

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1158

Citation: Shchepacheva, I., Komar, N., Makhinina, N., Sidorova, M., & Berdnikova, O. (2017). Contemporary Christian Tale for Children: Questions of Poetics and Problems. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6(4), 647-654. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1158>

Contemporary Christian Tale for Children: Questions of Poetics and Problems

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Abstract

The article deals with the problems and poetics of Christian fairy tale for children in contemporary Russian literature. The relevance of this issue is motivated by a number of polemic, problematic statements about the form and the content of Christian literature in general, and children's literature in particular. The research reveals features of Christian children's literature, gives characteristics of its genres and defines the place of the fairy tale as a genre that most satisfies young readers' needs. The central theme of Christian fairy tales is the theme of realization of existence of God, distinction of good and evil, understanding of sin and punishment. This problem-thematic complex is embodied mainly at the level of composition and character system of fairy tales. During analysis two types of Christian fairy tales are distinguished, generally based on the folklore canon of the fairy tales about animals. In the first type main characters are animals and they help people magically. The predominant didacticism of fairy tales of the first type is realized in schematization of animal images and absence of plot development. The peculiarity of the second type is based on traditional cyclical adventure story and absence of open characters' convention which is a common feature to parable-allegorical fairy tales.

Keywords: Christian literature for children, Russian literature, Fairy tale, Didactic, Parable.

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Introduction

One of the important features of Russian literature of different periods is its religious essence. Russian literature has been influenced not only by Christianity, but also by Islam (*Edikhanov & Bekmetov, (2016)*) and Buddhism (Bekmetov, 2015). Nowadays the research of this phenomenon is one of the interesting and crucial problems of literary criticism. The role of the axiological approach because of value orientations is increasing in the humanities (Pashkurov & Razzhivin, 2016; Razzhivin et al., 2016).

The formation of Russian literature for children as the formation of literature in Russia was based on Old Russian literature and Western European literature. The Horologion and the Psalter, being first books for teaching and education, played an important role in the process of spiritual and religious upbringing of a child. The consolidation of the foundations of upbringing and education was connected with reading works of ancient Russian literature: hagiographic texts, morals, military and historical novellas, chronicle tales, didactic and natural scientific works of foreign literature (*Shestodnev, Physiologist*) (Birnbau & Flier, 1984). This situation is preserved in the 17-19th centuries when the very phenomenon of children's literature was formed. It is no coincidence that one of the first children's writers was Karion Istomin (1640-1717), a priest in the Chudov monastery.

In the 19th century, especially in its first half, Christian basis continued to determine the development of children's literature. It manifests itself in the literary tale, moralizing stories and stories for children and even in the new adventure literature. For example, V.V. Lvov's short story, *Gray Armagh, or Fulfilled Promise* (1836) and V. Burnashev's short story *New Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1837).

Reflecting on the children's literature of the Soviet period, researchers in the 1990s discussed so-called 'hidden Christianity' which is presented both in the work of individual authors and in individual works for children. An attempt to generalize and systematize the material on this problem is contained in V. Voskoboynikov's article *A Secret Belief in God in the Children's Literature of the Soviet Period* (2017). The author claims that the 'secret belief in God' was expressed in the mood of literary works, at the level of characters and plots.

This allows us to say that the tradition of the existence of Christian principle in literature for children was continued. However, such phenomenon as Christian literature for children, represented by a number of genres, has formed only in last decade. The aim of our research is an attempt to define functions and peculiarities of contemporary Christian fairy tale for children.

It is necessary to say that Christian literature for adults has become the object of sufficiently profound literary study recently. I.S. Leonov in his article *Studying Contemporary Russian Spiritual Prose* in the project *The Russian Language, Literature and Culture Today (Humanitarian World of Modern Russia)* tends to define features of spiritual literature. In his opinion they are the theme of spiritual evolution of the individual. The scholar raises the question of the aesthetic status of the analyzed works, referring them to fiction (Leonov, 2013).

Value and aesthetic contradictions are often revealed at the intersection of literary traditions. These contradictions are reflected on the poetics of the work (Ricoeur, 1974). One of the key points is different understanding of the nature of the artistic. This category has special significance for literature that has religious ideas and great traditions. In Old Russian literature the artistic has an ethical meaning. The artistic is everything connected with the knowledge of God. In the Modern Age of verbal art, the category of artistic is synonymous with the literary and is defined by such aesthetic criterion as fiction (Wellek & Warren, 1956; Eagleton, 1996). Therefore, a problem of the ratio of artistry and didactics is arisen in children's literature. On the one hand this is also the problem of ethical and aesthetic boundaries of fiction; on the other hand it is also a problem of imagery, entertaining. This problem is especially crucial in the genres of modern Christian fairy tale.

Materials and methods

The main principles in the text analysis of the modern Christian fairy tale in the article are principles of cultural-historical and textual analysis. This allows us to identify significant elements of the text poetics in connection with its ideological and artistic content and in the aspect of complex interaction of stable religious content and changing forms of its embodiment in the text.

Aim of the article is to comprehend the problem of existence of a modern Christian fairy tale for children in Russian literature, its problems and poetics. This phenomenon is regarded from the perspective of its content and form. In this article the scholars try to identify the way of development of this phenomenon.

Results and discussion

Nowadays there is a stable system of existence of Christian literature for children. It includes both Christian children's magazines and newspapers, as well as authors who has written and are writing in this field, for example monk Lazar (Afanasyev), N. Blokhin, Y.Voznesenskaya, B. Ganago, E. Mikula, E. Chepilka and others .

Speaking about the specifics of such literature, the chief editor of the publishing house *Lepta* O.E. Golosova emphasizes: “Why cannot Christian children be on an uninhabited island? They can. But in good Christian books characters will not deal with magic as a way of communication with reality, although this does not mean that there will be no magic in such book. This book will show difficult relationship of children with each other, it will describe a problem of making a choice between good and evil, and, of course, good will win” (Golosova, 2017).

However, a number of critics, including Olga Golosova, note that in the development of modern Christian literature for children, there are difficulties concerning forms of adequate reporting religious ideas to the child's mind.

In our opinion it is necessary to correlate the problems of the development of Christian literature for children with its genre structure which includes fantasy, fairy tales and socio-psychological prose (stories and novels). Stories and novels are preferred by the authors of Christian literature mostly (N. Agafonov, N. Blokhin, V. Gerasin, A. Gorbunov, A. Gorshkov, A. Dmitrikov, A. Dobrodomov, S. Zamlelova, I. Izbortsev, V. Kaplan, M. Kucherskaya, A. Lesnyansky, A. Limonov and others). Another actively developing genre is Christian fantasy (Y. Voznesenskaya, D. Volodikhin, Y. Maksimov and etc.). As these genres are presented in Christian literature for adults; they are used in the literature for children. They are intended for teenagers. The fairy tale is mostly oriented to children of younger age. That is why there are quite a lot of difficulties in the interaction of those attributes of fairy tale, with forms of embodiment of the ideas of Christianity.

One of the first creators of Christian fairy tales was the monk Lazar. Today A. Gorbunov, L. Dunaev, T. Kryukova, D. Orekhov, T. Shiposhina, D. Bykov and I. Lukyanova are creating fairy tales.

The central theme of these tales, as in other genres of Christian literature, is the realization of God. It reveals in the problems of sin and penitence.

This problem-thematic complex is embodied mainly in the structure of the folk tale about animals which is the basis of most Christian fairy tales. This is due to the author's complex relationship to the genre of the fairy tale which includes elements of magic, images of evil spirits.

We can talk about two variants of structure transformation of the fairy tale about animals. The first is the accentuation of the parable-allegorical principle. Fairy tales *Secret Verbs*, *Burnt down Animals* by monk Lazar (2017) are being written according to this principle. In the first fairy tale a parrot who learned a lot of words, pretended to be a person of secret knowledge

and tried to teach forest animals how to live. In the second fairy tale animals of one forest have been discussing for so long how to help burnt down animals from the neighboring forest that those have died of hunger.

Tales of this kind are often combined into installments. The integrity of such installments is defined not only by characters, but also a special world view. *The Amazing Story of the Little Hedgehog, Told by Monk Lazar* (2014) is the example of such fairy tale. It consists of three parts where the protagonist Hedgehog passes the stages of realizing the true faith. In the first part he rescues the world from a drought, guiding all the insects to the Old Mantis, inspiring those with the idea of pray; in the second part he travels with the Mantis to Optina Dessert, in the third part he does good deeds because of gratitude.

In this fairy tale a real place of action is depicted. It is Paliki village near the Zhizdra River. Despite all specific descriptions, it embodies the world of paradise, where there are contradictions. Drought destroys life, predators Eagle-owl, Crow, Snake eat insects and even a good-natured mouse steals food from people and gnaws things. Thus, Hedgehog and Old Mantis are spokesmen for the ideas of Christian ontology and ethics, other characters embody the image of sinful life.

To some extent, a book by D. Bykov and I. Lukyanova *about Zverkakh and Zverushakh (About bad animals and good animals)* (Bykov & Lukyanova, 2007) was written according to the same principle. The same paradise world is situated in the town Preobrazhensk, where righteous animals live, and the town Proud, the refuge of uninhibited animals. Zverki and Zverushi are symbolic designation of two principles in the human soul, as evidenced by constant movement of characters from one city to another.

Describing relationships between Zverki and Zverushi in separate stories, the authors conclude stories with an obvious combination of characters. The foundation of the Christian world view manifests itself where family is the center of the world.

A lot of critical reproaches are addressed these kinds of fairy tales because of certain schematic. This is a reason of tendency to their parody rewriting.

The predominance of the didactic in these tales is manifested in animal characters' filling and structuring the plot. In the folklore tale of animals, images of characters, acquiring allegorical principle, retain some dominant features specific to a particular kind of animal. In the Christian fairy tale of the first type these features are not marked that gives characters abstract nature. The plot has a traditional structure of the moralizing story in which character's fault and its consequences in the form of punishment or awareness settle the content.

Another type of fairy tales is those in which the main characters are people and animals help them magically. For example, in T. Shiposhina's fairy tale *Familian Rukavishnikov* (Shiposhina, 2017) mice help drunkard to mend his way. These mice are the descendants of those mice that faithfully served his grandfather.

In the Y. Lavryashina's fairy tale *In the Cat's Kingdom*, it seems the opposite happens. The girl saves the kingdom of cats and at the same time the world of people from rats. But the logic of the inner path, which the character of the Christian fairy tale must pass through, shows that cats tend to test people, to understand if good or evil prevails.

The plot in such fairy tales is cyclical. A character has to prove several times that he is ready to perceive other values. At first it is entering an unfamiliar world of talking animals, and then there are dramatic incidents in this world, forcing the character to overcome his vices and flaws. Rukavishnikov in T. Shiposhina's fairy tale saves mice after disinfection and stops drinking. Nastya in Y. Lavryashina's fairy tale first learns about rats' attack on people, then that they threaten the kingdom of cats, and then she rescues the cat princess, sacrificing herself, being brave and suffering from pain.

A system of Christian values is revealed in such type of plot. It is important for a character to eradicate negatives not only in the external world, but also in his soul. In Y. Lavryashina's fairy tale the main character seems to defeat rats, but at the end of the fairy tale the cat princess dies. Her death denotes that changes in the soul of the main character have not completed.

In the fairy tales of the second type there is no open conversion, characteristic of parable-allegorical fairy tales. In T. Shiposhina's fairy tale *Family Rukavishnikov* the main character reunites with his family at the end. It is said that he and his son go not only to the museums and the zoos, but to the church.

At first glance artistic space and time in these fairy tales are organized by writers within the framework of realistic notions about these categories. In Y. Lavryashina's fairy tale autumn rainy day is described in details, when the characters meet a cat in the street. In T. Shiposhina's fairy tale the description of Rukavishnikov's multifamily unit is given. But thus writers tend to depict a Christian picture of the world with laws of existence of time and space peculiar to it. For example, in Yuri Lavryashina's fairy tale the hierarchy of spaces is obvious: the human - the cat's - the rat.

The empyrean world is given in the description of the natural space where the main character comes into after a bloodless victory over the rats: "Before running back, Zhenya stayed in the forest for a minute. He was alone, but now it seemed to be a pleasure. He was so exhausted

after visiting rats. The morning came into the grove after him. It reflected with smiles in the white trunks of birch, woke some birds, ready to give farewell songs before flying to the south. Arussula looked slyly under a brown, moist leaf, but Zhenya did not take it. He wanted to keep this world untouchable. And still he could not resist, he touched a golden strand of the birch. It was heard a crystal bell. So clear, so cold air was” (Lavryashina, 2017).

Conclusion

Christian fairy tale realizes problem-thematic complex, connected with the ideas of Christianity, within the genre structure of the traditional folklore tale about animals, using the parable structures in it. There are two variants of genre transformations related to the ratio of didactic and artistic aims in literary works. The plot of coming to the true understanding of life is the main principle of the parable-allegorical type. This type is connected with the plot canon of the moralizing story for children, on the one hand, and with the motive of pilgrimage, from Christian literature for adults, on the other. The main problem is the quest of the main character through some difficulties.

Thus, modern Christian literature for children reveals a tendency to seek the correlation of didactic and artistic principles in way of development for the structurally-imaginative realization of religious ideas.

Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Comparative Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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