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Children's theatricals and other games in E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness*

JADWIGA WĘGRODZKA

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Abstract

The motif of children-characters making a theatrical performance, found in many children's texts, is considered on the basis of E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) where it is made parallel with children's other playful activities. Though an improvised performance in Nesbit's humorous novel contrasts with a controlled and structured activity in Almond's more sombre text, the two books share a metafictional interest in the power of imagination and its relation to hidden aspects of reality. Play-as-performance is also parallel to other games which introduce elements of the fantastic, of metaleptic transgression, and of ritual initiation. Both novels link childhood, imagination and creativity in a way reminiscent of Romantic ideas.

Key words

E. Nesbit, David Almond, *The Enchanted Castle*, *Kit's Wilderness*, play, game, performance

Zabawy teatralne w powieściach *The Enchanted Castle* E. Nesbit i *Kit's Wilderness* Davida Almonda

Abstrakt

Obecny w wielu tekstach motyw teatralnego przedstawienia organizowanego przez dzieci omawiany jest na przykładzie powieści E. Nesbit *Zaczarowany zamek* (1907) oraz *Powrót z bezkresu* (1999) Davida Almonda. Oba teksty ustanawiają ekwiwalencję między przedstawieniem, mającym wiele cech zabawy, a innymi czynnościami dzieci. Choć wiele różni humorystyczną powieść Nesbit od znacznie poważniejszego tekstu Almonda, łączą je motywy metafikcyjne oraz zainteresowanie mocą wyobraźni zwłaszcza w relacji do ukrytych wymiarów rzeczywistości. Inne zabawowe czynności dziecięcych postaci wprowadzają elementy fantastyczne, metalepsję, a także sugerują rytuał inicjacji. Obie powieści wykorzystują motywy dzieciństwa, wyobraźni i twórczości w sposób bliski paradygmatowi romantycznemu.

Słowa kluczowe

E. Nesbit, David Almond, *Zaczarowany zamek*, *Powrót z bezkresu*, zabawa, gra, przedstawienie

1. Introduction

Play remains most firmly associated with children even though evolutionary perspectives make it obvious that play is natural for many animals[1] while sociological studies provide various examples of play in adult behaviour. There are many different approaches to play in human cultures and in the specific context of childhood, many ways of classifying it, as well as numerous and historically changeable attitudes to this phenome-

[1] Compare Chapters 3 and 4 devoted to animal play in *Children's Play: Understanding Children's Worlds* by Peter K. Smith (2010: 41-60).

non.[2] It is interesting to note that the Puritan tradition made play suspicious in Britain from the seventeenth to early nineteenth century. For example, Isaac Watts's poems for children *Divine and Moral Songs* (1715) refer to "wanton play" (in Song 18) and contrast it with positive examples of childhood piety which the poems seek to inculcate (Węgrodzka 2016: 467-8). At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the writer and educator Maria Edgeworth approved of play only if it followed the child's faithful discharge of all duties: for example, in her moral tale "Lazy Lawrence" a virtuous boy enjoys a ball game with his friends only after 10 to 12 hours of work in the garden (Edgeworth 1897: 34). The Victorian period vindicated and even sentimentalised children; play was recognised as a legitimate, desirable and endearing aspect of childhood. Sports activities (especially for boys) were seen as valuable in personal and social development of children while imaginative games of make-believe became an emblem of childhood and – with a bow towards Romanticism – aligned childhood with creativity. The cultural importance of play in relation to children is confirmed by the fact that such famous children's books as R.L. Stevenson's *The Treasure Island* (1883), J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) or E. Nesbit's *The Magic City* (1910) derive from elaborate make-believe games played by adults with children while other texts more or less directly celebrate children's imagination as a creative power: for instance, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), Mrs. Molesworth's *The Cuckoo Clock* (1877) or Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* (1905).

I want to examine the motif of children's play in a more specialised sense of theatrical performance on the basis of E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (1999). While the two books are divided by many

[2] For cultural significance of play compare the classic book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* by Johan Huizinga; for an overview of definitions and attitudes to play see Smith (2010: 21-40).

obvious differences, they also share a metafictional interest in the power of imagination and link childhood, imagination and creativity in way reminiscent of Romantic ideas. I also intend to prove that play-as-performance and children's other games in the analysed novels serve to introduce elements of the fantastic, of metaleptic transgression, and of ritual initiation.

2. Children's theatricals

While in Polish there are two different words to distinguish between a child's play (*zabawa*) and a theatrical play (*sztuka*), in English one can use the word *play* for both. This double sense of the word "play" serves as a starting point of the present article which considers the motif of children putting on theatrical plays in two novels divided by nearly a century: E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* from 1907 and David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* from 1999. In analysing children-characters' activities I will use elements of structural and semiotic analysis of aspects of the story world and the level of discourse, and refer to Roger Caillois's classification of various types of play. A comparative analysis of the novels will present similarities and differences in the authors' treatment of play, imagination and creativity.

Johan Huizinga's comprehensive definition of play in *Homo ludens* includes performances as a type of play covered by his research:

> [...] play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life". Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call "play" in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. (Huizinga 1949: 28)

Other researchers highlight imaginative aspects of play. For instance, Wincenty Okoń in *Zabawa i rzeczywistość* defines play as an activity motivated by pleasure and based on imagination creating a new reality (1987: 44). He considers playing as a way of relating to consensual reality and of experiencing it not only in a pleasurable mode but also in terms of harmony between the human being and his or her world.

Children's games and theatrical performances share many features: they require special time and space as well as the presence of certain rules (script); they aim at providing enjoyment or fun. Moreover, both impose on the participant a secondary (fictional) personality (Cieślikowski 1985: 215) and involve an allotment of roles. Also both impose on the ordinary space some imaginary or extraordinary "superstructure" (1985: 215) and both definitely have creational character since the illusion of a different world has to be constantly supported. A child's play and a theatrical play can be repeated – though without producing identical realisations. In spite of similarities, Jerzy Cieślikowski claims that in a child's play a total merging of the primary personality with its secondary – playful – role does not entail theatricality since the play is not aimed at any outside viewer:

> The act of a perfect fusion with the imaginary, while no attention is spared for the preparation of scenery or for the presence of the outside (or inside) observer – may only concern an individual game involving one single player. Already with two players – even if linked in the most perfect agreement – there appears a need for some external considerations, which may involve at least some measure of control of oneself and the playing companion, or else may concern new suggestions. (Cieślikowski 1985: 218, trans. J. W.)

According to Cieślikowski, every game involving more than one player, may be called theatrical. The scholar stresses that such a game must have a script defining the required roles, the type

of imaginary imposition, and even rudiments of dialogic exchanges (Cieślikowski 1985: 218).

Out of a great number of narratives describing children's theatrical performances this paper examines two books which illustrate very different uses of the motif of a play put up by children. In their different ways both books link the idea of performance with the children's less theatrical, playful activities in a relation of equivalence. The two selected books share a special – theatre-like – setting, assumption of roles inside an imaginary world within the ordinary reality, the presence of a script with various degrees of control, and the motif of an audience in the sense of observer-characters outside the secondary world of the play.

E. Nesbit (1858-1924) was a widely-read author of children's fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among her most popular novels are *Five Children and It* (1902), a magical adventure story, and *The Railway Children* (1905), a family story. The two novels represent two types of fiction – fantastic and mimetic – which Nesbit practised throughout her career. *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) belongs to the former type. The book's main theatrical event involves four children preparing and performing a play of Beauty and the Beast. They perform it for their teacher during holidays which they spend in the school due to illness in the family. The "theatre" is organised in the school dining room carefully prepared for the performance, complete with a stage and scenery, and seats for the audience:

> It was a real stage […] – the dining tables pushed close together and covered with pink-and-white counterpanes. It was a little unsteady to walk on, but very imposing to look at. […] Rows of chairs had been placed across the other end of the room – all the chairs in the house, it seemed […]. (Nesbit 1968: 107-108)

The children-actors wear ingenious costumes: "Jimmy, enlarged by pillows under Gerald's best overcoat […], a Turkish

turban on his head [...] opened the first act [...]", while "Gerald rustled in, elegant in Mademoiselle's pink dressing-gown [...]" (Nesbit 1968: 109). The narrator's descriptions of the children's preparations consistently emphasise their imaginative ingenuity which allows them to change pieces of furniture, fabrics and ordinary domestic objects into props and scenery.

In contrast to the carefully prepared theatrical setting and costumes, the children's utterances are largely improvised since they "had spent the afternoon in arranging their costumes and so had left no time for rehearsing what they had to say" (Nesbit 1968: 110). The plot of the traditional fairy tale serves as a script of the performance but they feel entirely free to improvise within its limits. The performance of the play gives much pleasure to the actors and to the audience: "[...] it delighted them and it charmed their audience" (Nesbit 1968: 110). While the narrator's descriptions – on the one hand – evidently emphasise the children's ingenuity in preparing and executing their improvised but spirited theatricals, on the other hand the narrator's gentle irony introduces frequent touches of humour:

> The [Beauty's] sisters were almost *too* natural in their disagreeableness, and Beauty's annoyance when they splashed her princess's dress with real soap and water was considered a miracle of good acting (Nesbit 1968: 111; emphasis original)

However, the most heavily emphasised element of the theatrical set-up is the audience: the teacher for whom the children organise the play and the maid they also invite, seem too few for the ambitious troupe. So the children make seven puppets to occupy some of the numerous chairs collected in the theatre room:

> Their bodies were bolsters and rolled-up blankets, their spines were hockey sticks and umbrellas. [...] their hands were gloves stuffed out with handkerchiefs; and their faces were the paper

> masks painted in the afternoon by the untutored brush of Gerald. (Nesbit 1968: 107-108)

Particular stress is put on the motif of the audience when the puppets suddenly come alive and start clapping their stuffed-glove hands. This terrifies the teacher and the maid who run away from the room as well as the actors so that the performance stops before the play is finished. In spite of their fear the actors are also terrified but courageously take it upon themselves to lead the animated puppets away from the school. Such an ending of the theatrical episode introduces an emphatic element of horror to the humorously described performance of the children. The animation of the inanimate introduces a transgressive motif typical of horror, though it needs to be stressed that horror motifs were not conventional in children's fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nesbit's playing with horror motifs in a humorous children's story may be seen as a forerunner of the type of fiction prevalent now.

In the plot of Nesbit's novel the sudden animation of the puppets is explained as a result of a wish granted by a magic ring. Irritated by the meagre applause of just two members of the audience, one of the children utters a careless wish: "I wish those creatures we made were alive. We should get something like applause then" (Nesbit 1968: 111). The ring is one of the props in the performance: Gerald who performs the role of the Beast gives Beauty the ring and says:

> This is a magic ring that will give you anything you wish. When you desire to return [...] put on the ring and utter your wish. Instantly you will be at my side. (Nesbit 1968: 111)

The actor-characters assume that the power of the ring, defined during the performance, applies – fictionally and playfully – only to the secondary world of the play. But the power of the ring unexpectedly applies to the world outside of the play

and transforms a part of the reality beyond the stage (the audience). Such an operation of magic in the story world of the novel may be seen in terms of a metaleptic transgression: an element apparently belonging to one level of the story world penetrates into another level.

The theatrical episode in Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* metafictionally highlights the power of imagination to shape not only the secondary reality of the play but also to influence the ordinary reality. The creation of the secondary, theatrical reality of the play involves the use of ordinary imaginative powers connected with participation in any kind of fiction. The transformation of the puppets into living beings, however, is presented as the work of magic. As a transformative power, magic can be seen as a metaphorical equivalent of imagination. While the children find much enjoyment in exercising their imagination while preparing the play and its additional audience, the horror of the puppets coming to life may be seen as a warning against letting imagination play too freely – a repeated motif in Nesbit's fiction (Briggs 1987: 265; Węgrodzka 2007: 183).

The second author in whose novel a performance of a play by children serves as an important motif is David Almond (born in 1951), a British author of acclaimed children's novels often linked with magic realism in children's fiction. In his novel *Kit's Wilderness* (1999) children (teens) perform a Christmas play based on *Snow Queen* at their school. The children-actors, the school setting, and the script based on a fairy story make the episode similar to the Beauty and the Beast performance in Nesbit's novel. However, in Almond's text the play is a much more serious and "professional" affair: it is supervised by one of the teachers, tightly controlled by the script, takes a long time to prepare and rehearse, and is performed for the whole local community. The performance involves elaborate lighting, music and scenery: "[…] dim lights inside, rows of chairs facing the brilliantly-lit ice world on the stage"; "[m]usic

played: squeaky violins and whistles, sometimes a distant wailing voice […]" (Almond 2008: 161). There are specially prepared programmes and thematic decorations on the school walls:

> […] first years dressed in silver foil and silver slippers passed out programmes. […] The lobby had great paintings and photographs of glaciers and ice floes. There were paintings of polar bears and penguins. […] Maps showed how the Ice Age once held the northern world in its grip. (Almond 2008: 161)

Young actors perform in elaborate and beautiful costumes. The play is written by a teacher on the basis of Hans Christian Andersen's tale and the new script is evidently a strong controlling tool since there is no improvisation in the play: everything is carefully rehearsed and performed perfectly. Even though the performance in *Kit's Wilderness* is a much more serious undertaking than the children's play in *The Enchanted Castle*, and involves much sustained effort, it is still hugely enjoyable for all of its participants, which links it with the idea of play as a game. The enjoyment is particularly highlighted in the character of Allie who plays Gerda.

It is the beauty and perfection of the performance, i.e. the aesthetic aspect, which is particularly stressed in Almond's novel. Multiple elements of the play synergically work to create an artistic whole. However, this sense of achievement and importance as connected with the play is weakened on the discourse level by the fact that only a part of the performance is attentively watched and described by the protagonist-narrator. Even though the play is gripping and beautiful, the protagonist Kit has more pressing concerns: "The play began again, but I was lost in my own thoughts, my own fears" (Almond 2008: 166).

Though the two theatrical events in Nesbit's and Almond's novels are quite different, they are linked not only by the fact that both are interrupted (the former on the story level, the

latter on the level of discourse) but also both are based on well-known fairy tales. Such a generic choice serves to emphasise the secondary worlds of the plays as fictional and distant from the ordinary reality of the characters. However, the two performances activate different spheres of semantic reference. In Nesbit's book, the play world is linked with the children's imagination whose creative aspect is enhanced owing to the parallel with magic. Moreover, the enjoyment of the performance and the horror of the magical transformation appear to suggest two opposite but related aspects of the exercise of imagination which may be creative and joyous or destructive and frightening (Briggs 1987: 265-266). On the other hand, in Almond's novel, the beautiful performance uniting many diverse aesthetic experiences (of pictures, scenery, costumes, music, stage movement, and words) is not really connected with the children-characters' imagination. Though present in the audience, Kit is overwhelmed by his problems and stops paying attention to (and describing) the play. The other protagonist, Kit's friend John, does not attend the play and is only mentioned by other characters. Out of the three main characters in *Kit's Wilderness* only the girl Allie is totally involved in the play and becomes sure she will be an actress – not just in the sense of a future job but in the sense of an artistic calling. The presentation of Allie as a future artist accords with the stress on the aesthetic aspects in the description of the performance. Moreover, the play's thematic focus on evil finds many echoes in the book (for example, in the characters of John and his father) and is functional also in relation to Allie who – owing to the role she plays – discovers a propensity for evil in herself. This area of functionality points to reflection on the functions of art which can enhance a person's understanding of themselves.

3. Play parallels

Both novels considered here establish parallels between the children's theatrical performance and other episodes. In Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* one of the four protagonists, Mabel, whose aunt is a housekeeper in the eponymous mansion, dresses up in a beautiful old dress and pretends to be Sleeping Beauty. She arranges herself on a bench in the castle gardens and is incidentally found there by three siblings who become caught up in the strangeness of the situation and half believe they are in a fairy tale. One of the boys "wakens" Mabel with a kiss, and for quite a long time she goes on pretending she really is a princess and her castle is just coming to life after a hundred years of sleep. The Sleeping Beauty episode evinces some features of a theatrical performance: Mabel performs a role according to the script provided by a well-known fairy tale, she uses a costume and certain props, and treats the castle and its grounds as the stage. On the other hand, the girl may also be seen as just playing a make-believe game because she is bored and lonely. Initially she pretends to be a princess only for herself since she does not have any playmates. She continues pretending when the three siblings appear and draws them into the make-believe world as half-believing participants and as an audience of her playacting. The episode highlights the closeness of a theatrical play and a child's game. Both the Beauty and the Beast performance and the Sleeping Beauty episode are based on well-known fairy tales. They are also linked by the fact that exactly the same cast of four children participate in both. However, the latter case seems more complex and ambiguous than the former one. A make-believe game – just like a theatrical performance – assumes the willing access of participants who understand the provisional and fictitious nature of the play reality. Yet Mabel insistently asserts the factual nature of her royal identity and tries to convince the other children that they have stepped into a real fairy tale.

Moreover, the rules assumed to be governing the play/game/performance are unexpectedly broken in both cases: in the theatrical performance by the sudden animation of the puppets in the audience and in the Sleeping Beauty make-believe game – by Mabel suddenly becoming invisible. In both cases the breakage is defined as the operation of magic. Mabel, still trying to convince the other children that she is a real princess in a fairy tale promises to become invisible. She expresses a wish but actually she only intends to hide in a cupboard. When she emerges, she takes the children's behaviour to be a spiteful copy of her own: they act as if she were still invisible, which she treats as hateful teasing until they make her look in a mirror. The Sleeping Beauty game is abandoned and the four children unite to deal with the distressing problem of invisibility. As observed by Julia Briggs,

> *The Enchanted Castle* […] elaborately counterpoint[s] make-believe and reality. The book begins with the most complex switchback of magic and games that she [Nesbit] had yet invented: one minute the children are playing 'let's pretend', the next their pretence has come true and they are caught up in a sequence of transformations that symbolically enact the dangers as well as pleasures of the imagination. (Briggs 1987: 265)

Also the spatial aspect of the Sleeping Beauty game/performance is significant in defining important aspects of play. Firstly, as already indicated, Mabel treats the castle and its grounds as an element of her make-believe game. Though this spatial extensiveness contrasts with the well-limited theatre room of the Beauty and the Beast performance, both spaces appear to function in suggesting the transformative power of a child's imagination. Secondly, the game starts in a labyrinth through which the three siblings are guided by a thread leading them to the centre where Mabel lies as Sleeping Beauty. Obviously such a configuration of the spatial setting introduces mythical associations – though they would be decipherable

on the higher level of reception not immediately available to children. Labyrinths have a great symbolic potential connected with their mythic origins and may be semantically associated with confusion, lack of knowledge and understanding on the one hand, and also with initiation, penetration to the heart of mysteries, or to the sacred centre and absolute truth of reality on the other hand (Cirlot 2007: 220). The former set of senses may apply to the children's inability to determine whether Mabel's story is true or just a game. Metaphorically, their confusion – as well as Mabel's when she unexpectedly becomes invisible – may through generalisation be related to human inability to fully understand the nature of reality. In the novel the children are continuously perplexed with the unaccountable operations of magic in the world of ordinary experience. The motif of magic in Nesbit's novel may be interpreted as expressing hidden, mysterious and even transcendental aspects of human reality, and not only the power of the child's imagination in pretending games.

Also in *Kit's Wilderness* the theatrical performance of the Snow Queen is made equivalent to other narrative sequences. For instance, the winter setting of the Snow Queen play, emphasised by the decorations concerning the Ice Age, glaciers and polar animals, introduces a strong parallel to Kit's own story about an Ice Age boy Lac who, like the two children in "The Snow Queen", gets separated from his family, is lost and likely to die. Kit writes the story for his friend John, who is suspended at school and runs away from his abusive home. The fictional Ice Age boy Lac is in Kit's mind increasingly identified with John. The fate of Lac – whether he dies of exhaustion or manages to find his family again – seems to determine the fate of John, but Kit, who is inventing and writing the story, does not know how it will end. He finally reads it to John in an underground cave in an old mine where the boy is hiding. The happy ending of Lac's desperate journey and his reconciliation with his family in Kit's story lays down a script of ac-

ceptance and love which is followed by John when he finally emerges from the cave.

Lac from the story is a caveman, which creates a link with John who chooses an old mine to hide from everybody. The sequence of equivalences connecting the Snow Queen play, Kit's story about Lac, and the subplot concerning John suggests a parallel of the wintry settings of the two former stories with the cave setting of the latter plot. The coldness of the winter setting is associated with evil in the Snow Queen play in the sense of egoism and lack of human compassion. In the story of Lac, the winter of the Ice Age is evidently suggestive of death which threatens the boy separated from his family. In the case of John, the cave setting of a dark, cold, underground space brings up the meanings of loneliness and emotional deprivation, as well as death in the sense of the suicidal desperation of the abused boy. Moreover, the darkness of the cave seems to correspond with John's twisted fascination with evil and death.

The plotline of John introduces another aspect into the network of narrative equivalences. The theatrical play, the Ice Age story, and John's escape from his troubled home are also parallel to "the game of death" played by John with a group of friends. Invented by John, who is unhappy and disturbed, the game reflects his focus on death and suicidal tendencies. It is played in an underground place similar to the grave and to a prehistoric dwelling. Thus, spatially the setting of the game of death is linked with John's hiding place in the old mine and with the prehistoric chronotope of Kit's story whose characters live in caves.

The similarity between the game of death and the Snow Queen play concerns the element of playacting and pretending. Moreover, like the theatrical play the game is also controlled by a pre-existing script (of questions and answers) as well as a predetermined sequence of activities. For instance, when Kit's turn comes to "die" in the game, he reports: "I knelt as

I had seen others kneel" (Almond 2008: 49). Then comes an exchange between John and Kit:

> 'Do you abandon life?'
> 'I abandon life.'
> 'Do you truly wish to die?'
> 'I truly wish to die' (Almond 2008: 49)

This repetitive script, however, suggests an emphatic ritualistic quality: because it assumes an entry of a participant into the sphere of death, the game can be seen as a rite of passage, an initiation. Moreover, while the theatrical performance is described as having a strong fun element (especially for Allie), the game of death does not seem to have any. Instead it has a strong element of *alea* (chance aspect) connected with the choice of the "victim" through spinning a knife. The game consists in choosing a person out of a circle of a few teens, who agrees to "die" (in the play sense) and is left alone in the cave until he or she emerges again. Most kids only pretend (playact) to die and invent stories of what they have seen while "dead". In this way, they realise the script as they understand it. But Kit does not pretend: he goes into a deep trance where he experiences frightening nothingness. This experience makes him able to see ghosts or shades of children who died in mining accidents in the past, as John, who can also see them, explains. For both Kit and John the game is a real, though imaginary, encounter with death, which enhances vision and understanding.

Further, the game of death has a parallel in dancing around a cemetery monument to children-victims of mining accidents from the past. Such dancing, recollected by Kit's grandfather and father, but no longer engaged in by Kit and his friends, has an evident *ilinx* aspect which, through its connection to trance-like states, confirms the ritualistic aspect of children's games. The dancing game involves both laughter and fear: dancing is exhilarating, but the children are also scared of be-

ing in the cemetery. The purpose of both dancing and the game of death is the same: to induce a trance-like state which makes it possible to see ghosts of children from the past. Interestingly, a ritualistic element also appears in Nesbit's novel (though not in connection with a children's game) when the children and adult characters witness a gathering of divine creatures from all human cultures and are engulfed in a trance-like experience of illumination.

All the playful activities I have discussed in connection with David Almond's novel – the theatrical performance, the inset story written by Kit, the game of death, the dancing game – share features of play as distinguished, for instance, by Roger Caillois: they are free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, and governed by rules (2001: 9-10). The latter quality is connected with what I have called scripts, which in all the above activities have different degrees of controlling power. Kit does not treat writing stories as a play or game and yet his activity also shares many features with playing: it is motivated by pleasure and results in the creation of a new, secondary reality through imagination, a quality Caillois calls make-believe (2001: 10; compare also Okoń 1987: 44). The latter quality is emphatically present in the theatrical performance and in the game of death. However, in contrast to the Snow Queen performance, which is tightly controlled by the script, Kit does not seem to have full control over his story. He does not know how the plot of Lac will develop, just as he is uncertain about the fate of his friend John. This feature strongly emphasises the element of uncertainty – which is one of the qualities of play (Caillois 2001: 9) and an element of the creative process.

More conspicuously than Nesbit's novel, *Kit's Wilderness* displays metaleptic transgressions. While Kit is engaged in writing his Ice Age story, a character from his fiction appears in his room and seems to be pleading for the survival of Lac. Eventually the figure from the story's secondary world is also seen by John when Kit is reading to him in the old mine. This

metaleptic mixture of narrative levels underlines the power of imagination and/or storytelling. Alternatively, Kit's creative gift may be linked with his visionary power (his ability to see ghosts of long-dead children) and thus suggest that his story recaptures some events from distant prehistoric past. Both of these explanations highlight the independent – and, in some sense, real – existence of the make-believe, secondary reality created by playful imagination. Another aspect of reality of make-believe worlds is also visible in their therapeutic or transforming power: the theatrical performance makes one of the players, Allie, aware of her own potential for evil, Kit's experience of "death" makes him able to understand his friend John, while Kit's story becomes a metaphoric script of hope and survival for John. The therapeutic aspect links all the various examples of playing in the novel and emphasises their creative or transformative power. By drawing an equivalence between playing (the game of death, dancing in the cemetery) and such artistic activities as performing a theatrical play or writing a story, the novel empahasises the creative aspects of playing on the one hand and playful qualities of artistic engagement on the other.

To conclude: the two considered novels are linked by introducing a motif of children's theatrical performance and making it equivalent to other more or less playful activities. Moreover, both introduce uncertainty about the rules of the world model and suggest the presence of magic (Nesbit), and of the supernatural, metaphysical or the numinous. Strangely enough, both books preserve some echoes of the connection between performance, play/game and ritual in their connection to hidden aspects of reality. Both Nesbit and Almond seem to celebrate the child's imagination and sensitivity, while Almond additionally links it to artistic creativity by making all three of his main characters budding artists. The connection between childhood, imagination and creative and/or visionary power is very Romantic in nature, and testifies to the persistence of the

Romantic paradigm in the contemporary culture. What is more, both books present imagination as able to enhance mundane reality (through magic transformations in Nesbit's novel and artistic creations in Almond's), but also capable of producing actual or potential horrors (the living puppets, ghosts, fascination with death) which may be destructive and evil. This dark side of imagination seems to be a price to pay for being sensitive and open to hidden aspects of reality.

The two novels may also be seen as illustrative of certain cultural changes as well as continuities in the understanding and literary presentation of childhood. The Edwardian children in Nesbit's story are fully aware of playing and sometimes even voice this consciousness: playing is an important aspect of their lives. In Almond's novel, such awareness of the playfulness is most strongly present in relation to children from the past in the dancing game of the protagonist's father and grandfather. Contemporary children (or rather teens) are very serious about all their activities even when they apply the name of "game" to them (as in the "game of death"). However, by making a theatrical performance equivalent to children's other activities, both novels highlight the make-believe and creative aspect of such actions. Significantly, in both texts children's games involve connections with ritual and initiation into hidden facets of reality. The motifs of play-game-performance, linked in tight networks of equivalences, testify to the semantic richness of the play motif in the considered novels. It should be also emphasised that while both texts focus on young characters and their playful activities, the motif of play – in its several senses – far exceeds the confines of actions limited to the period of childhood by referring to art, ritual and spiritual initiation.

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Jadwiga Węgrodzka
Instytut Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki
Uniwersytet Gdański
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
angjw@ug.edu.pl