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CHANGELING MYTH AND THE PORTRAYAL OF UNUSUAL CHILD CHARACTERS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract. *This article examines the origins and literary significance of the changeling myth and its relationship to the representation of the unusual child in English literature. The changeling is a folkloric figure traditionally associated with European, particularly Celtic and Irish, beliefs concerning the supernatural replacement of a human child. The article analyses the changeling as a figure of otherness, uncertain identity, liminality, and belonging. It also explores the transformation of the traditional myth in later children's and fantasy literature. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the changeling motif anticipates modern representations of extraordinary children who occupy a position between ordinary social reality and supernatural or alternative worlds. The study argues that the changeling should be considered not simply as a supernatural folkloric figure but as an important cultural prototype for literary representations of children whose identities, abilities, or behavior challenge conventional concepts of childhood.*

Keywords: *changeling, unusual child, children's literature, folklore, Celtic mythology, fairy mythology, otherness, identity, childhood, fantasy literature.*

O‘ZGARISH AFSONASI VA INGLIZ ADABIYOTIDA G‘AYRIODDIY BOLA QAHRAMONLARINING TASVIRLANISHI

Annotatsiya. *Mazkur maqolada Yevropa, xususan, kelt va irland folklorida shakllangan changeling mifining kelib chiqishi, mazmun-mohiyati hamda uning ingliz adabiyotida g‘ayrioddiy bola obrazining shakllanishiga ta’siri tahlil qilinadi. Changeling – folklor an’analarida g‘ayritabiiy mavjudotlar tomonidan inson bolasining o‘rniga qoldirilgan bola yoki mavjudot sifatida tasvirlanadigan obrazdir. Tadqiqotda changeling motivi “boshqalik”, identifikatsiya, begonalashuv, oilaga mansublik, insoniy va g‘ayritabiiy olam o‘rtasidagi chegaralar kabi tushunchalar bilan bog‘liq holda o‘rganiladi. Shuningdek, an’anaviy folklordagi changeling obrazi bilan ingliz va ingliz tilidagi bolalar adabiyotida uchraydigan g‘ayrioddiy bolalar o‘rtasidagi poetik va mazmuniy aloqalar ko‘rsatiladi. Tadqiqot natijalari changeling motivi zamonaviy fantastik adabiyotdagi “g‘ayrioddiy bola” obrazining folkloriy-mifologik ildizlaridan biri sifatida talqin qilinishi mumkinligini ko‘rsatadi.*

Kalit so‘zlar: *changeling, g‘ayrioddiy bola, bolalar adabiyoti, folklor, kelt mifologiyasi, fairy mythology, boshqalik, identifikatsiya, bolalik, fantastika.*

МИФ ОБ ИЗМЕНЕНИИ И ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕ НЕОБЫЧНЫХ ДЕТСКИХ ПЕРСОНАЖЕЙ В АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ

Аннотация. *В статье исследуются происхождение и содержание мифа о changeling в европейском, особенно кельтском и ирландском фольклоре, а также его значение для формирования образа необычного ребёнка в английской литературе. Changeling в традиционном фольклоре представляет собой ребёнка или сверхъестественное существо, оставленное вместо человеческого ребёнка после его похищения сверхъестественными существами. В работе мотив changeling рассматривается в связи с категориями инаковости, идентичности, отчуждения, принадлежности к семье и взаимодействия человеческого и сверхъестественного миров. Особое внимание уделяется трансформации данного мотива в литературе и его связи с образом необычного ребёнка в современной детской фантастике. Исследование показывает, что мотив changeling может рассматриваться как один из фольклорно-мифологических источников формирования образа необычный ребёнок в последующей литературной традиции.*

Ключевые слова: *changeling, необычный ребёнок, детская литература, фольклор, кельтская мифология, Фейри, инаковость, идентичность, детство, фантастика.*

Introduction. The child has always occupied a complex position in folklore and literature. In many traditional narratives, childhood is associated with innocence, vulnerability, purity, and dependence. At the same time, folklore and literary traditions have created another type of child: a mysterious, unusual, extraordinary, or supernatural child whose identity and behavior challenge the expectations of adults and society. The representation of such children is particularly significant in children's literature because the child character frequently becomes a means through which writers explore social norms, identity, family relationships, imagination, and the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The unusual child may possess exceptional abilities, enter another world, discover a hidden identity, or simply behave in ways that distinguish them from other children. One of the earliest folkloric models relevant to this literary tradition is the changeling. The concept is strongly associated with Celtic and Irish folklore, although related beliefs can be found in different European traditions. According to traditional narratives, supernatural beings could take a human child and leave another child or creature in its place. The replacement was believed to be recognizable through unusual behavior, mysterious characteristics, or an inability to conform to expectations. The importance of the changeling for literary studies lies in its representation of childhood as a state of uncertainty. The changeling is neither completely familiar nor completely foreign. It exists within the family but is perceived as belonging elsewhere. This liminal status makes the figure particularly relevant to the study of unusual child characters.

Methods. The research employs a qualitative literary and cultural analysis. Folkloristic, comparative-literary, and close-reading approaches are combined to examine the changeling motif and its relationship to the representation of unusual children. The analysis focuses on several interconnected concepts: otherness, identity, belonging, childhood, liminality, supernatural transformation, and the relationship between the child and the adult community. Primary literary and folkloric materials are considered alongside scholarly works on children's literature, fairy tales, folklore, and fantasy. Particular attention is given to the transformation of the traditional supernatural child into the modern literary child who possesses unusual characteristics or occupies a position between different worlds.

Results. The study demonstrates that the changeling motif contains several structural elements that later become important in the representation of extraordinary children. The first is difference. The changeling is distinguished from an ordinary child through behavior, abilities, appearance, or mysterious characteristics. Difference therefore becomes the central element of the character's identity. The second is uncertain identity. The central question surrounding a changeling is whether the child is really who the family believes it to be. This question creates a strong connection between the changeling and later literary narratives concerned with hidden identity. The third is liminality. The changeling occupies a space between the human and supernatural worlds. It is physically present in the human community but symbolically connected with another world. The fourth is social otherness. The changeling is frequently perceived from the perspective of the community that considers it different. Consequently, the myth reveals not only the nature of the supernatural child but also the fears and expectations of the society observing it. These characteristics are subsequently transformed in children's fantasy literature. The unusual child increasingly becomes the central protagonist rather than an object of fear. Difference may become a source of knowledge, imagination, courage, and personal development.

Discussion. The changeling myth can be interpreted as one of the early cultural narratives through which societies attempted to understand unusual childhood. Traditional communities lacked many of the scientific explanations available today, and supernatural narratives provided frameworks for interpreting situations that appeared mysterious. However, from a literary perspective, the significance of the changeling extends beyond historical belief. The myth establishes a narrative structure based on a child whose identity is uncertain and whose difference disrupts the expectations of the family and community. This aspect can be connected with the concept of the unusual child in English literature. The unusual child is often placed in opposition to adult expectations. Adults may initially fail to understand the child's abilities, imagination, or identity, while the child gradually discovers a more complex understanding of the world. A particularly useful example of the broader tradition is J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan. Peter is not literally a changeling, but his character shares several structural characteristics with supernatural and liminal children in folklore. He refuses the conventional process of growing up and belongs simultaneously to childhood reality and the fantastic world of Never land.

A short passage that captures this fundamental idea is Barrie's well-known statement: “All children, except one, grow up.” This brief sentence establishes Peter's exceptional position immediately. Unlike ordinary children, Peter occupies a space outside conventional human development. His unusual identity is not simply a personal characteristic; it becomes the foundation of the entire narrative. The connection with changeling mythology can therefore be understood through the concept of liminality. Like the changeling,

Peter does not completely fit into the ordinary social structure. He represents an alternative form of childhood that exists beyond conventional expectations. Another important example can be found in Neil Gaiman's The Graveyard Book. The protagonist, Nobody Owens, is a child who grows up outside ordinary human society among supernatural inhabitants of a graveyard. His identity is constructed through an unusual relationship between the human and super natural worlds. The opening of the novel presents the child in an atmosphere of mystery and danger, immediately placing him outside the conventional family environment. Although nobody is human, his upbringing makes him culturally and socially different from ordinary children. This situation recalls an essential feature of the changeling motif: the unusual child belongs simultaneously to two different spheres. The child is human but develops within a supernatural environment. Thus, the traditional opposition between the human world and the fairy or supernatural world is transformed into a narrative about identity and belonging. Roald Dahl's Matilda provides another form of the unusual child. Matilda is not a supernatural changeling, but her extraordinary intellectual abilities distinguish her from both children and adults around her. Her unusualness becomes a source of empowerment rather than a reason for exclusion. The narrative presents a strong contrast between the child's intellectual potential and the limitations of the adults who fail to recognize it. In this respect, Matilda represents an important development in the literary history of the unusual child: difference is transformed from something frightening into something valuable.

The evolution from changeling folklore to modern children's literature can therefore be understood as a movement in the cultural interpretation of difference. In traditional folklore, the unusual child could be regarded as a threat to family stability. In modern children's literature, however, the unusual child frequently becomes the protagonist whose difference enables the discovery of truth and the transformation of the surrounding world. The Changeling Motif and the Concept of Otherness. Otherness is one of the most productive concepts for analyzing changeling narratives. The changeling is defined by its difference from the expected model of the human child. The family observes the child and gradually recognizes that something is unusual. This structure creates a division between “us” and “the other.” The child appears to be part of the family but is simultaneously perceived as an outsider. Modern children's literature frequently reverses this relationship. Instead of presenting the unusual child exclusively through the eyes of adults, contemporary narratives give the child a voice and perspective. As a result, the reader is encouraged to identify with the child rather than with the community that regards the child as strange. This transformation has important ethical and aesthetic implications. The unusual child is no longer simply an object of fear. The child becomes a subject capable of interpreting the world.

The Changeling as a Prototype of the Extraordinary Child.

The concept of the extraordinary child has become central to fantasy and children's literature. Such protagonists frequently possess qualities that separate them from ordinary children. They may have supernatural powers, exceptional intelligence, unusual courage, or a special relationship with another world. The changeling motif can be considered a folkloric prototype of this literary phenomenon because it establishes several characteristics that remain important the child is different; the child's identity is uncertain; the child exists between two worlds;

adults cannot fully understand the child; the child's difference creates narrative conflict;

the child's unusual identity eventually becomes significant. The major difference is that modern literature tends to reinterpret these characteristics positively. The extraordinary child is often not a danger to society but a character capable of challenging injustice and transforming the world.

Conclusion. The changeling myth represents an important stage in the cultural and literary history of the unusual child. Emerging from European folklore and particularly associated with Celtic and Irish traditions, the changeling embodies uncertainty concerning childhood identity, belonging, and difference. Its literary importance can be found in the way it constructs the child as a liminal figure situated between the familiar and unfamiliar, human and supernatural, family and otherness. These structural characteristics continue to appear in later English and English-language children's fantasy. The development of the unusual child from folklore to modern children's literature demonstrates a significant transformation in the cultural understanding of difference. While traditional changeling narratives frequently express fear of an unfamiliar child, modern literary works increasingly present unusual children as independent, intelligent, imaginative, and powerful figures. Characters such as Peter Pan, Nobody Owens, and Matilda demonstrate different forms of this transformation. They are not literal changelings, but their unusual identities, relationships with alternative worlds, and conflicts with conventional expectations reveal the continuing literary relevance of the changeling pattern.

Consequently, the changeling myth can be regarded as an important folkloric and mythological foundation for the study of unusual child characters. Its analysis provides an opportunity to examine how

literature has moved from representing the unusual child as an object of fear and suspicion toward presenting the child as a figure of identity, resistance, imagination, and transformation.

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