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ON POLISH FANTASTIC LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND ITS THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL¹

The objective of this article is to provide an overview of the therapeutic potential of fantastic literature for young people on the example of the series of novels by Rafał Kosik. The paper consists of three parts. The first part presents the definition of fantastic literature with reference to the concepts introduced by Tzvetan Todorov, Roger Caillois, Eric Rabkin and dictionary entries. Then the therapeutic function of literature is discussed by citing psychological theses on the importance of narrative in human life, as well as Roman Ingarden's theory of the aesthetic experience. This provides the basis for reflection on bibliotherapy and the use of fantastic literature within its framework. The third part of the article presents the concept of the series of novels about Felix, Net and Nika, referring to the opinions of critics and literary scholars. Subsequently the selected fragments of the novels are discussed, demonstrating their therapeutic potential.

KEY WORDS: fantastic literature for young people, bibliotherapy, Rafał Kosik.

On fantastic literature

The objective of this paper is to provide an analysis of the therapeutic potential of the fantastic literature for young people on the example of the series of novels by Rafał Kosik. This segment of literature is currently enjoying great popularity among young readers both in Poland and across the world. Its popularity may be explained by the ludic value, which is provided by the extraordinary adventures of the characters. For me, however, the role of fantastic literature is not only limited to providing the reader with a bit of fun and relaxation. It seems to me that such novels could also prove useful as the so-called therapeutic reading materials, which help teenage consumers in their real problems.

I would like to begin my reflections by locating fantastic literature (also known as the fantastic) within the broader literary culture, and providing some insight into its specifics. It should be pointed out right at the beginning that there are some issues with the definition of the concept of fantastic literature. The main causes of these complications include: the

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evolution of the term itself, the existence of many explanations of its meaning and the common use of ambiguous terms (Niziołek 2005: 268). I will not, however, provide a detailed description of how exactly the definition of fantastic literature has evolved, and instead I will indicate the most important characteristics of literary texts which are included in that category. I will refer to the classic concept of fantasy literature of Tzvetan Todorov, the theory of Roger Caillois, the linguistic concept of Eric Rubkin, and to the available dictionary studies. In this way, I will indicate how the fantastic is understood in this work.

The starting point will be the definition proposed by Todorov. The researcher equated the category of the fantastic with the hesitation experienced in confrontation with supernatural phenomena, by a person (the reader) who is only familiar with the laws of nature. Thus, the separation of the fantastic is done on the basis of comparison with that which is imaginary, but realistic (Todorov 1970: 29). The proposed explanation refers to the concept of probability, which would designate the boundaries of realistic literature. As a result, the fantastic should be understood as going beyond that which is probable. This does not mean, however, that all the elements of the presented fictional universe must be devoid of references to reality.

A similar view of fantastic literature was presented by Rabkin, who emphasises not only going beyond the perspective, but also breaking it (Rabkin 1977: 4). Thus, fantastic literature is characterised by the creation of a world which is improbable, and does not have to respect the rules which are applicable in the real world. In this view the author is able to deviate from the accepted order and to introduce a new logic (Dubowik 1999: 11) which determines its own principles of functioning of the presented fictional universe. Rabkin also points out that the fantastic is further determined by the creation of new words to describe the invented elements of the constructed reality.

Caillois introduces a division of the fantastic literature into fairy tales, fantastic stories and science-fiction. The classification criterion that he uses is the level of extraordinariness and its relationship to the probable world. A fairy tale is characterised by the combination of real elements with improbable elements, which, however, does not interfere with the coherence of the presented fictional universe. The remaining listed genres, described by the common notion of the fantastic, are situated at the other extreme. The element of extraordinariness introduced in them has quite different properties. Its presence interferes with the known logic, which leads to the disruption of internal coherence. Thus, the fantastic creates a sense of destabilisation, which leads to the feeling of terror (Caillois 1967: 31–34). It should be noted that fantastic literature is credited with evoking negative emotions. In my opinion, this is not the only possible response to the introduction of the extraordinary. The disruption of the order of the world may also arouse curiosity that encourages one to learn about the alternative world. We should agree, however, that in the fantastic the extraordinary is clearly distinguished from other elements. This is also confirmed by one of the dictionary definitions, which presents the fantastic as “a brutal intrusion of the mysterious into real life” (Childs, Fowler 2006: 83). The essential significance of the introduction of supernatural phenomena is also emphasised.

I would also like to mention one of the latest explanations of the fantastic. In this case, the importance is assigned to the reception of the created world: a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for strange events of the story (Baldick 2008: 125).

In the context of the presented ways of defining fantastic literature, I can conclude that they indicate its most important characteristics. The category of the fantastic consists in crossing the boundary of the possible world. Therefore, fantastic literature includes items, characters and/or events that are impossible and do not exist in the reality actually surrounding the reader (Zgorzelski 1980: 14). Their presence disrupts the order and coherence, introducing new principles of functioning of the world. In my opinion, this explains the phenomenon of fantastic literature, which currently has a large following. Many people read fantastic literature and science fiction in particular due to the desire to experience contact with a different world and the emotions associated with that (Wróblewski 2008: 25). In the case of fantastic literature, another element important for young people is the presence of a protagonist who is a peer of the reader, which allows for a better understanding of their situation, motivation of their actions and behaviours due to identification with that character.

Therapeutic impact of a literary work

The impact of literature is not limited to its three canonical functions: aesthetic, cognitive and educational. I will not, however, discuss all the possible tasks that a literary work could fulfil. Instead, I would like to draw particular attention solely to the therapeutic impact that such literary texts may have. For this purpose, I will refer to the psychological theories of the impact of the narrative on human beings and to Roman Ingarden's theory of the aesthetic experience. This will allow for explaining why literature is credited with therapeutic capabilities.

It is essential to characterise the categories of the narrative which functions within various disciplines. The term is most often used to describe the recounting of a series of facts which have a mutual connection (Childs, Fowler 2006: 148). This could be both a literary story, as well as the presentation of events from one's own life. Maria Molicka drew attention to the structure of the narrative, which consists of four elements. Among them the scholar listed: an event or events in a specific situational context; a protagonist who is pursuing adopted goals; the method of performance of the tasks; the consequences of the undertaken actions (Molicka 2011: 50). The cited model is universal in nature as it relates to literary narratives and everyday narratives created by ordinary people.

I will, however, discuss the category of the narrative only from the psychological perspective, which will nonetheless allow for the identification of its general properties. It plays a significant role in people's lives because it allows them to discover the surrounding world and construct their own identity. The category of the narrative has an effect on the "self", which is formed throughout the entire life. It helps to understand oneself and the community. The process of understanding occurring here is based on ascribing meaning.

As a result, the narrative could be equated with the interpretation of events, which is subjective in nature (Molicka 2011: 60-61). The specificity of the narrative explains its frequent use in therapies conducted by psychologists. It enables a human being to recount the events from their life, evoke the emotions associated with them, and analyse the whole situation (Trzebiński 2008: 15). In this way, a participant in the therapy can get to know and understand their own behaviour and the approach of other people. Similar results can be achieved through the reading of literary texts, and a subsequent discussion or solely one's own reflection on the events presented there. The reader has a chance to refer the presented stories to their own life in order to understand the mechanisms of their own behaviour.

The psychological theories are complemented by R. Ingarden's concept, which is focused around the aesthetic experience in contact with a work of art. The philosopher draws attention to the process of reception of a literary text or another work of culture. The aesthetic experience is treated as a multiphase process which leads to the creation of an aesthetic object (Ingarden 1966: 11). Although the resulting aesthetic object does not belong to the real world, it is difficult not to relate it to reality. The recipient imagines the work by comparing it with the corresponding elements of the real world (Czernianin 2008: 65). This is of particular importance in the case of literary texts, in which, as a rule, completely fictitious or somewhat probable worlds are constructed. In the course of reading the reader imagines the fictional reality, but it is not an image entirely disconnected from real life experiences. The image created in the mind is based on the subject's previous knowledge of the surrounding world, which applies even to fantastic literature.

I will now focus on the phases of the aesthetic experience. It begins at the moment of contact with a work of art, which puts the recipient in an emotional state. This is also described as the emergence of the so-called "original emotion". As a result of the emotion which was evoked, the subject focuses on the cause of that emotion. The recipient then gathers their insights about the work of art, which allows for the formation of an aesthetic object in their mind. The last phase of the aesthetic experience is the contemplation of the created aesthetic object, which is deemed a valuable object. It should be noted, however, that sometimes a negative evaluation may occur, which leads to the rejection and attribution of worthlessness to the object (Ingarden 1966: 12-16).

Another element of Ingarden's concept which I find important is the consequences that result from having an aesthetic experience. Already at the moment of the so-called "original emotion" the remaining experiences are inhibited and the human being's relation to the real world changes. "What he was occupying himself with a moment before at once loses its importance, becomes uninteresting, a matter of indifference" (Ingarden 1976: 185). Focus is put on the imaginary world, which may cause a momentary oblivion of current emotions and problems from the surrounding reality. The effects of contact with a work of art presented here clearly indicate that it allows the subject to disconnect from the real world. This is a key characteristic for a situation in which the recipient wants to forget about the experienced problems and emotions. Having an aesthetic experience of a valuable aesthetic object may therefore help them quiet down, calm down or control their emotions.

Bibliotherapy

The aforementioned psychological and literary theories are the foundation of bibliotherapy. This term is typically used to describe “the use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry; also guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading” (ALA). This is a very general explanation, which does not allow for a precise description. Whereas the definition of Maria Molicka seems quite accurate: it describes bibliotherapy as a psychotherapeutic method – affecting, through literature, the cognitive processes of an individual; the development or transformation of patterns; the “image of self” and the “image of the world” – whose objective is: a) building personal resources; b) supporting in difficult situations; c) providing therapeutic impact (Molicka 2008: 37).

The author draws attention to the diversity of the impact of this therapy. In this way, the explanation includes various types of bibliotherapy. These include: institutional bibliotherapy, clinical bibliotherapy, and developmental bibliotherapy (Kruszewski 2006: 59). The first therapy is for people hospitalised or treated in a stationary mode when literature is used to help to relax and provide knowledge about the disease and its overcoming. Another one involves working with literary texts, the purpose of which is to help them cope with emotional and behavioural disorders. Developmental bibliotherapy, however, is intended for anyone who wants to improve their mental functioning or for self-improvement. In this article, I will focus only on the last type of bibliotherapy, therefore I accept the definition formulated by Magdalena Cyrklaff: “bibliotherapy is a method of personal development, which, by means of carefully selected reading materials and/or their substitutes, supports the human functioning in the emotional, intellectual, and social sphere” (2014: 72).

Bibliotherapeutic process consists of several phases which help achieve the previously established aims. It starts from the individual reading or listening to the text, which raises the problem that is the subject of the class. Then, there is the identification with the hero that can activate or silence the emotions of the bibliotherapy participant. The third stage is the *katharsis*, which is to get rid of mental tension and feel the relief. The whole process ends with insight into self, which is a comparison of analysed problems of literary hero with one’s own difficulties (Borecka 2008: 26). The last phase seems to be the most important since its proper conduct affects the success of the changes that may occur in the therapy participant.

An important aspect of bibliotherapy is the selection of books which should be subordinated to the well-known principle of medicine: *primum non nocere* (Szulc 1994: 47). Optimistic literature which allows surviving and coping with the experienced crisis is most recommended. The therapy, however, completely rejects texts which may aggravate the problems of the reader and disrupt their mental balance.

Thus, the specificity of bibliotherapy is to use a literary text which should help refer to specific problems. Typically used are novel of manners, psychological novels, biographical novels or poetry. In the case of bibliotherapy with children and adolescents, I would suggest

the use of fantastic literature addressed to them, which has already been the subject of scientific discussion (Rudolf 2014: 59).

I base my proposal on the assumption that the whole of literature for children and young people is characterised by the presence of a protagonist who is a peer of the reader, and the introduction of themes which correspond with the reader's age and interests. As a result, the recipient can easily translate the literary event to their own life experiences, which in turn allows them to understand difficult situations and find solutions to them. This is how the therapeutic function of literature would be fulfilled. There is also a second form of its impact, which is especially visible in the fantastic and adventure novels. An interesting story and fictional universe attracts the reader's attention, disconnecting them from other current experiences. In this case the contact with literature allows them to calm their emotions, which may later help in getting back to solving a difficult situation.

As can be seen in bibliotherapy, the proper selection of literary texts is important just as the way they are discussed, both of which are the therapist's responsibility. Any occurring mistakes or oversights can disrupt the entire bibliotherapeutic process which leads to the reflection on ethical issues. After contact with the wrong literature, the participant may experience worsening of their problems instead of reducing them. The adoption of a negative way of solving difficult situations also poses a threat. However, the therapist cannot be fully responsible for the consequences, as the reception of literature remains subjective for each person. At this point, the question arises about the qualifications of a person leading such a therapy, as well as about their approach to the participants. These are only a few emerging dilemmas that are difficult to assess. Therefore, creating a code of ethics for therapists, what has already been postulated by Wanda Matras-Mastalerz (2012: 59), seems reasonable to me as it would be helpful in therapeutic activity – especially for students.

About the series of novels “Felix, Net and Nika” by Rafał Kosik

For several years now, the series of novels of Rafał Kosik, which currently consists of 14 volumes, has enjoyed the interest of the readers and popularity on the Polish publishing market. It is worth noting that it has also found an audience outside of Poland, as evidenced by previous translations to the Czech, Hungarian and Lithuanian languages (Kosik 2016a). The novels included in the series present the adventures of three friends: Felix, Net and Nika, who are middle school students. The world created by Kosik is a fantastic construction, although it largely reflects the reality of life of today's teenage readers – the peers of the protagonists. The series of novels is characterised by the presence of unknown devices, telepathic abilities or sometimes even the ability to travel in time. It is these fantastic elements that determine the main threads of the individual literary works, as a result of which the themes of technological progress and the development of IT technology come to the foreground.

Kosik's series of novels began to be read, interpreted and evaluated in this direction. Weronika Kostecka has reconstructed the image of the digital generation, which Felix, Net and Nika represent. She noted that even though they function in a digital reality,

they still put a lot of value in the printed word (Kostecka 2008: 45). However, the presence of improbable elements is also met with critical reactions because the author has introduced too many fantastic objects and phenomena to his world (Kaźkiel 2006: 35), thereby causing some chaos. We should admit, however, that this is compensated by an “extensive knowledge of the IT technologies and a tendency to reflect typical for a humanist” (Kaźkiel 2005: 20).

Despite the introduction of an excessive amount of fantastic elements, I think that Kosik’s novel can be read from a different perspective. Issues associated with life choices, and values or the sense of responsibility have also been noticed in these works (Gruda 2007: 39). In addition, the stories about Felix, Net and Nika promote the modern model of the family, functioning on the basis of trust, partnership and equality (Gruda 2008: 39). Another important thing is the presence of teenage protagonists who could be the peers of the readers. This determines the youthful perception of reality, as well as the occurrence of problems which young people may experience.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to look at Kosik’s series of novels from the therapeutic perspective. I am convinced that the inclusion of typical everyday issues affecting teens in a literary work can help young readers in solving their problems. This belief is supported by the psychological theory of the narrative and R. Ingarden’s concept of the aesthetic experience which were presented earlier. In this place I will thoroughly analyse and interpret only a few selected fragments, which could be used in bibliotherapy.

At the beginning of the first part of the series (see: Kosik 2015) the young protagonists are in a situation where they begin their education in a middle school and have to adapt to a new school environment. None of them have any friends there, and they do not yet know the principles of functioning of the educational facility. They experience confusion and stress associated with being in a new place. Their psychological condition is reflected by the narrated situation in which the young protagonists get to know each other. The boys wandering through the school hallway in search of their classroom accidentally meet each other and are later joined by Nika. Making new acquaintances enables the teenage characters to feel more at home in the new environment, and above all, allows them to regain a sense of stability. The established friendship provides them with the much needed support.

The anxiety resulting from entering a new environment is not the only problem faced by the teenagers. At the school Felix is robbed by older students, which causes a lot of anxiety to the protagonist. However, the boy receives support from the new friends who help him cope with the difficult situation. At the same time this event motivates the young people to jointly oppose the school violence, which further strengthens their bond.

The aforementioned situation from the first day at a new school will certainly resonate with the readers, who have likely experienced it on a few occasions. Accordingly, it will be easier for them to imagine the described event (concretisation of the aesthetic experience). It will be referred to the previous experiences of the readers. This is where the therapeutic potential of Kosik’s narrative materialises. On the one hand, the presented situation can be discussed with the readers, for whom going to a new school is associated with a lot of stress and tension. Analysing the uncomfortable event from the novel will be easier for them than

talking about their own experiences. On the other hand, the discussed scene can be helpful in preparing young people for changes in their environment. In both cases, a discussion about the emotional state of the characters and the ways of resolving the problematic scene will be of crucial importance. This will enable the students to understand their own emotions, which may occur during the first day at a new school. In addition, the scene ends on a positive note because the protagonists overcame the adversity which they faced. Thus, the reader receives guidance or advice on how to deal with the feeling of being lost at a new school and with violence existing at school.

In Kosik's novels everyday school life is also portrayed in other areas. One thread that I find noteworthy concerns the competition between the students (see: Kosik 2016b) which has a destructive effect on them. This is shown by the situation in which Felix, Net and Nika's class takes part in a school contest, in which one of tasks involves preparing a class Internet website. The students approach the task reluctantly, because few of them are good at computer science. Only Net and Gerald decide to take on the task, but they do not want to work together. The lack of cooperation in this case stems from the previous relationship between the classmates. They both competed for Nika, which negatively affected their mutual relations. The actions of the novel's protagonists are very clearly described in the series of events surrounding the preparation of the class website. The teenagers feel a strong sense of competition and want to prove their own superiority, which is also accompanied by stubbornness. They do not take into account the possibility that their cooperation could give better results than working independently. Even Nika is unable to persuade them to change their attitude. It is clear that they are driven solely by selfishness and jealousy. As a result, the submitted project of the class website loses the contest because it is not refined enough.

The competition between the students, envy over the achievements of others is one of the common problems occurring in the school reality in which the mechanism of the "rat race" is often present, much like in adult life. It is therefore an issue which should be discussed with the readers. Kosik's narrative could inspire reflection, and at the same time help in analysing the problem of competition in school. It is especially important to discuss the reasons why students decide to compete against each other. In this case, Net wants to demonstrate that he has better IT skills. But in reality he is just trying to ruin the image of his competitor. Meanwhile, Gerald, who is a new student in the class, wants to win trust, friendship and acceptance in the new environment, although his intentions also include ridiculing Net. Such a thorough analysis of the motives of actions could encourage the readers to reflect on their own behaviour and make them aware of the possible or actual mistakes. An important role is also played by the conclusion of the situation which does not bring any true victory. Although Net's project won the eliminations within the class, it proved to be weak compared to other classes. The situation constructed in such a way carries the message that competition is not effective. Instead, it is suggested that success could be achieved with cooperation and respect for each other's talents.

The therapeutic quality of Kosik's narrative could consist in enabling the reader to forget about their problems for some time. As I already noted, the series of novels is a compilation

of fantastic elements and adventures. One example of that could be the story from the second volume (see: Kosik 2014) in which Felix, Net and Nika solve the mystery of the former German military base. The group of friends accidentally discovers a way to travel in time and space. Their most important expeditions include a journey into the past and a journey into the future. During the first one they learn about the functioning of the Polish society in the old times. Images of the past are often surprising to the protagonists, and similar reactions may occur in the peer reader who does not have too much historical knowledge. Meanwhile, a journey to the future stimulates increased interest in the surrounding world, which does not reflect reality. It includes various new devices, and a changed lifestyle. Here, an important role is also played by the adventures that the protagonists are experiencing in the course of time travel. The introduction of fantastic elements encourages the reader to focus on learning about the new environment. In this way, the protagonists devote more attention to uncovering the secrets of the future, and forget for some time about their problems. A similar reaction may occur in the reader, who is fascinated by the incredible reality. The evoked curiosity will certainly allow the reader to tone down their current emotional experiences, while activating their imagination.

Conclusion

The therapeutic impact of Rafał Kosik's novels which I presented can be manifested in two ways. The first is the reader's identification with the presented situations typical for teenagers (e.g. the first day at a new school), which in my opinion seems very effective. The analysis of the behaviour of the literary protagonists enables the reader to understand their own motivations, mistakes, and also allows them to prepare for the various events that could occur in the lives of young people.

The second way involves the use of the fantastic and adventures, which generate the reader's interest in the presented story. In this way, they can easily experience a full aesthetic experience which involves a temporary disconnection from reality. Such an effect may help them forget about the current problems and control their emotions.

However, the phenomenon of fantastic literature for children and young people lies in the fact that both presented mechanisms occur simultaneously. This is due to the combination of the specific nature of literature for children and young people and that of fantastic literature. The former addresses issues important for the reader, which makes it easier to identify with them. The latter is associated with the introduction of improbable elements, which stimulate curiosity and increase the focus on the literary text.

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