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**Neither useful nor useless:
The child in Kate Chopin's fiction**

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyze the figure of a child in the fiction of Kate Chopin, an American proto-feminist writer, on the example of her novel *The Awakening* and three short stories: "Beyond the Bayou", "Désirée's Baby" and "Ripe Figs". Characters are analyzed here in terms of James Phelan's mimetic, thematic and synthetic components as well as character's dimensions and functions. It is argued that children in Chopin's fiction contribute to the development of the narrative by transforming the dimensions of adult characters into their functions. Chopin portrays two types of children common in the literature of the period: the economically useful child (a little laborer) and the economically useless but emotionally priceless child (a mascot). A third type of child emerges especially in Chopin's short stories: the child that is extremely useful in psychological and moral terms. This figure adds moral depth to the narratives, prompts the adult characters to evolve and serves as a source of in-text instabilities or as a medium of transferring the narrative tensions. The child's psychological and moral value on the level of the plot translates into their narrative significance on the level of story construction.

Key words

child, usefulness, uselessness, Kate Chopin, dimension, function

**Ani przydatne, ani nieprzydatne
– dziecko w twórczości Kate Chopin****Abstrakt**

Artykuł omawia znaczenie postaci dziecka w twórczości amerykańskiej pisarki proto-feministycznej Kate Chopin na przykładzie powieści *Przebudzenie* (*The Awakening*) oraz trzech opowiadań: *Beyond the Bayou*, *Désirée's Baby* i *Ripe Figs*. Podstawą analizy postaci jest podejście Jamesa Phelana, opisujące mimetyczne, tematyczne i syntetyczne elementy postaci literackich i wprowadzające pojęcia ich aspektów oraz funkcji. Dzieci w twórczości Chopin przyczyniają się do rozwoju narracji poprzez przekształcanie aspektów postaci dorosłych w ich funkcje. Chopin konstruuje dwa typy postaci dziecięcych powszechne w literaturze jej epoki: dziecko przydatne ekonomicznie (małego robotnika) oraz dziecko nieprzydatne gospodarczo, ale bezcenne pod względem emocjonalnym (maskotkę). Ponadto szczególnie w opowiadaniach pisarki pojawia się trzeci rodzaj dziecka: bohater o wielkim znaczeniu psychologicznym i moralnym. Ta postać nadaje opowieści moralną głębię, motywuje rozwój i przemianę postaci dorosłych, a także stanowi źródło wewnątrztekstowych niestabilności lub pełni funkcję środka przekazu napięć narracyjnych. Psychologiczna i moralna wartość postaci dziecięcych na poziomie fabularnym przekłada się na ich znaczenie na poziomie konstrukcji opowiadań.

Słowa kluczowe

dziecko, przydatność, nieprzydatność, Kate Chopin, aspekt postaci, funkcja postaci

Kate Chopin, born in 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri, was an American proto-feminist writer best known for her works exploring the subject of discovering female identity and rebelling against the cultural norms governing the thoroughly male-dominated South. The aim of the present article is to discuss the motif of a child in Chopin's fiction. It will be argued that Chopin introduces young characters into her works in a number of functions, all of which are crucial for the development of a given story.

It might be appropriate to start the analysis with some preliminary comments on Chopin's attitude to children and literature. The author wrote over 100 short stories, about a third of which were labelled as "children's stories". It is vital to observe, though, that this categorization is based mainly on the fact that the stories in question were published in children's or family magazines, such as *Harper's Young People* or *Youth's Companion*. Nevertheless, Chopin never ventured to write a classical fairy tale story: she held strong belief that children and teenagers should not be protected from the 'dangers' of serious, adult literature, hence she tried to construct her children's stories in a very mature, elegant style, similar to the one that she employed to write stories too perverse to be published at the time. Chopin considered children conscious readers, keen observers and reflective beings. It is not surprising, therefore, that in her fiction the figure of the child is typically portrayed with reverence and certain gravitas: "[t]hroughout her writings, young people feature as subjects in their own right, as metaphor and as the focus for far-reaching reflections on psychological, cultural or historical possibilities" (Knights 2008: 45). Indeed, Chopin constructed young characters in her stories and novels not as embellishments or markers of verisimilitude, but as vital elements of the narrative influencing its progression.

In analyzing the figure of the child in Chopin's fiction, James Phelan's theory on literary characters proves especially

useful, as the realist works of the writer resist methods of interpretations relying on perceiving literary characters as purely artificial constructs, utterly separated from real human beings. As Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga and Jadwiga Węgrodzka rightly observe: “In contrast to scholars who refuse to grant characters any similarity to real persons, Phelan attempts to accommodate the well-known tendency of the readers to treat character as such” (Terentowicz-Fotyga, Węgrodzka 2015: 17). In *Reading People, Reading Plots. Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (1989), Phelan distinguishes three components of the character: mimetic, thematic and synthetic. It is the mimetic element that refers to the aforementioned plausibility of a given character and it is the prerequisite of an efficient mimetic illusion. Non-professional readers, represented by narrative audience (term borrowed by Phelan from Peter Rabinowitz), tend to perceive characters as real people, whose appearance, behavior and background cannot differ radically from their own, if they are to be plausible; this kind of perception is possible solely in the cases of characters with well-developed mimetic elements. The thematic component adds a symbolic depth to a character, showing her as a representative of an idea, belief, group or class larger than the character herself. Finally, the synthetic element points to the fact that each literary character is in fact a constructed figure belonging to the fictional world. The artificiality of characters tends to be unnoticed by those who enjoy the mimetic illusion, but while the synthetic may be more or less foregrounded, it is always present (Phelan 1989: 3).

Furthermore, Phelan proposes a distinction between functions and dimensions of characters:

A dimension is any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure. (Phelan 1989: 9)

Therefore, the progression of a given narrative contributes to transforming dimensions into functions, though not all dimensions undergo this kind of conversion. Interestingly, dimensions and functions apply to all three components, but in the case of the synthetic, every dimension is necessarily also a synthetic function (Phelan 1989: 14). Finally, Phelan introduces one more significant distinction: between tensions and instabilities. Tensions are certain divergences created by discourse of a given work, discrepancies “of value, belief, opinion, knowledge, expectation – between authors and/or narrators, on the one hand, and the authorial audience on the other” (Phelan 1989: 15). These tensions are not to be mistaken with instabilities, phenomena of similar nature to tensions, but occurring within the story. Instabilities happen between the characters, they are caused by fictional situations and may be complicated or resolved in the course of the action. Phelan’s theory will serve as a theoretical framework for the subsequent discussion of the child in Kate Chopin’s fiction.

The title of this article may appear misleading, or at least confusing, but there is a method to it. In 1994, sociologist Viviana Zelizer published a book entitled *Pricing a Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, in which she argued that between the 1870s and the 1930s there was a shift in the social and cultural significance of children. The change involved moving from perceiving a child as economically useful to seeing it as economically useless, yet emotionally priceless. Zelizer proves that American children had always worked and it was not until the end of the 19th century that child labor began to be commonly seen as morally wrong. Reformers struggled to eliminate the image of a useful child: the one that helps parents not only with housework, but also earns money in factories and on farms. Thus emerged the modern child, economically useless but of great emotional value. This useless child no longer works, and its main function is to bring joy to the family and whole community. The shift from useful to use-

less child, as one can imagine, deals with extremes, and therefore its implications were often extreme as well. The useless child was frequently presented as having ornamental rather than practical function: the child was supposed to be beautiful and adorable, to play instruments or recite poems, to stay quiet in the presence of adults and to be as thoughtless as possible. This new approach resulted, among other things, in the excessive protection of children against “adult” problems, such as those described in the aforementioned ambitious literature, allegedly inappropriate for young readers. Kate Chopin clearly opposed this idea. She recognized the problem of both useful and useless child, and addressed it, among other works, in her second novel, *The Awakening*.

In *Kate Chopin and the subject of childhood* (2008), Pamela Knights highlights the importance of the fact that Chopin presented two strikingly different girls in *The Awakening*: an African American girl employed by one of the characters and an upper-class girl whose sole task is dancing at an elegant party. The former child is, in fact, mentioned only in passing in the description of her employer’s activity:

Madame Lebrun was busily engaged at the sewing-machine. A little black girl sat on the floor, and with her hands worked the treadle of the machine. The Creole woman does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperilling her health. (Chopin 2015: 414)

This brief introduction of the child figure indicates that the girl is not perceived by Madame Lebrun – or any other adult present in the room – as a complete, valuable being with her own identity, but rather as a purely functional tool. The ironic sentence on the nature of wealthy Creole women strengthens this idea, signalling that imperilling a black servant’s health would be perfectly acceptable. The girl does not possess any mimetic function of her own in the novel: her role is perhaps to enhance the plausibility of Madame Lebrun as an upper-class

lady. Nevertheless, the thematic dimension, later turned into function, is clearly visible, as the child represents the oppressed young laborers. Just a few pages further in the narrative, another girl is presented, and her description is somewhat more developed:

A little girl performed a skirt dance in the center of the floor. The mother played her accompaniments and at the same time watched her daughter with greedy admiration and nervous apprehension. She need have had no apprehension. The child was mistress of the situation. She had been properly dressed for the occasion in black tulle and black silk tights. (Chopin 2015: 417)

Interestingly, also this child is presented predominantly in relation to adults: the girl is supposed to be a charming object of everyone's awe, which is prompted by her mother's "greedy admiration" and concern with whether the performance is successful or not. Hence the mimetic dimensions, although more developed than in the case of the servant, are transformed into thematic functions and once again focused primarily on how the child performs its designed role in the society. Due to her status as a member of white upper class, the dancer's function happens to be solely decorative.

Obviously, by juxtaposing the thematic functions of both girls, Chopin comments powerfully on the class and race inequality.¹ Simultaneously, though, she presents the two radically different types of the American child, later characterized by Zelizer: a little laborer and a mascot. However, I would argue that in general Chopin recognizes and frequently describes yet another type of a child: a child neither economically useful, nor reduced to purely entertaining and ornamental role. This third type in Chopin's fiction can be viewed as extremely useful, but in psychological and moral rather than economic terms.

¹ On racial inequalities and slavery in "The Awakening" see Ewell (1999).

In Chopin's "Beyond the Bayou", a short story about overcoming mental boundaries, the protagonist, La Folle, is a middle-aged black woman who lives in a cabin near a plantation and never crosses the bayou separating her from the outer world.² Traumatized in childhood, La Folle cannot cope with the fear and has little contact with the outside, but is frequently visited by Chéri, a 10-year-old son of the plantation owner. She genuinely loves the child and the boy adores and respects her. One day, Chéri accidentally shoots himself in the leg and La Folle immediately takes him to the verge of the bayou and shouts for help. Not hearing any response, she decides to carry the youth to the doctor, crossing the ultimate boundary and, by the same token, overcoming her limitations. The child, therefore, is an instrument of deep transition here, as it enables La Folle to defeat a phobia cultivated for approximately forty years. However, this aiding function of the boy is not limited to fighting a minor space-related fear – a mere inconvenience. Indeed, having crossed the bayou, La Folle explores a whole new world, which provides her with the new identity: no longer treated as a madwoman, she becomes a conscious, accepted member of the community. Furthermore, she decides to visit convalescing Chéri at his home, making a powerful statement by knocking on the door of the plantation owners. La Folle, a slave, performs an act which may be viewed as highly symbolic: she crosses the boundary between herself and the white upper class. The act of crossing the bayou, made possible by the affection towards the boy, becomes a sort of a revelation: "A look of wonder and deep content crept into her face as she watched for the first time the sun rise upon the new, the beautiful world beyond the bayou" (Chopin 2015: 67). This kind of revelation may lead La Folle to a great disappointment, which is prompted to the authorial audience by a literary allusion to Shakespeare's Miranda's fascination with the "brave new world". The white world may not be as wonder-

² See Dara (1996).

ful for the old black slave as she expects it to be. However, even if the description of her wonder on the newly discovered world is ironic, there is no doubt that the new perspective, whether blissful or not, would not have been gained if it was not for the child. Once she overcomes her fear of the outer world, everything seems possible.

“Beyond the Bayou” exemplifies a technique applied frequently in Chopin’s stories: the effect of the emotional and psychological usefulness of the child is obtained by the young character’s contribution to the development of adult characters and of the narrative itself. As the relationship between the child and the adult character usually requires certain action on the part of the latter, the child (or its needs, to be more specific) propels the progression of the narrative, which – in turn – enables the conversion of adults’ dimensions into their functions. The conversion is not particularly smooth in Chopin’s works, it usually involves major changes in characters’ fictional situation. It can be argued that La Folle’s main distinguishing mimetic dimension is her fear. However, it is signaled that she also has other hidden attributes, bravery and self-consciousness, which, due to her love of Chéri, are transformed into a mimetic function. The function, moreover, has not only a mimetic nature, but is also of deep thematic significance, as it encompasses the development of a new, more aware approach of the slave towards her white masters.

The motif of children helping adults in gaining a certain kind of freedom and identity is frequently deployed in Chopin’s fiction, but not always in such heartfelt and at least apparently positive narratives as “Beyond the Bayou”. In “Désirée’s Baby”, an infant serves as a cause of tragedy. Young and beautiful Désirée, whose origin is unknown, marries a wealthy and respected man, Armand, and gives birth to a child, whose skin is a little too dark. Furious Armand deduces that his wife must have a drop of black blood, and, incapable of handling such a disgrace, expels both the mother and the child. Although

Désirée is supposed to go back to her mother's house, she disappears in the forest, never to be seen again. It finally turns out that it is Armand who is partially black, but the calamity cannot be undone. The innocent baby leads, in a crooked way, to the discovery by the male protagonist of an unwanted – and, in his opinion, degrading – racial identity, which is by no means a positive experience.³

Moreover, the story features one more vital young character. Désirée notices the otherness of her baby only when she observes a one-fourth black boy fanning the infant. The similarity of their skin color strikes her and leaves her speechless. The quadroon boy, this little obedient slave, becomes a silent proof, a medium revealing the harsh truth. Although clearly innocent and unaware of conveying a calamitous message, the two boys constitute an axis of the family tragedy. Furthermore, the skin color of both boys is much more than just their mimetic attribute: it is a thematic dimension, transformed by the progression into the thematic function. The boys constitute telling elements in the discussion of the problem of race, becoming bearers of the racial history and victims of the oppressive southern society of the white upper class.

On the level of the narrative structure, another vital mechanism comprising the child's contribution to the progression is employed. The major narrative instability in the text is the one between Désirée and Armand and it is caused by the discovery that the baby is black. The resulting action constitutes the most significant move of the story's progression. Désirée's mimetic and thematic dimensions (such as her unknown origin and position in the society) are transformed into functions – even though the functions rely on the false assumption that Désirée has a drop of black blood. The satisfactory resolution of the instability is not granted by the author: Armand learns

³ On the subject of race in Kate Chopin's fiction see Goodwyn (1994) and Taylor (1989). The notion of the drop of black blood in "Désirée's Baby", as well as in other works of American fiction, is explored by Palumbo-DeSimone (2002).

the truth and so do the readers, but Désirée is already gone at the time and in all probability she dies unconscious of the groundlessness of her husband's accusations. In this sense, the story achieves closure, but not completeness. As proposed by Phelan, closure "refers to the way in which a narrative signals its end, whereas completeness refers to the degree of resolution accompanying the closure" (Phelan 1989: 17-18). Ultimately, then, the infant in "Désirée's Baby" causes the unresolvable instability which is central to the whole progression. Similarly to Chéri in "Beyond the Bayou", the baby serves as a motivation for converting certain adult characters' dimensions into functions.

As mentioned above, Chopin constructs young characters not as mere additions to adults, but as active and often quite reflective agents. "Ripe Figs" is an excellent one-page long story, published in 1893 in *Vogue*. It describes a process of waiting: Babette, a girl, is promised by her godmother that she will be able to visit her cousins "when the figs were ripe" (Chopin 2015: 241). The girl waits impatiently (or so it seems at the beginning), but reasonably: she examines the trees carefully every day, checking the leaves and the fruit, as well as musing on the weather. When the figs are finally ripe, she takes great effort to present her godmother with the proof that the terms of the contract have been fulfilled. The child is therefore not discouraged by the abstractness or ridiculousness of the deal, but approaches it in a mature and, out of necessity, patient way, and eventually has enough courage and reason to assert her rights. It is worth noting, moreover, that presenting and executing the deal, the godmother treats the child in a bizarre way: on the one hand, she uses the extraordinary method of counting time and expects the child to follow it, and on the other, she is surprised when the girl announces that the time has come. The aunt relies on idiosyncratic, poetic, if not immature, discourse, whereas Babette respects the terms of the

agreement, which makes her an active and thoughtful character.

Indeed, the analysis of particular components of the characters of Babette and the godmother, Maman-Nainaine, reveals an interesting paradox. Babette, despite clearly being the actant and main protagonist of the story, is not described in terms of physical appearance or habits. The weird godmother, on the other hand, vaguely resembling a typical fairy-tale figure and thereby displaying a synthetic dimension, is presented from various perspectives. Readers learn, for example, that she had a “muslin cap standing like an aureole about her white, placid face” (Chopin 2015: 241), but also that she frequently used strange references to nature as a method of counting time. In fact, the ripening of figs was not the only instance of this tendency, as the godmother mentions also meeting her relative “when the chrysanthemums are in bloom” (Chopin 2015: 241). This mysterious mimetic dimension of the character, strengthening only her synthetic dimension, is moreover a source of a major tension presented in the text. Indeed, the godmother’s discursive singularity constitutes something that the readers do not understand. The lack of shared knowledge between the narrator and the audience is subsequently affirmed and its importance is amplified, because the information on the terms of the agreement is followed by an interesting assertion: “Not that the ripening of figs had the least thing to do with it, but that is the way Maman-Nainaine was” (Chopin 2015: 241). At the same time, the tension cannot be perceived as an in-text instability, because Babette is well aware of Maman-Nainaine’s habit, which she confirms by following the aunt’s instructions imperturbably, without questioning their reasonableness. Hence even though the girl’s action does not result in resolving the tension (because eventually the readers do not receive a satisfactory explanation of the aunt’s behavior), her character undoubtedly constitutes a kind of platform on which the tension is mediated, and therefore

she contributes to the story's uncertainty and mysteriousness. Undoubtedly, the importance of the figure of the child in the story is based on a different mechanism than those presented in "Beyond the Bayou" or "Désirée's Baby". The child does not propel the narrative progression by means of the transformation of certain adults' dimensions into functions, but rather by acting as the medium of transferring the narrative tension.

The nonobvious nature of the characters' presentation in "Ripe Figs" is signaled at one more point. The narrator mentions that "Maman-Nainaine was as patient as the statue of la Madone, and Babette as restless as a humming-bird" (Chopin 2015: 241). If the sentence appears to be accurate at a certain point of the narrative (i.e. at the beginning of the description of the waiting process), the course of the events eventually proves that quite the opposite is true: real patience characterizes the girl. This obvious contradiction is perhaps the most noticeable manifestation of the synthetic components and functions of both characters; a procedure especially telling, as such mechanisms are extremely rare in the prose of Chopin, deeply rooted in realist traditions.⁴

After publishing *The Awakening* and such stories as "A Pair of Silk Stockings", Kate Chopin met with fierce criticism as far as her portrayals of mothers and children were concerned. She was attacked for introducing characters of mothers who loved their children "sometimes" or only to a certain extent. The outrage of Chopin's contemporaries towards her description of motherly love resulted in an unjust but widespread belief that the author treated the figure of child – and, by implication, children as such – with disregard. However, such voices of criticism clearly neglect all the instances of representing children as active, intelligent and vital for the development of Chopin's stories. Some of the children in her fiction were indeed more passive than the others, and many were not in fact described in great detail – as Pamela Knights observes, "in the area of

⁴ On realism in Chopin's fiction see, e.g., Skaggs (1988).

childhood, as in others, Chopin's texts are never univocal but (...) work with a rich, and often contradictory, range of materials, taking up concerns of widespread contemporary interest" (Knights 2008: 46). In numerous cases, the children's mimetic components do not rely greatly on personal attributes, but rather on their relationships with adult characters. What contributes most to their plausibility is the affection they receive, and their obvious dependence on their caretakers. Even though Chopin not always addressed such issues directly, she constructed her children characters upon a conviction that the extra-textual knowledge of the audience will suffice to fill the descriptive gaps or those created by intended understatements. The brief descriptions apply especially to those young characters whose thematic functions are foregrounded (such as the two girls in *The Awakening*). As argued above, however, even such scarcely described characters may have a crucial function in Chopin's fiction.

All in all, the child in Chopin's fiction is neither economically useful nor decorative – it is always incorporated into a given story for a very significant reason, as it is often the figure of a child that contributes to clarifying the mechanisms regulating the adult world, as well as to adding certain moral and psychological depth to the story. Additionally, the usefulness of children in Chopin's fiction is not restricted to their psychological and moral pricelessness on the level of the plot, but it also translates into their narrative significance on the level of story construction, as they contribute greatly to the progression of the narrative.

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