

THE IMAGE OF FAMILY IN LITHUANIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF THE SOVIET PERIOD

SUMMARY

Family is a fundamental element of children's literature. Its universal qualities have been aptly described by the British cultural scholar Nicholas Tucker, who believes that 'unless set in outer space, all children's books are family stories. Even those many orphans in children's fiction are still defined to an extent by the families they don't have or by the replacement surrogate family they have managed to become part of by the end of their story.'¹ Soviet Lithuanian children's literature spoke of family in highly specific political circumstances: from the Second World War to the Soviet occupation cultural policy dictated that children's literature was meant to 'rear the young Soviet citizen' following the example of Pavlik Morozov – a boy who denounced his father to the state security services for damages to the state. These expectations for literature concurred with the new obligations placed on families: the smallest cell of society was to raise its offspring in the spirit of communism.

This monograph is a work of literary history that aims to reveal an aggregate of the evolving image of family as it was portrayed in Lithuanian books for children and teenagers from 1945 to 1990. A corpus of different genres (poetry, fairy tales, short stories, novelettes, novels and plays) was examined according to a thematic plot analysis that focuses on family, the subject in question. Without an underlying agenda, the study observed what the literature itself chose to disclose about family, which aspects

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1 Nicholas Tucker, 'The Family in British Children's Literature', *IBBYLink*, 25, Summer 2009, p. 2.

of family life it presented as the most relevant, how it interpreted the relationship between parents and children, and what role in the family was prescribed to the child.

In the primary stage of the study the whole corpus of relevant texts was examined in four independent thematic aspects: the style of communication within the family, parental control, domestic conflicts, and the particularities of the physical home. This analysis brought forwards some irregularities in the data: shortly after the war families are still seen having dinner together, whereas in the prose of the 1970s food becomes almost non-existent; at some points in time people live in seemingly empty home, at others the narrator finds it important to mention such details as the make of an oven or the brand of a car. The historically uneven strands of topical information were tied together to reveal a few rather clear illustrative tapestries that represent the diverse images of family throughout the Soviet occupation. As it turned out, even the lives of animal families were depicted with similar ebbs and flows. The dominant aspects of the family image determined the structure of the book which also includes an introduction summarising all the previous literary research into the family as presented to children.

According to both international and Lithuanian studies, however much works of literature differ politically, culturally or socially, the subject of family is generally approached in an exploration of a finite number of recurrent issues. They are determined by the dynamics of the family unit: the relationships between parents and children, the didactic efforts of the adults, and the ties and conflicts that arise from living together. Another recurrence is the crisis of representation that manifests itself in the depiction of an idealized home that ultimately breeds problems. However, the intrigue and uniqueness of such historical research arises from the sources with strong specifics of locality. The aggregate imagery described in this monograph is supported by an almost four-figure collection of empirical data on children's books.

In Lithuanian children's literature of the Soviet period the image of family arises as a historical sequence of dominant characteristics. With a few exceptions, the post-war books propagated a new and unusual image of the family based on the Soviet interpretation of the family unit, social realist aesthetics and the example set by Russian literature – in other words, a monolithic, static image with an emphasis on Soviet propaganda. The new Soviet family model was an unrealistic projection of the Stalinist family ideal: the family was to be an incubator producing Soviet citizens, thus revolving around the new, improved life and the social awareness of all the family members. In the idealized family, all its members possess the correct mental attitudes: the generally working-class parents have made clear choices, the children are lively Little Octobrists or pioneers. The domestic relationships radiate harmony: the parents are patient and attentive, whereas the children are obedient, hardworking and honest. Conflicts only arise because of a temporary lapse in one of the members' ideological self-awareness. Literature depicted two kinds of families: the ideologically-charged, impoverished family of independent inter-war Lithuania and the idealized Soviet family unit. Both types retain the traditional domestic structure in which the parents are authority figures setting an example for their children's thoughts and actions. Conversely, if one of the parents does not entirely blend into the new society, the children are seen as more powerful and become authorities themselves. With the help of ideological leaders outside of the family unit (like the superior pioneers or the exemplary collective farmers), the child guides the parent to the right path. A common literary motif is the transition into a new home – symbolic of moving from the old order (an old farmstead) to the new one (the collective farm).

In the second decade of the Soviet era, the focus of children's literature shifted as it began depicting a fuller picture of domestic everyday life. Special attention was given to the unifying ties of family, like the affection for one's relatives, the thoughtfulness of parents and grandparents, and the free time spent talking or playing games together.

Works of different genres, styles and addressees all show the household to be strong and stable enough. The growing inclination to write about family ties is hinted at by the return of the grandparent to children's literature, while the world of poetry filled with emotional poems in which children express their affection for family members, especially for their mother. In this period there also appeared quite a few domestic sagas – longer works of literature describing a more extensive stretch of family life. The role of parents in the children's lives was highly emphasised, with the parent depicted as an authority. A hierarchical structure combined with discipline was seen to be the basis of unobstructed, smooth domestic life. The aspect of spoiling the child was also broadly explored. While family relationships had not yet entered the focus of literature for teenagers, the main goal of children's literature was to teach the child to follow the rules set by the adults.

Monolithic and static in the post-war period, children's literature was becoming more colourful in terms of themes, style and genres. Different tendencies emerged simultaneously as the image of family started acquiring new dimensions. In the history of the family image, the period between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s is especially intensive and contradictory. On the one hand, as literature focuses more and more closely on the little one's place in the home, the understanding of childhood broadens and the unique worldview of the child becomes accepted. Parental control weakens and the role of physical punishment is questioned in favour of more complex psychological approaches. The parents become more attentive and develop a warmer communication style by way of speech, intonation and body language. The books intended for the younger readers show plenty of peaceful sketches of daily life, and through literature they rediscover the joy of spending time with mother or father. On the other hand, having highlighted emotional ties as a family value and a measure of relationship quality, literature – especially teenager's literature – started noticing their lack. Works of literature begin recording the first domestic conflicts that arise from the confrontation

of the worldviews of children and parents, an indifference towards the problems children encounter, and the child's neglected emotional world. Towards the middle of the 1970s, the dominant traits of the family imagery had already split into the two categories that would co-exist until Lithuania's Independence: one of them would further maintain the relatively positive impression of the home, whereas the other would highlight the inner problems within the family.

After a tentatively warm, accommodating domestic environment for children at the start of the 1970s, in the following years literature started exploring the various difficulties of family life and their effect on the child. Daily routine features mothers' bossiness, highlighting the rigid parent-child hierarchy within the family; because of professional or household concerns parents lack the time to spend with their children who then feel less important than the parents' jobs or festivities (in Soviet literature, seasonal and personal festivities unravel family ties because the parents generally leave home to celebrate elsewhere, whereas the young children are left on their own). Due to the lack of attention and especially parents' alcoholism, the child feels lonely and helpless in the company of those to whom he or she should be closest. Focus on alcoholism, in both the family and in society on the whole, pulls literature back from social factors and causes; instead it addresses the physical and psychological damage to the child. The new perspective reveals the home as a domain of isolation, punishment, and emotional stress.

As the domestic issues and conflicts become deeper and more common in the late Soviet period, the literary world develops a new dominant image of the family: one in which unfaithfulness tears the family apart and creates a clash between the children and the parents, to ultimately be physically separated by divorce. Writers emphasised the loneliness of teenagers, the intersections of their values and those of their parents, the growing disappointment in the older generation, and the alienation of family members. The young characters also serve as a measure of domestic harmony and morality: they try to repair their relationships with their parents, but

their influence is very limited. As the children grow, their power over their parents fades. Literature's critical attitude towards the wrecker of domestic peace is reflected in the unambiguously negative portraits of the individuals who exchange family for personal comfort. Books for teenagers of the 1980s start questioning the lifestyles of 'elite' families and criticising consumerism with the aim of propagating the traditional and modest yet emotionally warm and cosy family ideal that retains close ties and communication.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the tension and the crack within the family was such a prominent phenomenon in prose that it could be considered to be a metonymy for all the realistic literature for children and teenagers of the late Soviet period. However, simultaneously, works offering a less dramatic narrative were also being published, and even in larger quantities. Even the authors who were most critical towards family could not escape this narrative: it coexisted as a supplement or a possible alternative in a single short story or poem. Furthermore, some of the directions that literature took in this period can be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen the institution of family. The critical examination of the vices and moral upheavals of the parents' lifestyle is a means for the writer to create a contrast with the positive image of the grandparent – a fundamental element of childhood and a basic foundation of the family. A new wave of literary works suggested that parents should be more forgiving and understanding towards their children, thus letting them grow up more independently. This concept was expressed both in open declarations and by way of less obvious, yet equally significant guises. The motif of teenagers camping away from their parents or going on holiday on their own became increasingly common, as did the plot lines that noticeably 'bring up' or mature the protagonist; diverse domestic conflicts are examined only to discover there is no right answer or right family member. The part of children's literature of the late Soviet period that does not belong to the category of acute problem prose is not hermetic and does not offer an infantile, idealised image of family. Quite the opposite – the literature presents a variety of conflicts, but instead

of focusing on the damage done to the child, it offers possible solutions. Alongside the conflict-torn families, the reader is shown a stable family life in a home accommodating to the child.

After the post-war Stalinist literary project, the dominant aspects of children's literature gradually transformed like a dynamic story about family life: first the home and its rules are established, then little by little the individuality of the younger family members is recognized and new methods of co-existence are discussed and implemented. Finally, the neighbourhood of the well-adjusted harmonious family becomes inhabited by other, more or less conflicting, families. This historical trajectory of the image of family is revealed upon a close inspection of the thematic transformations, as seen in numbers of works in particular periods. It does not mean, however, that the dominance of one thematic aspect in the children's literature of one particular year denies the existence of other trends. Some older components of the image continued to be used because of inertia or intent. A recurrent feature in the picture of domestic life is the traditional hierarchy of family members: the men, who are placed at the top, are followed by the women, with the children at the bottom. With very few exceptions, the entirety of Soviet children's literature (just like the reality of the time) places the mother character in the kitchen more than in any other part of the home. Even though the literature of the 1970s critically examined the aspects of punishment and ruthless discipline, literature in later periods still displayed a wide variety of diverse control methods, ranging from especially close supervision and physical punishment to a discussion between equals. The more controlling parents tend to ignore their children's questions, refuse to explain their decisions and demand that their directions are obeyed immediately and unconditionally. Many of the literary families lack conversation and open problem-solving discussions; their lexicons of interaction are still permeated with harshness. These principles of relationship have been partly inherited by twenty-first-century children's and teenagers' literature.