



POEMS FOR CHILDREN AS A MEANS OF CONVEYING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE REGION

Anna Nosek

University of Bialystok, Information and Library Science Bialystok, Poland, anna.nosek@poczta.onet.pl

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Polish literature for children has always played an important educational role since its very beginning – that is from the the early 19th century²³. It has mostly fulfilled didactic and cognitive functions. According to the new edition of *The Dictionary of Youth and Children Literature*, “didacticism” means “a complex of functional elements of the content and form of a literary work aiming to shape the reader, to influence their world view, attitude, their system of values and beliefs and showing them models worth following²⁴.” Through literature, especially fables, 19th century children learned how they should behave and what they should avoid doing. The authors (eg. Stanislaw Jachowicz) deplored greed, sucking fingers, children’s jokes and pranks. In addition, it is worth stressing that they imposed orders, bans or even used threats. For example, the poem entitled *The Ill Kitty* by Stanislaw Jachowicz ends with the following prohibition expressed in the form of a moral: “Deliver us [children], O Lord, from greed²⁵!” Works which conveyed the knowledge of Poland, to children, especially the knowledge of Polish history, were also very popular in the 19th century Poland. The authors used poems to persuade children to respect adults, to work hard, and most of all to love God and their homeland. It was not until the end of the 19th century that both literary critics and the authors themselves (eg. Maria Konopnicka) began to recognise the esthetic and amusement values of poems for children as well as their influence on developing children’s imagination. It was caused by the in-depth psychological research on the essence of childhood and children’s needs as readers. Nevertheless, even contemporary researchers argue that didacticism is still a basic element of literature for the youngest children (Jerzy Cieslikowski) because it aims at having an influence on the receiver.

Also the continuous popularity of the fable among children themselves indicates that there is a mutual consensus on the existence of educational and cognitive elements in literature for children. However, it is worth noticing that authors use poems not only to convey moral principles or patterns of proper behaviour to children but also to teach them about the world. At present, Polish teachers, especially those of the first forms of primary school, often use poems by famous authors in order to communicate knowledge of biology, hygiene, history or even mathematics to children. For instance, in 2008 children’s reader for the third form of primary school titled *Already at School* there are 30 poems which teachers use in so called integrated teaching²⁶. Using the form of poem for educational purposes seems comprehensible and is connected with the above mentioned tradition. The rhyme, rhythm and melody of the poem as well as its short, mnemonic form of expression facilitate learning and memorising. Even ancient authors and teachers knew it well, and at present it is also commonly used in TV and radio commercials.

²³ R. Waksmund, *Od literatury dla dzieci do literatury dziecięcej (tematy – gatunki – konteksty)*. Wrocław 2000.

²⁴ ²⁴Entry: *didacticism* by G. Leszczynski. In B. Tylicka and G. Leszczynska., eds. *The Dictionary of Youth and Children Literature*. Wrocław, 2002.

²⁵ S. Jachowicz, *The Ill Kitty*. In J. Cieslinski, ed. *The Anthology of Poetry for Children*. Krakow, 1990.

²⁶ See M. E. Piotrowska and M. A. Szymanska. *Already at School. A Textbook for Integrated Teaching*. Semester I. Warsaw, 2008.



POEMS FOR CHILDREN AS A MEANS OF CONVEYING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE REGION

The following text is the analysis of poems for children in which their authors, consciously or subconsciously, convey various issues of knowledge of the region to children. The poems have been selected from the works of the writers of north-eastern Poland such as Franciszek Kobryńczuk, Józefa Drozdowska, Jan Leończuk, Zofia Olek-Redlarska, Wiktor Szwed, Joanna Myślińska. The works of Franciszek Kobryńczuk are especially worthy of attention since the author dedicates his all collections of poems to certain places, towns, inhabitants, and the flora and fauna of the Podlasie region (eg. the collections of poems entitled *The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf*, *The Fairy Tales of Monki*, *The Fairy Tales of Zabłodow*, *The Little Worms of the Biebrza River*, *Oak Tree Tales*, or the didactic poem called *On Beautiful Oksana and her Knight*).

The choice of the topic has been justified not only by scientific reasons but also by my personal conviction that regional works of art should be popularised, especially among teachers and students of the region. I am convinced that regional literature has a great potential for conveying knowledge of the region to children. Moreover, with the reform of the education system in Poland in 1999, regional education²⁷ was included in the school curriculum.

The aims of regional education (which is called educational path in the school curriculum) include:

1. Learning about the immediate environment and the typical characteristics of the region.
2. Developing family values linked with the cultural values of the local community.
3. Developing patriotic conduct connected with the cultural identity of the region.

The educational contents of regional education in primary school include:

1. The immediate environment of the family home, the neighbourhood, school and their surroundings.
2. The general characteristic of geographical features, culture of the region, and basic terminology.
3. The main symbols of the region.
4. The specific language of the region, the regional dialect and names.
5. Elements of the history of the region and their connection with the history and traditions of their own families.
6. Local and regional traditions, customs, holidays, observances.
7. Local stories, sayings, local music, architecture, folklore, folk art and handicraft.

²⁷ *The Dictionary of the Contemporary Polish Language* reads that “a region is an area distinguished by a number of landscape features and natural characteristics resulting from human activity, eg. the Podhale region, the Slask region.” In Boguslaw Dunaj, ed. *The Dictionary of the Contemporary Polish Language*. Warsaw, 2000.



8. The profiles of important people who rendered great service to the local community, the region and the country²⁸.

THE MOST POPULAR THEMES CONNECTED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE REGION IN THE POEMS FOR CHILDREN

While analysing the works of the Podlasie region poets paying attention to their means of conveying knowledge of the region, one may notice their selective content in this respect. It can be observed that almost all authors present very selective knowledge of the region in their works. They tend to chose such themes connected with their region which are are both familiar to the author and interesting to the potential reader, that is the ones that refer to their childhood experiences, interests and their favourite places of the “experienced world.”

In the analised poems of the regional authors of the Podlasie region we can find first off all references to **nature: flora and founa**, which undoubtedly appeal to authors’ interests.

For instance, nature themes prevail in the works of Franciszek Kobrynczuk, who is a professor of biology. It is also a dominant theme in the works of those authors who we brought up in the surroundings of the forests and fields of the Podlasie region such as Wiktor Szwed or Jadwiga Kolesnik. Secondly, nature theme appeal to children’s interests – children children like listening to tales about animals and plants which they can find in their surroundings. Thirdly, a large number of poems about nature in the works of Podlasie authors results from the fact that Podlasie is the land of forests and lakes which is part of the north-eastern region of Poland called “the Green Lungs of Poland.” In this part of Poland there are the biggest protected areas which form a huge ecosystem consisting of 4 national parks, 13 landscape parks,, 263 nature reserves, and aproximately 5700 natural features of historic importance²⁹. Podlasie is primarily an agricultural region although recently tourism is beginning to play a more important role. It is important to remember that Bialowieza Forest, which is the only virgin forest in this part of Europe, is in the Podlasie region. The flora and fauna of the Bialowieza National Park is unique in Europe.

The bison (Latin *Bison bonasus*) is one of the symbols of Podlasie. The current population of the bison in the world is about 3400 specimens, around 800 of which live in Poland, in Bialowieza Forest, Knyszyn Forest, Borecki Forest and Pisa Forest. There is a bison on the coats of arms of a few towns in Podlasie such as Bialowieza, Hajnowka, Narewka, Tykocin, Zambrow and Sokolka. The presence of the bison on the coats of arms of Podlasie, but also on the coats of arms of Bialorus or even Spain (Cortezubi’s coat of arms), proves that this animal once existed in these areas. On the

²⁸ See „The Educator. The Monthly for Catholic Teachers and Educators.” 4/2002.

²⁹ <http://pl.wikipedia.org>. (entry: „the Green Lungs of Poland”)



other hand, the animal had a symbolic meaning. The bison is associated with the raw power of nature which is hard to tame, it means bravery, magnanimity and diligence.

How is the bison depicted in the Podlasie poetry for children? Have the authors communicated “credible information” about the bison to children? The answers to these questions can be found in the collection of poems by Franciszek Kobrynczuk, who has made the bison the hero of many of his poems. The volume entitled *The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf* (Bialystok, 1999), devoted to Bialowieza Forest, contains the most complete description of the animal.

The poems *The Drawing*, *In the Forest* and *The Bison* tell children what the animal looks like and how it feeds. However, the picture of the bison in the poems is antropomorphic since the author attributed human feelings and thoughts to the animal which can think, feel and talk to other animals or even people, which reflects children’s animistic way of thinking. Whereas antropomorphism is common in children literature, Kobrynczuk has gone even further. He has shown the symbolic meaning of the bison in our regional culture and mythology. The bison in the poem *Bialowieza Forest* appears as a mysterious creature, a royal animal endowed with enormous strength and power:

“In the darkness stands the bison, / The host of Bialowieza backwoods. / It feels an imperious power” (*The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf*, p. 8). In the poem *In the Forest* “The bison stands in a clearing/ silent like a monument” (*The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf*, p. 9). Whereas in traditional children literature, especially in the conventional fable, the lion is the king of animals, in the regional poetry of Podlasie the title of the king of the forest belongs to the bison. Kobrynczuk’s poems titled *The King Bison* and *The Bison* emphasize the bison’s role as the king of the forest. In *The Bison* the author writes: “The bison lives in the thicket / Of Bialowieza Forest./ It is famous in the whole world as a royal animal” (*The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf*, p. 14). Kobrynczuk tends to idealise the main character of his poems. On the other hand, he shows the bison in an amusing way, which undoubtedly appeals to a potential young reader. For example, the biggest dream of the king of the forest is that “swams of malicious flies / will be shot dead/ by Mr Hunter (*The Bison*, p. 14). The young bison humorously depicted as a child in the poem *A Dream* does not have any clear educational purposes and functions as a rather amusing character:

*“A little bison is sleeping under a larch,
it is worn out.
What has it been doing? – It has been wagging
its tail since morning”* (*The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf*, p. 16).

The image of the forest in the volume *The Bialowieza Royal Dwarf* has also been poetically converted. The young reader can find in the poems a lot of new names of various species of birds and animals that live in the area of Bialowieza Forest. For instance, in the poem *Birds are coming back* the author mentions 24 species of birds.



The form of a poem (the author uses rhyme), makes it easier for children to remember information, to acquire new knowledge. However, in Kobrynczuk's poems from this volume there are also fabulous inhabitants of the forest such as dwarfs, gnomes or so called the baba-jaga witch. The coexistence of real and fictional elements reflects the child's need (desire) for fantasy.

There are also a lot of works that deal with **regional customs, beliefs, places of worship, folk stories and legends connected with the genealogy of the inhabitants**. In the analysed texts, however, there are not any issues connected with economy, economics or politics (or they appear very rarely). It proves that the authors' main aim is to communicate deep cultural values of the region.

In some poems of Podlasie authors we can also find references to **regional products**. For example, in the poem *The Gourmet Frog* by Jaonna Myslinska from the volume called *Poem-fables of Little Mateusz II* (Bialystok, 2008) the author mentions cucumber pickles from the town of Kruszew, which were voted the best regional product. They won the "Pearl 2003" prize in all-Poland contest called "Our Culinary Heritage".

THE POEMS ABOUT THE REGION IN THE PRAGMALINGUISTIC CONTEXT

According to the principles of pragmalinguistics, the basic condition of successful language communication and knowledge distribution is adjusting the message to the communicative needs and abilities of the receiver. The regional authors' poems for children are also worth analysing from this perspective because we can observe in them:

- ◆ means of adjusting a message to the needs and communicative competence of children – the features of poems that enable children to understand messages (simplified language, short forms of expression, the use of numerous images, explaining difficult phrases, e.g. attaching a glossary of archaisms or difficult words to poems)
- ◆ literary devices which make the form of conveyed knowledge about the region more attractive (the poetic form of expression, rhythm, elements of humour, poeticizing, direct form of address which establishes a close rapport with the addressee, fairy tale elements and illustrations).

ENDING

The choice of topics presented in the poems of Podlachian authors indicates that cognitive processes, the information collected and popularised by writers (as



cognitivists claim) are tightly connected not only with thinking processes but also with their hierarchy of values. This paper shows that topics of regional poems for children are on the one hand connected with the beliefs of the writer which they want to pass on to the addressee, on the other hand they are consistent with the hierarchy of values and interests of the child.

The analysis of poems and interviews with the writers prove that the choice of a poem as a form of conveying knowledge about the region to children is conditioned not only by didactic goals but also by emotions such as love and attachment to the land, cultural, religious and spiritual values. In the eyes of regional authors, popularising knowledge about the region is a unique vocation. Poetry about the region which refers to intellectual, emotional and spiritual spheres should teach children to love the “close-to-their-heart” land. What is more, it should build their local, regional and national identity based on their own experience and knowledge gained from poems, which are easy to remember and which take roots in the hearts of the readers.