

TOM ROBBINS' *B IS FOR BEER*: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S FICTION

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Abstract: Tom Robbins, an American novelist, endeavoured to write a children's story, which looks at the problem of drinking beer from totally new perspective. This article analyses Robbins' treatment of the supernatural, which is present in most fantasy books. Using sophisticated similes and comments of philosophy and religion, often humorous, Robbins traces the history of beer, which is interwoven into the framework of children's discourse. Contemporary children's fiction makes use of postmodernist tendencies, such as metafiction, playing with readers' expectations, or self-conscious narration. *B is for Beer* is one such type of children's novel which engages the reader into thinking of different realms of reality and thinking about text and its fabrics rather than plot.

Key words: fantasy, beer, children's literature, supernatural, marvellous, cautionary

Introduction

Tom Robbins (1936) is an American novelist, whose fiction is marked by eccentric characters, often searching some ultimate truth on their journeys and meeting various people in distant countries. Moreover, his long-lasting interest in religion or philosophy is frequently reflected also in his latest fiction – his only children's book titled *B is for Beer*, which came out in 2009. The subtitle of the novel *A Children's Book for Grownups, A Grown-up Book for Children* presupposes its content. The story features a five-year-old girl Gracie who drinks two bottles of beer out of curiosity and encounters a beer fairy which takes the girl on a trip to discover the mysteries of the origin of this alcoholic drink. The novel is set in an ordinary setting – Seattle family, looked at from the vantage point of an omniscient narrator. If we try to categorise the novel (which is an ordinary enterprise among literary theoreticians), we will arrive at several problems, as, firstly, no single categorisation exists, and secondly, many literary works fit into several genres or sub-genres at once (Nünning, 2006: 773). The aim of this article is not to provide an exhaustive enumeration of signs of the literary work based on particular typology. We will briefly explain the definition of fantasy, which will shed a light on the nature of the supernatural in the novel and help in tracing the development of the children's fiction.⁵⁸ We will also analyse new perspectives in children's fiction in Tom Robbins' novel *B is for Beer*.

⁵⁸ Nünning (2006) says that we need to distinguish between fantastic as a genre and as an aesthetic category. Valček (2006: 109) similarly differentiates between fantastic literature as a complex term encompassing literary works with supernatural beings, magic, etc., and fantasy as the type of fantastic literature. Stableford states that the notion of "fantasy" as a literary genre is so recent. Before 1969, the description "fantasy," with respect to literary works, was usually only applied to a variety of *children's* fiction. "Fantasy" became firmly established as the label for a popular commercial genre of adult fiction in the 1970s. (xxxv). Todorov similarly uses the term fantastic as a universal aesthetic category (cf. Traill, 2011; Todorov, 2010)

A Children's Book for Grownups, a Grown-up Book for Children

Tom Robbins is famous for using complex similes, coining new words, and employing metafictional devices in most of his novels, including his latest *B is for Beer*. His diction in his children's book is reminiscent of his older novels, but it is softened through his insertion of childish dialogues, childish perspective, and the layout of the novel (pictures, for example).

The novel provides both adult and young readers with diverse kinds of information and message. This is obviously true of all kinds of literary work; take as an example *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which is enjoyed by both target groups in different ways (children, for example, will not spot puns or intertextual links in such narratives). Thus we might speak of multi-level narratives. In *B is for Beer*, the structure of the novel is foregrounded through the diction and discourse. Seen as a satire or parody, Robbins disguises his narrative to make it look as if it is aimed at very young readers. It is conveyed, for example, through his extensive use of parentheses in which he addresses apparently childish audience. The narrator tells readers: "Don't pretend you've never done anything similar" (26). Robbins' diction, however, reveals that it is a teenage or even adult audience to whom the novel is targeted. From the narratological point of view, the implied readers are obviously adults⁵⁹, but narratees are children. Consider the beginning of the novel: "Have you ever wondered why your daddy likes beer so much? Have you wondered, before you fall asleep at night, why he sometimes acts so funny after he's been drinking beer? Well, Gracie Parkel wondered those same things" (9). The language as well as choice of words is very simple. The questions are addressed to younger audience (heterodiegetic overt narrator speaks in a distinct voice), but often the narrator uses unique similes, alliteration, humorous and philosophical comments, which youngsters can only hardly comprehend. Here is an example of the conversation between Gracie Parkel and her uncle Moe:

When brewers combine hops with yeast and grain and water...it magically produces an elixir so gassy with blue-collar cheer, so regal with glints of gold, so titillating with potential mischief, so triumphantly refreshing, that it seizes the soul and thrusts it toward that ethereal plateau where, to paraphrase Baudelaire, all human whimsies float and merge. (14-15)

The extract contains a metaphor, a reference to a French poet, and words which do not belong to children's vocabulary.

If the narrator says that "Uncle Moe didn't take sports very seriously. He called himself a philosopher, if you know what that is" (12), readers have the impression it is children who are being addressed because the narrator presupposes readers may not know some of the expressions. From the adult perspective this rhetoric construct may be perceived just to ensure the readers that what they are reading is children's fiction. Another example is Gracie's misunderstanding of some of the expressions, even mispronunciation of some words. Again, Uncle Moe asks Gracie if she is able to say "cyanocobalamin." She replies: "Cyno...cyho...cyoballyman...cy..." (16) Uncle Moe, a free-spirited man and a philosopher, uses slang, idiomatic expressions, and humorous words, which frequently remain unanswered. The question is whether readers will be able to grasp the vocabulary or phrases used by Robbins, such as inertia, cultural stereotyping, birthday escapades, vermin-gnawed, nonchalantly, napper, or stucco facade. Undoubtedly, as the novel is meant to be read to children by their parents (the narrator constantly ensures his readers), some vocabulary is always explained as a part of extension of vocabulary, but there are instances in the novel which mark higher style of the writer (complex similes and metaphors, intertextual links, or

⁵⁹ Implied reader is "the reader intended, even created, by the text" (Murfin and Ray, 1998: 171)

symbolic expressions). Consider the following extract in which the Beer Fairy explains the moments of knowing or experiencing the mystery after drinking beer:

“What’s it look like?”

The fairy smiled and rotated her wings. “Everything. And nothing. Both at the same time....It’s the meaning of meaning, the other that has no further, and the which of which there is no whicher” (97).

This has a clear resemblance with the conversation between the characters in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* or A.A.Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*.

The story is narrator-focalised, as most of the incidents are supplied with narrator’s evaluation of each event – mainly humorous similes and metaphors (extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator). When Gracie is at school, her teacher asks the children why they think that the king of Egypt commanded all Israelite boy babies to be drowned in the river, to which Gracie replies: “To keep ’em from growing up and drinking all the Egypt’s beer” (18). What follows is a mixture of a narrative report and comment:⁶⁰ “The teacher gave her a very long, very strange look before going on to answer the question herself, all the while exhaling the fumes that would have parted the Red Sea and saved Moses the trouble” (18). Sometimes, to return to the perception of the main protagonist, the narrator’s focus shifts. Robbins makes use of free indirect discourse to maintain childish perspective. “She wished she wanted nothing to do with beer ever, ever again! Beer could totally disappear from Planet Earth for all she cared. She was through with beer. She hated it. She wished the damn baby-drowning Egyptians had choked on their dumb, ick invention” (26)

Robbins often makes remarks about childish perspective in the world and the way children imagine the world. His novel is narrator-focalised rather than character-focalised despite the fact that most of the vocabulary, rhetorical figures, syntax (length of sentences, for example), characterisation, or layout marks the children’s discourse. Take as an example the way the narrator describes Gracie’s imagination:

Mostly, she just gazed through the drizzle-speckled window at the distant hills, as if expecting, actually longing, to detect otherworldly signs in the mist; signs, for example, of legendary stick Indians, signs of tricksters, phantom outlaws, enchanted dwarves...once or twice, she believed she saw something along those very lines, although she would have hesitated to bet her allowance on it. (27)

As to figures of speech which emphasize the childish discourse, onomatopoeic expressions are abundant. Chapter 9 starts with a short rhyming couplet:

Through the lips and over the gums
Look out belly here it comes

Glug glug glug. The golden liquid was so cold it gave Gracie’s teeth a sleigh ride.
Glug glug glug. It was so bitter it made skunky hair sprout on her tonsils. Glug glug
glug . . . burp! (57)

These lines allude to the style of A.A.Milne and his *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Thus, Robbins prepares the readers to accept the norms of the discourse and themes of the novel.

The subtitle of the novel *A Children’s Book for Grownups, A Grown-up Book for Children* indicates that the book is dedicated not only to adults, but also to older children. Robbins manages to create the fiction which may be termed as children’s literature by not

⁶⁰ In the narrative mode of comment one notices the mediator (i.e. the narrator) most. In this mode we find evaluations of the story’s events and characters, general observations or judgements. Such evaluations can be quite explicit (Available at: <http://www2.anglistik.uni-freiburg.de/intranet/englishbasics/NarrativeModes02.htm#Comment>)

only having child as a protagonist but also employing children's discourse and using pictures in his book. However, his employment of philosophical comments and sophisticated similes mark the style, which is enjoyed by adult readers.

The Nature of Supernatural in Contemporary Children's fiction

The novel is a mixture of the marvellous, the uncanny, the fantastic, cautionary tale as well as social satire. When we look at the story in depth, we discover various parallels between the novel and some classic stories for children, especially *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Winnie the Pooh*, or *Peter Pan*. Gracie Perkel resembles Alice in some ways: both are curious, persistent, and often feeling perplexed. The nature of supernatural is however of different nature. In Alice it is explained explicitly that what Alice experienced was a dream. In *B is for Beer* readers are constantly told that what Gracie sees is real. The nature of supernatural is also very novel – the mysterious creatures and incidents do not evoke mystery typical of traditional fairy tales or fantasy tales.

The structure of the novel, its motifs as well as its characters show signs of a fantasy, but taking into consideration the research into fantasy carried out by Tzvetan Todorov or J.R.R. Tolkien, Robbins' novel hardly fits into any of the categories proposed by the aforementioned scholars. Tolkien was the first to question the status of fantasy based on the reader's immersion in the story. "Genuine and skillful fantasy creates a 'secondary' belief (unlike the so-called 'primary' belief of myth and religion), putting the reader in a temporary state of enchantment. As soon as suspension of disbelief is disturbed, the spell is broken and, Tolkien adds, art has failed." (Todorov, 2010: 331). Since the story in *B is for Beer* deals with the supernatural powers, which are explained, therefore having a rational explanation, it would be dismissed as a fantasy genre. This is supported by Todorov's typology which "distinguishes among the uncanny, the marvellous, and the fantastic [. . .] the fantastic is characterized by a strong sense of hesitation. Fairy tales, in this typology, fall under the category of the marvellous, and gothic tales under the uncanny, while the essence of fantasy lies in the hesitation of the protagonist" (Todorov, 2010: 331). In this sense, the story would fit into the transition type "fantastic-uncanny". The problem is that Robbins' story is marked by self-conscious narration, in which the narrator draws attention to the story, thus disturbing the suspension of disbelief. Chapter 13 provides a self-reflexive narrative, the communication between the narrator and narratee: "[. . .] if you didn't figure that out on your own, your grandpa surely pointed it out to you – provided he's still hanging in there with you, which he may well be since your grandpa, after so many experiences of reading you bedtime stories, [. . .] stories that surely made his teeth feel squeaky, [. . .] he must have been so enthused that he poured himself a tall frosty one before he began – and if grandma hasn't been checking on him, perhaps a couple more by Chapter 13. Right?" (79) Self-conscious or metafictional narratives divert the reader's attention from the story. The narrative thus loses the status of a fantasy – art has failed, as Todorov put it, and the principles of fantasy have been broken.

Moreover, unlike the readers, the narrator pretends he believes in the supernatural for the sake of children. The narrator ensures his readers: "No, it hadn't been a dream, in case that's what you're thinking. The Beer Fairy was right there with Gracie, perched on her chest." (111). There is no alternative explanation to the appearance of a fairy in the real world other than the apparent intoxication of the main protagonist and her fantasizing. This deliberate lie on the part of the narrator also problematizes the categorization of fantasy as a genre, making it a parody of a modern fantasy genre.

According to *The Greenwood encyclopedia of folktales and fairy tales*, "most fantasy novels demonstrate similarities to fairy tales. They have inherited the fairytale system of characters set up by Vladimir Propp and his followers: hero/subject, princess/object, sender,

helper, giver, and antagonist.” (Todorov, 2010: 332) The difference between fairy tale and fantasy lies in the characterisation (more complex characters, typical maturation of the main protagonist), presence of a secondary world (otherworld) and the special passage between those worlds (mirror, hole), to name but a few. In *B is for Beer*, Tom Robbins borrows many typical features from fantasy: Gracie is taken by a fairy into the otherworld, or, to be precise somewhere between this (real) world and the other world, which the fairy calls Seam (a sort of transitory space between two worlds or realms – a channel). The Fairy explains: “[the Seam] is between it and is, between the fire and the smoke, between the mirror and the reflection, between the buzz and the bee, between the screw and the turning of the screw.” (67) This description only stirs both children and adult imagination and creates another mystery – the mystery of the real world, something people often ponder in their lives and which, to use Todorov’s categories, belongs to the marvellous rather than the fantastic.

New Dimensions of Children’s Fiction

Contemporary children’s fiction is very diverse. Looking at a list from the database of children’s books award, we may see fantasies, historical novels, autobiographies or picture books – to name just a few sub-genres – which are nowadays popular. Naturally, literature written for children has been developing and we can observe changes in its narrative structure, employment of various themes and diverse characters, as well as its layout. Reading Robbins’ *B is for Beer* it is possible to link the novel to the literature which has been generally known in literary circles as postmodern. Thacker and Webb give a comprehensive study of a children’s postmodern fiction and maintain that many most postmodern authors

disrupt the expectations of the reader through the self-reflexive narrative structure [. . .] or are parodic rewritings of fairy tales [. . .] elect to introduce the reader to the dialogic nature of the work [...] and the voice of the narrator unusually draws attention to the publishing conventions of the construction of a book as an artefact (2002: 157-158).

Based on the expectations readers bring to the process of reading the fiction (in our example children’s fiction), *B is for Beer* exemplifies this kind of narrative which subverts the norms of traditional storytelling through, for example, the breakdown of traditional norms in society. The question of what is acceptable (or relevant) and what is not in particular society (and which finds its expression in fiction) has been an issue in each era. By having a supernatural being, a Beer Fairy, whose mysteriousness is enhanced by her identity, and whose behaviour confronts with human one, Robbins tests the boundaries within children’s literature. When Gracie first sees The Beer Fairy, she asks her who she is, to which the fairy answers: “What do you think I am, a Jehovah’s Witness? Do I look like I might be selling Girl Scout cookies?” (61) On the one hand, we might view such fiction purely in terms of its aesthetic value and effect it is meant to evoke. *B is for Beer* is full of humorous remarks as well as images which, to more puritan audience, would cause a feeling of unease, if not disapproval. The main theme of the novel is “to learn the truth of beer,” however, this is not conveyed only by educational means. The main character tries the forbidden fruit. Gracie gets drunk, which is left unnoticed. Her misbehaviour is not punished. Gracie learns about the vile effects of drinking alcohol through her observation. The images of “upchuck on the carpet [. . .] still shiny and bright” (111) or “vomit-stained birthday dress” (79) may create either comic or unpleasant effects, rather than serve as a negative outcome of Gracie’s foul behaviour. On the other hand, the ideological implications are more than obvious. By means of Gracie’s adventurous journey through “the history of beer” Robbins points at various philosophical, didactic, and ethical issues. One of them concerns the effect of alcohol and its (mis)use in

society. Both Robbins and the beer fairy hold the opinion that a consummation of an alcohol may have a desirable effect.

Robbins in his novel for children offers the story of morals. Gracie is a very attentive and curious girl, who learns not only the history of the beer but throughout her journey she is exposed to various incidents and situations (mostly negative ones) which serve as a warning – here we can see an element known as a cautionary tale which Robbins borrowed from folk tales or fairy tales, which were once invented to be instructive. After Gracie returns back to reality, her mother Karla is astonished by her wisdom: “I swear Grace Olivia Perkel, sometimes you almost scare me, you’re so . . . so wise.” (117) This shows another aspect of a modern fantasy which is supported by the definition of fantasy: “Unlike fairy tales, the final goal of fantasy is seldom marriage and enthronement; in contemporary philosophical and ethical fantasy, it is usually a matter of spiritual maturation” (Todorov, 2010: 332).

The novel on its thematic level discusses various perspectives on beer and alcohol (philosophical, ethical, or historical). The novel has an instructional value and serves as a precaution to bad behaviour. Rather than another cautionary tale, Robbins’ “do-not-try-this-at-home” book tells the story of a child who breaks the rules, but the precaution is not one of its main themes. Robbins surprises his readers with topics which had not been discussed in children’s fiction before. Some of the story takes the form of an allegory. In the following extract from the novel we can see how alcohol changes man’s behaviour. This is naturally known to adults, but not to children. The Beer Fairy’s example and warrants have a particular force upon the child – Gracie in her fantasizing learns to help those in need and be brave when she prevents two drunk attackers from hurting a lady. Allegory lies in the description of the way a man passes out because of excessive drinking.

From a sitting position, she [the Beer Fairy] pointed her wand at the lummoX who’d swatted her. As if undecided in which direction to move, he was shifting his bleary gaze from the sobbing maiden a few yards above him to his friend who lay unmoving farther down the slope. The fairy took aim. She fired a single amber beer ray at the area behind his eyes where his brain ought to be. [...] When it struck its target, the beer ray would instantly raise the alcohol level in an imbibers blood to such a degree that his lights would begin to flicker, his curtains commence to close, and his internal clock to chime midnight. (102)

Topics such as alcohol consummation among children points at Robbins’ interest in shocking his readers and discussing various controversial issues from a more liberal perspective, which sometimes comes out as rather far-fetched. This only shows that the scope of children’s literature has widened.

Conclusion

Tom Robbins in his book for children titled *B is for Beer: A Children’s Book for Grownups, A Grown-up Book for Children* brings to younger audience the topic, which is part of discussion of adults – alcohol, namely beer consumption. Such “taboo” topic is presented, on one hand, in a humorous way, and, on the other, with didactic overtones. Robbins elaborates on the traditional use of supernatural in fantasy tales, creating a new type of fairy with human-like traits and occupying the real world. In the self-conscious narrative he maintains a very close communication with his readership – both children and adult, as he not only uses a small girl as the main protagonist with childish dialogues and problems typical of children, but also creates a space for older audience through “practical philosophical” comments, puns, and amusing similes.

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