of his reign as the child version of the carnival mock king.<sup>50</sup> The deconstruction of the existing, stiff system, epitomised by the multivolume interpretation of the law, finishes when the new, blasphemous reversed order is introduced, as the children's parliament passes the change of social order. A controversial resolution is decided by vote that adults shall go to school, and it shall be children's duty to go to work. Interestingly, grownup men, lawyers or mechanics, yield to the new authority and effortlessly enter the roles of little boys or rowdy rascals; whereas children are very calm and dignified, and by nine o'clock open all the offices and stores. Although initially this system functions quite effectively, the total reversal of age roles gradually leads to its complete collapse, because the new order has no reason for existence.

Matt, the child king, is a clown figure, and, as such, a peripheral, marginal and cross-border character. The power and the related elevation place him temporarily at the top of the vertical hierarchy and in the centre of the horizontal order, but he does not discard the clownish chaos; on the contrary, he brings it with him into the very centre. As a 'mascot of chaos,' he opens the door a little, through which the carnival enters, and with it also destruction (children destroy the army, factories, train station and hospital); consequently, death and destruction sour the joyful

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<sup>50</sup> A.M. Czernow, *Korczakowskie dzieci błazny*, [in:] A.M. Czernow (ed.), *Janusz Korczak: pisarz, op. cit.*, p. 48.

atmosphere of the feast. This marks the end of carnival and the return to the norm only temporarily rejected and disgraced.<sup>51</sup>

The ludic character of Matt's phenomenon is that he has no influence on the carnival, but the chaos is a factor that affects the lives and attitudes of both the world of children and the world of adults. The coronation inaugurates the carnival celebration and the dethronement annihilates it. Korczak shows that both the desires of adults and children are equally important and should be encouraged. The inevitable restoration of order at the end of the novel brings the characters to captivity, but they gain more power and awareness as a community.

Korczak challenges the arbitrary attribution of the socio-cultural role to the child and convinces us that the binary division between adult and child is necessary, but the rights of the child must be recognised; a child should be allowed to participate in society, but it is impossible to reverse the natural course of nature. He shows the risks of this reversal and proclaims a homeostasis and cooperation of adults with children.<sup>52</sup>

Karolina Szymborska recreates the emergence of the prefigurative subject in Korczak's work, suggesting that the central problem of his novel is the attempt to create a new type of child subjectivity that would reflect on the changing image of the child.

King Matt became an archetype, a symbol of a certain existential, social, and philosophical nature, reflecting on the child's position in the world, society and, in general, the human being's situation towards the deepest substance of existence. He grows up to be a superhero that, intuitively, armed only with finesse, courage, and a tender heart, enters enemy territory to probe the forces of the enemy and the mechanisms of power. He is later the creator of the Code of Children Rights, the initiator of what we can call a *coup d'état*, which results in giving more power in the state into the hands of children while degrading the position of adults.<sup>53</sup>

In the second book of the series, *King Matt on the Desert Island* (1923), the author proposes to reject traditional divisions on the grounds of gender, race, life and death, age, nature and culture, and local and global, in lieu of these categories placing life itself.

Karolina Szymborska, a Białystok anthropologist and a promoter of the prefigurative cultural perspective in education, derived her own characteristics of the

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<sup>51</sup> A.M. Czernow, *The King of Misrule*, [in:] Ch. Kelen, B. Sundmark (eds.), *Child Autonomy and Child Governance in Children's Literature...*, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> K. Szymborska, *Po stronie dziecka...*, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

prefigurative subject. She reconstructed from Korczak's works the four constitutive dimensions/features of the protagonist as the prefigurative Self:

1. Its source is the philosophical concept of a strong subject and its power results from the rejection of the social structure of communities (family, neighbourhood, ethnic group, religion, nation), or even categories imposed by biology or by institutions within society (gender or age) in the name of self-awareness. In that sense, the child is an autonomous, independent entity, undeterred Sisyphus aware of one's being.
2. The performative nature of the child. The entity of the child is characterised by heterogeneity, openness, diversity, liquidity and self-creation. The prefigurative subject is in the continuous process of becoming, is still building his identity, but does not want to choose any particular one. It seems that he is internally broken, like the world in which he operates. Matt has no coherent and consistent identity; he is perceived ambiguously: from a small child of ten to the fabulous figures of Tom Thumb, the Oak Tree Man or Napoleon Bonaparte. His personality consists of fragments of other selves, derived from cultural texts important to him for some reason, by which he tries to define himself. In this fragmentation of identity, he must achieve an integrated sense of Self by combining these separate lives into a coherent, but liquid identity. A prefigurative subject is then the Self, who chooses and adjusts the cultural and social roles, guided by the need to find one true identity in the dispersed world.
3. The direction of socialisation changes, so that the younger generation may instruct the older ones and introduce them to the changes occurring in society as a result of the accelerated development of civilisation. The prefigurative subject resigns from his previous apathy, acting in the possibility of influencing the social context and improving his own position. Thinking in the new criteria is characterised by "pragmatic idealism." In Korczak's novel, participation is especially accentuated by the juxtaposition of the child's identity with his passive alter ego – the porcelain doll. The child, according to adult expectations, is to be like this little puppet, the actor of their show: obedient and controllable. Only then can he take the position of king, and may passively command the elders. Matt, however, is not a doll, but is created out of flesh and blood, because he rejects passivity and conformism, fighting at the front arm-in-arm with his people. For Korczak's subject, as in the prefigurative Self, the main idea was always activism. The author is, though, in favour of describing a child subject as strong and morally grounded, but also rebellious to the injustice of the world, compassionate for the pain of others, transcending the traditional modern vision of the universal and homogeneous Self,

seen by patriarchal culture as a rational, white, mature, European-male, appropriating the right of objecting to the Other.

4. Child in Korczak's meditations is also a synonym for 'sense', 'courage' and 'rebellion'. It represents a mysterious energy, an element of meaning, existing beyond the events of history and time. To grasp its meaning is to reach the non-material and non-verbal nature of progress, to give it a 'deep sense' and a metaphysical attitude of rebellion and resistance to the patriarchal power of adults. Matt's character grows to the rank of myth, allowing him to be interpreted as the symbol of the system's reform. The underage boy must become a king to save his country from chaos and to deal with the new adult role – the Great King Matt the First. He has to rebuild his kingdom in a modern manner.<sup>54</sup>

## Iwona Chmielewska on the Genesis of the Picture Book

The direct inspiration to prepare the book came from the exhibition *In King Matt's Poland. The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Regaining Independence* at the Warsaw-based POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The curators of the exhibition selected quotes from the novel *King Matt the First*, which in their opinion summarised in a nutshell the central ideas and message of the book; next, they enriched them visually, evoking all their depth through metaphoric, large-format and colourful illustrations by Iwona Chmielewska. These illustrations were printed on the walls, and visitors could literally walk into them, play among them and read them like a huge book. For children who did not yet know how to read, the fragments were recorded, so they could be played like an audiobook, while walking page by page, from headphones to headphones. The illustrations by the Toruń artist also became the artistic input for the children's book *How Hard It Is to Be a King*.

Thus, Chmielewska first designed the historical part of the exhibition, relating to the story of King Matt, and then created a picture book. This is how she described the process:

When I reread *King Matt the First* many years later, as part of preparation for this job, I saw a lonely child, overwhelmed by the adult world, striving to make his subjects happy by bringing his rather naive visions to life. His lack of experience does not allow space for complications, and each subsequent decision leads to catastrophe. Today, we would talk about populism, abuse, manipulation and of cruel disillusionment with the adult world, as well as with children – peers. The boy is brave, bright, stubborn; he is a quick learner who works hard, yet his childish, short-sighted perspective and lack of awareness of potential consequences doom his vision to failure. ... [I]t was not the Old Doctor's intention to lead

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 94–96.

us and make us think gullibly about the state. Quite the opposite – the Doctor teaches us some wise scepticism towards happy-go-lucky optimism, and critical thinking about building a state together.<sup>55</sup>

While pondering on the visual creation of the main character, the artist came up with the idea of drawing Matt as little Henryk Goldszmit [Korczak's real name], as shown in the photograph included in the original book: "For me, he could get no other face but the one of little Henryk Goldszmit, little Janusz Korczak, of the same age as Matt; in the book I remember he wrote, 'When I was the little boy you see in the photograph, I wanted to do all the things that are in this book,'" said Chmielewska in the *Audycje Kulturalne* radio program.<sup>56</sup> In the mid-1950s, Jerzy Srokowski (1910–1975), the most famous illustrator of the book, created the characteristic, rather gloomy, image of the boy king with wide melancholic eyes, which became a model emulated by subsequent generations of artists. That portrait was a transformed picture of Janusz Korczak, who as a ten-year-old boy was ushered to a studio and taken a photograph, which is iconic today. As his biographer surmised:

This is the same boy who would go for family trips to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Wilanow Palace, where Polish kings spent the summertime in the golden age, when Poland was a proud, independent kingdom and its borders stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea and almost to the gates of Moscow. Transferred not only out of Warsaw but also in time, he could feel the 'cold beauty' of the exquisite furniture in the palace and the 'phantasmal presence' of moving kings. Perhaps it was then that he and king Matt coalesced into one.<sup>57</sup>



<sup>55</sup> I. Chmielewska, *Jak ciężko być królem*, [in:] A. Czerwińska-Walczak, T. Sztyrna-Knasiecka (eds.), *W Polsce króla Maciusia...*, op. cit., p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> M. Miszeńska (dir.), Interview *W Polsce króla Maciusia*, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> B.J. Lifton, *The Spirit of King Matt*, [in:] B.J. Lifton, *The King of Children...*, op. cit., p. 107.



In one illustration, there is a touching scene of being a child and an adult at the same time: the old Doctor and little Matt sit together in the crown of a symbolic tree of life. Korczak attentively hugs himself as a little boy, “who wanted to do all the things that are in this book.” Korczak’s face ‘reflected’ in the face of Matt is a reminder that the author of *King Matt the First* was guided by the same noble motives until the end of his life. Matt is clearly and intentionally depicted here as Korczak’s *alter ego*, and the intimacy of these two figures is accentuated by the artist also in other illustrations, on which the Old Doctor, like a guardian angel, accompanies Matt in his lonely struggle for the better world. Age differences are blurred, as they do not really determine the maturity and agency of a human being. What remains meaningful, however, is the intergenerational bond, a sense of connection and community, and an ability to unobtrusively assist young people in their efforts – for which, as the illustrations seem to imply, the responsibility rests extensively with adults.<sup>58</sup>

## Will Matt Make It?

The visual artist created images open to interpretation, that everybody can read in their own way. “The images are only triggered by the text, and the text is only triggered by the image; and together they trigger the audience.”<sup>59</sup> The text contains a profusion of metaphors, including one reprised on all pictures – the crown. “It is a glaring attribute of power; yet it is employed here in a number of conflicting ways. I wanted to convey partly the helplessness of the child and partly the oppressiveness of the crown, which, coveted by many, carries immense responsibility and immense unhappiness of making everyone happy – which is manifestly impossible. This is what I wanted to demonstrate. The crowd which just a moment earlier shouted ‘Long live the king!’, now, gathered in the same place, is shouting ‘Down with the king!’ And it is between ‘Long live the king!’ and ‘Down with the king!’ that my visual narrative is spanned,” said Chmielewska in *Audycje Kulturalne*.<sup>60</sup> Her narrative ponders the uniqueness of the role of the ruler, but also the feeling of ‘unfitness’, exhaustion and suffering – rendered on the illustrations by the poorly fitted, encumbering crown. The recurring motif of the crown (as a bur-

<sup>58</sup> K. Smyczyńska, *Dzieciństwo jako kategoria żywa we współczesnej literaturze wizualnej. Jak ciężko być królem według powieści Janusza Korczaka “Król Maciuś Pierwszy” z ilustracjami Iwony Chmielewskiej*, [in:] B. Bednarek, A. Gemra, R. Waksmond (eds.), *Folklor, literatura dziecięca i nie tylko. Księga jubileuszowa dedykowana profesor Jolancie Ługowskiej*, Wrocław 2021, pp. 319–327.

<sup>59</sup> I. Chmielewska, *Jak ciężko być królem*, [in:] A. Czerwińska-Walczak, T. Sztyma-Knasiecka (eds.), *W Polsce króla Maciusia...*, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> M. Miszeńska (dir.), *Interview W Polsce króla Maciusia*, op. cit.

den or thorn) in conjunction with the symbolic use of colours and other imagery subtly allude to the context of the Passion. The novel scrutinises the authority of the king, but, in essence, it contemplates the attitude of anyone in a position of responsibility for others.<sup>61</sup>

In the picture book, similarly to the original novel, children are told by Matt, a ten-year-old boy and their peer, how hard it is to rule the country and make everybody feel content and happy. First, he ponders the general nature of power and explores what reforms and governance are like. When he learns about the concept of democracy, he establishes the parliament in his country – in fact, even two parliaments, one for children and one for adults. It turns out not so simple on the ground, since it is difficult to reach an agreement with everyone. Ultimately, his reforms end in calamity. The country is brought to the verge of war, and King Matt ends up on a desert island.

The visual narrative by the Toruń artist highlights also those traits of Matt that render him a typical Korczakian hero. The young king endeavours to remedy and change the world, as for him, in the same way as for Korczak himself, it is crucial “not to leave the world as it is.” Recurrently relating to Korczak’s thought, Chmielewska reflects on the nature of patriotism, and contemplates whether maturity and responsibility in cultural terms are justifiably attributed (still) mainly to adults.<sup>62</sup>

The further part of this article is based on the interpretation by the Bydgoszcz literary scholar Katarzyna Smyczyńska, because (i) it is communicated from the paedocentric perspective, and (ii) she is a recognised linguistic authority in children’s literature studies, specialising in visual arts, who is able to clarify to inexperienced readers the symbolic meaning of colours and other graphical elements.

In her reinterpretation of the fragments of *King Matt the First* on the illustrations for *How Hard It Is to Be a King*, the artist tackles several issues that are salient to her. Describing the hardships of being a child, she masterly blurs the boundaries not only between childhood and adulthood, but also between the past and the present, and the local and global context. While creating a story immersed in the local culture, Chmielewska urges universal questions. Certain elements of the illustrations could imply that her work should be interpreted as a painful and ironic story of coping with life in her own homeland, while other details indicate that the book might be an allusive commentary on supranational responsibility. Chmielewska intentionally sets her story ‘in between’ – which allows for her vision to be interpreted as a reflection on the role of the state as a community, equally relevant at the time of Korczak, at present and in the future.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> K. Smyczyńska, *Dzieciństwo jako kategoria...*, op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 321.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

The illustrations, in consistence with Korczak's thought, seem to imply that Matt, despite his lack of experience, might be a role model and a chance for the nation. Using images to ask "How will he organise Poland?," Chmielewska tacitly offers the answer that the altruistic and empathetic desire to change the world is the best possible course of action; even though it may seem naive, and ends in defeat for the protagonist. The 'power', which proves to be such a burden and which in Chmielewska's illustrations pricks the hero with the sharp points of the crown, entails walking on the edge and involves the constant risk of falling down; it is predominantly associated with responsibility, which pertains to anyone who prioritises other people and the common good.<sup>64</sup>

The explication of the main hero's figure and his characterisation as the creation impersonating the prefigurative subject, that is an active individual leaned towards the future, in the conceptual proposition by Karolina Szymborska corresponds with the paedocentric interpretation of the iconotext message by Katarzyna Smyczyńska:

Beyond the ironic distance towards the overly known mechanisms of power and beyond the allusions signalling the disappointment with the existing models of governance, *How Hard It Is to Be a King* revokes the limitless potential of childhood, which is interpreted as a category close to the universal humanistic demeanour, as it is associated with empathy, openness and selflessness. Matt's failure stemmed not from his idealism, but from the acts or omissions of his subordinates. *How Hard It Is to Be a King* is an appeal for the mindfulness and sensitivity to the Other, and for solidarity and community actions. In view of the contemporary global issues, it seems the only way to save the world from disaster.<sup>65</sup>

## Critical Discourse

The depiction of other races, involving the exoticising portrayal of Africa and Africans, fashionable at the time, is probably among the most controversial aspects of Korczak's original text for contemporary audiences.<sup>66</sup> However, the transition from the verbal code of the novel to the visual one of the picture book led to omitting the story of Matt's journey to Africa, problematic by present-day standards. The representations of the child and childhood in literature are subject to reinterpretation and renewal of meanings, particularly within postcolonial criticism. Manfred Liebel conducted an insightful critical interpretation of *King Matt on the*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 322.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 327.

<sup>66</sup> J. Dybiec-Gajer, *Książka obrazkowa jako przekład intersemiotyczny – "Król Maciuś Pierwszy" w obrazach Iwony Chmielewskiej*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Linguistica" 2022, (17), p. 53, <https://doi.org/10.24917/20831765.17.3>

*Desert Island*, in which he opposed the idealisation of and indiscriminate homage to Korczak's life and works. He pointed out the novel's controversial language, which is a reservoir of stereotypes and prejudice with potential Eurocentric or even racist implications for the contemporary reader. Citing both favourable and critical opinions about the book, the author sought to find a balance between the extremes, and identify the reasons why Korczak – a pioneer of the emancipatory approach to children's rights, who fought against discrimination all his life – resorted to the rhetoric perceived as racist by some, and as the intentional, though botched, metaphors of social relationships by others.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

The article aimed to map the novel's deconstructing codes and identify the interpretative threads pointing to the symbolic representation of paedocracy – the rule of children considered in the symbolic, inner and spiritual dimension as the immanent stage of their personal development. In her seminar *Janusz Korczak, Anti-utopian Utopist*, Maria Janion contended that Durkheim's Prometheus was emblematic of society for Korczak. Remaining within mythological poetics, Matt can be identified as Icarus.<sup>68</sup>

Korczak's mode of writing aimed to explain to the hypothetical child reader the compound political issues of his times and the challenges faced by the young state. He believed that children should know the truth about the complex realities and mechanisms of power.<sup>69</sup> He treated his readers earnestly, teaching them pessimism or rather distrust towards optimism. Any decision, even the most legitimate, sets off a chain of unwanted events. Complementarily, Iwona Chmielewska places enormous trust in readers. She declares that as a reader herself she likes to be trusted by authors. She detests the lack of subtlety in arts. Marcin Wicha adds a relevant and bitter commentary to the discourse about King Matt: A paedocratic attempt to capture the world failed; among apparently innocent children there were found some traitors, such as the friend-turned-enemy Felek and the ministers. The essayist wonders whether any good story about power must be pessimistic. In his enigmatic, though accurate, review he concludes:

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<sup>67</sup> M. Liebel, "Białe" dzieci – "czarne" dzieci. Rozważania nad powieścią dla dzieci o małym królu Maciusiu Janusza Korczaka, [in:] M. Liebel, U. Markowska-Manista (eds.), *Prawa dziecka w kontekście międzykulturowości. Janusz Korczak na nowo odczytany*, Warsaw 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Archiwum cyfrowe Marii Janion. Janusz Korczak, antyutopijny utopista, <https://janion.pl/items/show/32> [accessed: 18.01.2025].

<sup>69</sup> W. Kostecka, G. Leszczyński and M. Skowera, *Kamienie milowe...*, op. cit., p. 216.

“There are no children, there are people” – this greatly overused motto is actually depressing. So, children are not better after all? Korczak switches off the stream of hollow flattery, and eradicates the kitschy admiration for children’s sensibility and wisdom. He does not cosy up to his underage audience. Children are sometimes noble and more sensible. They have not got used to injustice and have not grown sufficiently cynical yet. But they are able to make up for those ‘shortcomings’ in no time at all. When Felek, the closest friend, is made the prime minister, he insists on being addressed as baron, demands a higher salary and quickly develops contempt for idealistic Matt. Korczak warns: you might get unlimited power ..., but you will still fail to deliver on the Big Plan. Nevertheless, you should try. The book’s most engaging heroes are sad and disillusioned. Such is the doctor, Matt’s advisor and tutor. And also the sad king from the neighbouring country. He speaks about the effort put into reforms that will not change anything. He complains that “everything is still the same,” yet he establishes the parliament, builds hospitals and sends children to summer camps. Disenchantment without cynicism – we should count on nothing more.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> M. Wicha, *Occupuy Maciuś*, op. cit.



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