

THE AESTHETIC AND THE PEDAGOGICAL – TWO OPPOSING NOTIONS? A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLISH AND BRITISH BLOGS ABOUT CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

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Abstract: Children’s literature belongs simultaneously to the literary and the educational system – this is why the notions of the aesthetic and the pedagogical seem to be crucial in its study. They are often seen as opposing each other. The dichotomy between them appears to be even more interesting when approached from a cross-cultural perspective. Whereas English authors of books for the young reader were among the first to support the development of the children’s book into an art form in its own right (around the middle of the 19th century), their Polish counterparts followed suit decades later, as earliest attempts at writing artistically and without excessive didacticism appeared in the 1930s. In this context, a question arises whether and to what extent these traditional approaches to children’s literature and critique are still topical. I will address this question on the basis of a qualitative analysis of themed blogs written about literature for the young reader published in Poland and in the United Kingdom in the recent years. Interestingly, blogs discussing children’s literature are not addressed directly to the child, but to the “mediator circle”, or “gate-keepers”, primarily parents, teachers and librarians. With the help of content analysis and discourse analysis tools, I will try to determine the main themes present in their discussion of children’s and young adult literature, and to address them from the perspective of the traditional dichotomy between the aesthetic and the pedagogical.

Key words: blog, children’s literature, the aesthetic, the pedagogical, cross-cultural perspective

Słowa kluczowe: blog, literatura dziecięca, estetyka, pedagogika, perspektywa międzykulturowa

In his book on blogs, Greg Myers highlights that as a genre, blogs are defined “not so much by their form or content as by the kinds of uses to which they are put, and the ways these uses construct social identities and communities” (Myers 2010:15). Clearly, the social dimension seems to be the crucial aspect distinguishing weblogging from previous web media (cf. Marlow 2006); users of blogs create a social world constructed on the web, a readership network organized,

among other things, through hypertext links, and including the blogger, the commentators, those who clicked on links from the given post or were brought to it through links from other sites, or, in the context of literary blogs, bought and read the work which was the subject of analysis. In *Blogoshpere. The new political arena*, Michael Keren emphasizes the connection between blogging and emancipation: blogs offer the freedom of self-expression and facilitate “[t]he inclusion of millions of formerly silent voices in the communication flow in society” (Keren 2006:9). Blogs can be said to be democratic also as they seem to be a form of literary critique that is very easily accessible to anyone with internet access. In today’s digitalized world in particular one can expect to see a growing importance of writing and responding to blogs as a practice of discussing children’s literature, based on the use of new technologies and enhancing the sharing of information, opinions and experience, a practice easily accessible to anyone interested in children’s literature, be it parents, teachers, tutors, home educators or librarians. Although there are a few blogs written by children (or teenagers) and addressed to the bloggers’ peers, I will limit my analysis to more ‘standard’ blogs written by and addressed to the so called “mediator circle”, or “gate-keepers”.

Due to their characteristics, blogs may be seen as a perfect place to observe the pedagogic/aesthetic requirements imposed on children’s literature and the generally accepted criteria used for its evaluation. In this paper, blogs will be analyzed from a cross-cultural perspective, accounting for possible differences between British and Polish blogs.

Observing the history of children’s literature, one can see that English authors of books for the young reader were among the first to support the development of the children’s book into an art form in its own right, while their Polish counterparts followed suit only decades later, as earliest attempts at writing artistically and without excessive didacticism appeared in the 1930s, with Tuwim’s and Brzechwa’s work. Nevertheless, English children’s literature is still remarkable in many respects, which is stressed for example by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska’s definition: “When we say ‘English children’s literature’, we usually think of books that are also eagerly read by adults, books full of fantasy, humour and absurd, unusual interweaving of reality and fairy tale, *books devoid of obtrusive didacticism, often mocking any moralistic leanings*” (Adamczyk-Garbowska 1984:17, translation and emphasis mine). What is more, this difference is also emphasized in dictionary definitions, as will be shown below.

The first step of my study was the search for blogs for analysis, using key words: *blog literatura dziecięca/blog książki dla dzieci* for Polish blogs and *blog about children’s literature UK/ blog about books for children UK* for UK-based ones. On the basis of the most popular hits for individual blogs, static links on other blogs, and dynamic links in comments and posts, I was able to identify about 250 blogs. Of these, I chose 30 which were: still accessible, written by individual bloggers (not on behalf of organizations, booksellers etc), systematically written and current (at least 3 posts in 2021), devoted only or mainly to

contemporary children's and young adult literature, with posts having the form of reviews devoted to single books. Excluded were blogs whose authors expressly identified themselves as teenagers or children and those posts which referred to non-fiction. Of this number of blogs, 16 were Polish, and 14 UK-based. I used the three most recent posts from each blog, preparing a corpus of 90 texts.

The next step was to prepare a categorization model for the corpus, which on the one hand was relatively straightforward, as it included only two items (references to pedagogy and references to aesthetics), but on the other hand – demanding, in particular as regarded the pedagogical aspect, which seemed to be broad and all-permeating. Didacticism may be seen in more neutral terms, as a philosophy focusing on instructions, but not excluding entertainment, or it may refer (in a derogative way) to those texts which are too overtly instructive, overloaded with moral messages at the cost of including enjoyable or aesthetic content. The latter 'version' of didacticism may be (and often is) seen as a fault of a literary work, because "overt instruction can arouse suspicion of intellectual vices in the author, such as intellectual arrogance, dogmatism, and prejudice, which can make the lessons the author seeks to convey less rationally acceptable" (Repp 2012:271).

The issue is further complicated by the fact that, in the words of Zohar Shavit, "These texts belong simultaneously to more than one system and consequently are read differently (though concurrently), by at least two groups of readers" (Shavit 1986:66), adults and children.

Whereas one can imagine a work of literature which offers didactic content but disregards the aesthetic, the opposite may not be possible. As Peter Hunt in his essay "Instruction and delight" pointed out, "Even those writers who claim to be nothing but entertainers have their own ideological stance, their own ideas of what is right and wrong, their own way of seeing the world, and it is impossible that they should not in some way convey this in their writing, manipulatively or not" (Hunt 2009:15). Therefore, the question arises whether this inherent didacticism is noticed and commented on by bloggers reviewing works of children's literature. The same would apply to the more overt category of aesthetics.

I decided to use the following definitions to form the basis of conceptual frameworks that would help me to discern the pedagogical and the aesthetic references in the posts:

- "pedagogical" – **relating** to (the **methods** and **theory** of) **teaching**, a synonym of "didactic" – **intended to teach, especially** in a way that is too **determined** or **eager**, and often **fixed** and **unwilling to change**; **intended to teach people a moral lesson** (Cambridge Dictionary online). Thus, pedagogical entanglements of blogs would manifest themselves in references to a moral lesson taught by a given literary work; to mentions about the book explaining, teaching and instructing children in specific issues; developing their sensitivity, and so on;

- “aesthetic” – relating to the **enjoyment** or **study** of **beauty** or **showing great beauty** (Cambridge Dictionary online). Aesthetic entanglements of blogs could be seen e.g. in comments on the fun of reading the text or watching the illustrations, comments on the beauty of the text, pictures, graphic design (alternatively, observations on the lack of the feature in question).

It is well-worth noting that while the notion “*estetyka*” (‘aesthetic’) is similarly defined in the dictionary of the Polish language (Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN online), the definitions of “*dydaktyzm*” (‘didacticism’) and “*pedagogika*” (‘pedagogy’) show subtle, but very telling differences with their English-language equivalents. The former is defined as “the striving to shape in someone appropriate attitudes or views by instructing them or providing role models” (“*Dydaktyzm*” online, translation mine), while the latter as “the academic study of the goals and methods of upbringing and education”; “conscious and goal-oriented educational activity” (“*Pedagogika*” online, translation mine). The slightly negative overtone of the English-language definitions is absent from the Polish ones, which in turn seem to emphasize positive associations. Thus the cursorily mentioned observation on the historical development of English and Polish children’s literature as regards the attitude towards the pedagogical and the aesthetic seems to be echoed also on the level of basic dictionary definitions. In the following part of this paper I intend to investigate the question how these approaches are reflected in blogs discussing literature for young audiences.

The Polish blogs analyzed were written primarily by female writers (there was only one exception), whose posts ranged between 200 and 600 words. The majority (10) introduced themselves using the following descriptions: mother (6), journalist (5), book lover (3), home educator, graphic designer, photographer and artist, librarian, Polish, popularizer of literature (1 each). What might be quite surprising was the small number of comments under the posts: only the posts on one blog had between 15–30 comments each; for the remaining 45 posts I could only find 3 comments altogether. The bloggers focused mainly on Polish books (19 posts), and literature translated from English (14), French (4), Swedish and Italian (3 each), and other languages (Finnish, Ukrainian, Czech, Spanish) which represented the genres of short stories/novels (28), picture books (8) and comic books (7), or fairy tales, legends and fables (5).

After reading the posts, I found out that 75% of them (36) addressed the pedagogical or didactic dimension of books. When divided into broader genre categories, 79% of posts on short stories and novels contained didactic commentary, compared to 60% of posts on picture books and comic books and 80% on fairy tales, legends and fables. These remarks focused on the bloggers’ interpretation of the main message of the book under discussion (21 examples) or on the educational value of reading (9 examples), some of which are quoted below:

- “Lektura o marzeniach i pracy nad sobą, przyjaźni. Pokazuje, że warto mieć plany, ale do sukcesu nie dochodzi się łatwą drogą” (*Póleczka z książkami*). [A book about dreams and work on oneself, about friendship. It shows it’s good to have plans, but success does not come easily.]¹
- [about a book on internet addiction] “(...) **powinna mieć na okładce apel do rodziców, aby koniecznie przeczytali ją razem z dzieckiem!!!** Dorosli mogą w niej znaleźć wiele tematów do zastanowienia się i rachunku sumienia” (*Mały pokój z książkami*). [(...) on its cover, there should be an appeal to parents to necessarily read the book together with their child!!! Adults may find here many topics for reflection and an examination of conscience.]
- “Można się wiele dowiedzieć o borsukach. (...) To piękna i mądra opowieść o tolerancji i sąsiedzkiej pomocy. (...) dużo tu humoru, ale też i dużo wiedzy przyrodniczej i ciekawostek” (*Maki w Giverny*). [One can learn a lot about badgers. (...) It’s a beautiful and wise story about tolerance and neighbours helping one another. (...) you’ll find here a lot of humour, but also a lot of facts and titbits about nature.]
- “Książki są bogato zilustrowane, co także dla dzieci będzie stanowiło pomoc w czytaniu i zachęte” (*Czytanki-przytulanki*). [The books are richly illustrated, which will encourage children and help them in reading.]

Interestingly, six posts contained a direct reference to didacticism and a critical reflection on it:

- “Było fajnie (...) dopóki nie natrafiłam na ten moralizatorski smrodek. Każdy czas ma swoje tendencyjne tezy, którymi musi się karmić” (*Czytanki-przytulanki*). [It was all very fine (...) until I found this moralising stink. Every period has its own tendentious theses it feeds upon.]²
- “Proste morały biorą się z wnętrza opowieści (...) pisze lekko, z klasą, bez jachowiczowskiego moralizowania (*Mala czcionka*). [Simple moral lessons come from the inside of the story (...) [her] writing is light, classy, devoid of excessive and direct moralizing.]
- “Autor bardzo współcześnie i świadomie podchodzi do wielu zagadnień. (...) Jeszcze w książkach sprzed 10 lat można spotkać się z krytyką dziecka, które nie chce jeść. Tutaj mama delikatnie zachęca swojego kotka Amadeuszka do próbowania nowych rzeczy, ale do niczego go nie przymusza. Podobnie ma się rzecz w wierszu o strachu przed ciemnością. Tata głównego bohatera z kolei nie zarzuca mu tchórzostwa, ale zapewnia, że strach jest czymś naturalnym” (*Bajkochłonka*). [The author approaches many issues in a very modern and conscious way. (...) Even in books written 10 years ago, a child who does not want to eat is criticized. Here, mum

¹ All translations from Polish into English (provided in square brackets) are mine.

² Here, the message in question was: you don’t have to do anything.

gently encourages her kitten to try new things, but does not force him to do anything. The same refers to the piece on fear of the dark. The father of the protagonist does not accuse him of cowardice, but insists that fear is something natural.]

It might be surprising that only three bloggers decided to address the issue of didacticism more deeply and critically. The quotes above show that the pedagogical element is important, but it has to be balanced, unobtrusive, and rooted in the story to be acceptable; it is also important to consider today's psychological approach to children's emotions and behaviours.

The aesthetic aspect was addressed 66 times in 41 posts (85% of their total number). When divided into broader genre categories, 86% of posts on short stories and novels contained aesthetic commentary, compared to 80% of posts on picture books and comic books and 100% on fairy tales, legends and fables. These mentions included commentary on the beauty of the text and graphic design (28). Several examples are quoted below:

- “napisana pięknym językiem i znakomicie przetłumaczona” (*Mała czcionka*) [written in a beautiful language and excellently translated]
- “uczta dla oka” (*O tym że...*) [a feast for the eyes]
- “Ja chcę więcej takich książek dla dzieci... książek, które są nie tylko mądre i ciekawe, ale jeszcze jako przedmioty piękne i dające ogromną satysfakcję z obcowania z nimi” (*Strefa Psotnika*). [I want more such books for children... books which are not only wise and interesting, but also beautiful as objects and having them around is a source of enormous satisfaction.]
- “Wspaniała kreska, a wilki bajkowo-wilcze i po prostu urocze, tak bardzo, że rozczulałam się za każdym razem, jak na nie patrzyłam. To sztuka kilkoma ruchami, niby niedbale namalować postać tak, że czuje się jej myśli i odbiera emocje” (*Maki w Giverny*). [Wonderful strokes, and the wolves are fairy-tale like, wolfish, and simply charming, so charming that I was touched every time I looked at them. Painting a character with a few strokes, seemingly carelessly, so that one feels their thoughts and emotions, is no mean feat.]

Another frequently mentioned factor was the pleasure the reader can take in the humour or emotional engagement provided by the book (38 examples):

- “... to historia pełna emocji i zdarzeń. (...) Ale tak naprawdę największą frajdą będzie z pewnością wspólne „czytanie” i słuchanie tej historii z ust najmłodszych” (*Wilcze lektury*). [It's a story filled with emotions and events. (...) But in fact, the real fun will surely be “reading” together and listening to the story being told by the youngest.]

- “To piękna, bardzo subtelna i poetycka opowieść o nawiązywaniu bliskich relacji i przyjaźni. (...) Sięgnijcie po tę książkę dla tekstu, dla ilustracji (kocham!), dla morza czułości, ale też humoru, bo ta książka nie tylko wzrusza, ale i bawi” (*Maki w Giverny*). [It’s a beautiful, very subtle and poetic story about building close relationships and friendships. (...) Reach for this book for its text, illustrations (I love them!), for the sea of tenderness, but also for its humour: it not only touches, but also entertains.]

The last quote contains an interesting subversion of the popular Polish collocation “uczy i bawi” or ‘teaches and entertains’. In the quote from the blog, the ‘teaching’ element has been replaced with a reference to emotions (‘touches and entertains’).

I will now describe the English-language, UK-based blogs selected for analysis. In contrast to the Polish blogs, male bloggers were more often represented in the sample (4 out of 14 blogs). The posts ranged between 130 and 1000 words. The majority of bloggers (12) introduced themselves, using the following descriptions: reviewer/blogger (5), book lover (4), teacher (4), writer (4), mother/father (3), librarian, editor, book seller, photographer, film producer, children’s reading consultant (1 each). The total number of comments was 12, usually 1-3 comments for a post, with most posts without any comments. Bloggers focused only on English-language books (with two – French/Japanese – exceptions), which seems to reflect the character of the British market for children’s literature, often described as ‘resistant’ towards translations, the publication of which “remains limited and erratic” (cf. Lathey 129). The books discussed represented the genres of short stories, chapter books, novellas, novels (28), picture books (13) and comic books (1).

The pedagogical or didactic dimension was present in 18 posts (43% of the total number), that is in 11 posts on novels (39%) and 7 on picturebooks (50%). These remarks focused on the bloggers’ interpretation of the moral lesson taught by the book under discussion (12 examples) or on the educational value of reading (6 examples), some of which are quoted below:

- “She’s a great role model for the values of kindness and compassion...” (*Library Girl and Book Boy*)
- “This is a really sweet story with a very likeable penguin star and an important message to deliver. Differences should be celebrated” (*Father Reading*)
- “But beneath the giggles (...) there is an incredibly potent and heartfelt message about being true to who we are even if that means challenging the expectations around us and the labels others and we put on ourselves” (*Lily and the Fae*)
- “wonderful references to art history, both in the names of places and in plot details, as well as in the illustrations themselves” (*Get Kids into Books*)

- “I also loved that it was rooted in fact. We learn a great deal about the red pandas and their home” (*Bellis Does Books*).

In three posts I found interesting commentary on the pedagogical dimension of the books reviewed:

- “Eliza is not your typical heroine. She’s anxious, prone to worry and frequently engages in catastrophic thinking. A lot of her behaviour was very familiar to me and I think it’s really valuable to portray and explore these mental health issues in children’s books. It’s refreshing to see a lead character who isn’t self-assured and bursting with confidence and to watch her wrestle with these personal demons” (*Get Kids into Books*)
- “As expected, she has brought us a story which deals with both environmental and ‘real life’ issues sensitively and age-appropriately, with heaps of nature, excitement and adventure to boot! (...) Written in the first person as Tilly’s journal entries and thoughts, this has a really believable voice and feels perfectly pitched to its audience” (*Bellis does books*)
- “But it also is a wonderfully thoughtful and quietly mind-shifting novel dealing with issues of grief, but also dipping its toe into the debate for re-wilding lynx into the UK, something that is most cleverly and sensitively approached. (...) Sarah gently educates in an informed and careful non-preachy way with the realities as shown by European studies especially the highly-successful Swiss rewilding projects (...) But slowly drip feeding truths without it appearing a lecture means we are persuaded into realising what a powerful synergistic movement it is...” (*Lily and the Fae*).

Again, as was the case with Polish blogs, the posts which contained a deeper reflection on the pedagogical aspect of children’s books were very rare. They also showed the need for offering today’s young readers a “gentle” version of didacticism, ‘non-preachy’ and accompanied by ‘excitement and adventure’, breaking with the traditional perception of what a typical role-model protagonist should be like.

The aesthetic aspect was addressed in 34 posts (81%). When divided into genres, 79% of posts on short stories and novels contained aesthetic commentary (22), compared to 86% of posts on picture books and comic books (12). These mentions included, first of all, commentary on the beauty of the text and illustrations (21):

- (illustrations) “appealing” / “gorgeous” / “cute” / “terrific” (various blogs)
- “the way they present their titles and package them is always delicious” (*Did You Ever Stop To Think*)

- “While the word ‘delicious’ isn’t exactly right, something about the writing and the world that Kiran Millwood Hargrave builds makes each new page delectable, a treat for your senses” (*Luna’s Little Library*).

Similarly to the Polish blogs discussed in the first part of this paper, commentary on the pleasure the reader can take in the humour or emotional engagement provided by the book was also frequently mentioned (25 observations):

- “This is a story packed full of fun, with humour for readers young and old in both the words and pictures! The text is enjoyably put together, with hints of rhyme, mixed sentence sizes and even singing opportunities making this a perfect read-aloud! We also loved the illustrations, from cute Little Bat and his single fang, to the browns and greens of the wood and the watching animals” (*Father Reading*)
- “I completely love the illustrations. There’s a warmth to them as well as plenty of humour. The facial expressions of all three of the bats are terrific and convey lots of emotion” (*Get Kids into Books*)
- “This is a fantastically compelling story that is told from the heart. It’s a book to absorb long after you finish the last page as it’s not just a story but a journey. It’s a discovery and uncovering that will both touch and tug at your emotions. This is an important book to seek out and read as it may give some readers, both old and young, some comfort and solace when times are hard. (...) We hope you will take this journey and that it will have an impact on your life like it did ours” (*Mr Ripleys Enchanted Books*).

Again, as with Polish blogs, it can be seen that emotional engagement, adventure and humour emerged as important themes in the reviews.

To conclude: are the pedagogical and the aesthetic dimensions of literature for young audiences important for book bloggers? Definitely. Although the books reviewed were those intended primarily for pleasure and entertainment, not education as such, they were nevertheless described in terms of the pedagogical in 75% of cases (Poland) and 43% (the UK). Although the inclusion of the pedagogical element might depend on the specific blogger and the specific book being reviewed, it seems to have more to do with the literary and cultural tradition of writing for children and perceiving children’s literature. As I mentioned earlier, English authors of books for the young reader were among the first to support the development of the children’s book into an art form in its own right, while earliest attempts at writing artistically and without excessive didacticism appeared only decades later in Poland, in the 1930s. This piece of research seems to suggest that the traditional approaches to children’s literature and critique are still topical, which was also reflected in the basic definitions of the notions in question (the pedagogical and the aesthetic) in Polish and English-language dictionaries. Interestingly, the analysis of blog entries presented in this paper suggests that the

pedagogical and the aesthetic are not seen in juxtaposition to each other, as opposing notions. Instead, they seem to be almost equally important and interweave with each other, although excessive didacticism is criticized in both cultures.

As regards the aesthetic, it was not a category reserved for the description of illustrations. It appeared both in posts on novels, chapter books, novellas etc. and in posts on picture books, referring to illustrations as well as texts. The inclusion of this aspect in Polish and British blogs was almost identical, without any cross-cultural differences.

What might be described as a surprising result of the analysis of blogs was the meager number of comments accompanying the blog entries. May it suggest that readers (or gatekeepers) are not willing to discuss children's literature? Or perhaps children's book blogging is a niche in which the society as such is not interested in? A relatively high number of likes and subscriptions to such blogs would not support this conclusion. It might prove beneficial to study if the exchange of opinions would be more lively in the context of microblogging (e.g. Twitter or Instagram). As can be seen, the issue of addressing a traditional dichotomy between the aesthetic and the pedagogical in a modern, technology-driven world, using new ways of communication, seems to be open for further exploration.

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