

ANNA MARIA CZERNOW

University of Warsaw

Mary Poppins, Mr. Inkblot and Pippi Longstocking as Three Embodiments of the Fool Figure

Abstract: This article analyzes three characters created by Astrid Lindgren, Pamela L. Travers, and Jan Brzechwa. Pippi Longstocking, Mary Poppins, and Mr. Inkblot, the title characters of classic fantasy fiction for children, are discussed through their appearances, identity, as well as status and interpreted as embodiments of a fool defined as the central figure of carnivalesque in accordance to Mikhail Bakhtin theory.

Keywords: fool, clown, carnivalesque, Bakhtin, children's fantasy fiction

The subject of this paper is a comparative analysis of the eponymous characters of three works of fantasy fiction created in the 20th century. Two are part of the canon of Western children's literature, namely, Pamela Travers' *Mary Poppins* series and Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* trilogy. The third work is Jan Brzechwa's trilogy about Mr. Kleks (Mr. Inkblot), which occupies a canonical position as well, though only in the context of Polish children's literature. The first two books of Travers' series, *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, appeared in the 1930s, the last one, *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door*, was published 1988. Lindgren and Brzechwa created the first novels of their trilogies almost simultaneously, during World War II: *Pippi Långstrump* (*Pippi Longstocking*) came out in 1945, *Akademia pana Kleksa* (Mr. Inkblot's Academy) – in 1946. *Pippi Långstrump går ombord* (*Pippi Longstocking Goes Aboard*) and *Pippi Långstrump på Söderhavet* (*Pippi Longstocking in the South Seas*) followed shortly thereafter (published respectively in 1946 and 1948) whilst *Podróże pana Kleksa* (Mr. Inkblot's Journeys) and *Tryumf pana Kleksa* (Mr. Inkblot's Triumph) came out in the 1960s.

Pippi Longstocking, Mary Poppins and Ambrosius Inkblot are very similar as regards almost every element of character construction and role played in relation to the represented world. All three, as title characters of novels devoted to them, are brought into the narrative limelight. All three are not protagonists but catalysts, that is, as Maria Nikolajeva puts it, they “initiate the story and bring excitement [...] into the lives of real protagonists” (2002: 51). Finally, all three may be interpreted as fool or clown figures – actors central to the nar-

rative that Mikhail Bakhtin described as carnivalesque. Mary Poppins, Pippi Longstocking and Mr. Inkblot alike constitute the structural axis of the works discussed. All other elements of the represented worlds, including time, space and remaining characters, function around them and in relation to them. As Bakhtin points it out, they “create around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope” (2008). Consequently, Pippi Longstocking’s, Mary Poppins’ and Mr. Inkblot’s clownishness has far-reaching narrative, aesthetic, and ideological implications.

In Bakhtin’s interpretation, one of the most significant attributes of the fool or clown as a literary character is his “thoroughly allegorical nature” (2008). Due to this feature, the fool’s existence in the represented world has a metaphorical, figurative meaning – as a literary character, active within the narrative framework of a given work, he is at the same time a sign referring to the outside of the text. Besides, as a semantic cousin of the mythical trickster, he symbolizes the complexity and ambivalence of the elements of the primal chaos. This symbolic burden, which outlines a specific associative semantic field around images and notions such as asymmetry, amorphousness, blurring boundaries etc., often distinguishes many elements that construct clown figures, from their appearance and description of identity to activities undertaken in relation to other elements of the represented world.

In the beginning of his study in clowns and jesters William Willeford emphasises the importance of abnormal appearance of the fool (the physical deformity as well as the dress) as central to “the spectacle” presented by him (15–16). For all of the characters analysed in this paper their look, freakish, unusual or special, plays fundamental role in construction of their identity, being the first sign communicating their oddity both to the other characters in the novel and to the implied reader.

In the narrator’s description, the dominant element of Pippi Longstocking’s corporeality is her hair. Its bright red colour and messy, spiky stiffness brings to mind the hairdo of the circus clown. Mr. Inkblot’s variegated, multi-coloured hair elicits similar associations. What predominates over Pippi’s face is her „really very large mouth, with healthy white teeth” (Lindgren 2015a: 5). It is the mouth that the description focuses on almost exclusively, while the nose is barely noticeable, and serves mainly as a basis for freckles and the eyes are not mentioned at all. The portrait drawn in this way matches Bakhtin’s concept of the comical face, in which „[t]he eyes have no part” (1984: 316), and which can actually be “reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (317). The open mouth is voracious and eternally hungry, blurring the boundary between the body and the world, hence, it symbolises a body that “is never finished, never completed; it is constantly built, created” (317). Pippi’s mouth is a direct reference to “the acts of the bodily drama” (317) such as eating and drinking. Both its size and the emphasized existence of “healthy white teeth” are, according to Bakhtin’s

thought, attributes of “comic features” (325). It indicates a continuous readiness to take food, thus externalizing Pippi’s excessive voracity.

The mouth of Brzechwa’s character is invisible, covered by his moustache. Instead, his dominant facial feature is the nose: „The majority of Mr Inkblot’s face is taken up by his nose, which is always moving and keeps on leaning either to the left or to the right, depending on the time of year”¹ (29). The motif of the nose is described by Bakhtin as one of the most popular grotesque images. In the folk system of images referring to festivities, the nose substitutes the phallus (1984: 316). It plays a significant role in the picture of the comical face, not only as a protruding element, which violates the border between the body and the world, just as the mouth does, but also due to a certain autonomy it acquires, detachment from the rest of the face, its ability to “lead an independent life” (317). Indeed, Mr. Inkblot’s nose, described as “always moving” and keeping on “leaning either to the left or to the right” seems to lead a self-sufficient life, independent from the rest of the face.

Mary Poppins’ corporeality is depicted only rarely, and always in the same way: “Jane and Michael could see that the newcomer had shiny black hair – ‘Rather like a wooden Dutch doll,’ whispered Jane. And that she was thin, with large feet and hands, and small, rather peering blue eyes” (Travers 2016a: 125–127). This resemblance to a wooden doll, emphasized in almost every description, intensifies the impression of cool distance and mysteriousness. This fact, combined with Mary Poppins’ penetrating glance and sparing, carefully controlled facial expression perfectly fits into the associative field of order and norm, while having little in common with the grotesque appearance of the clown or fool. Mary Poppins’ face and impeccably clothed body complies with the rules of the norm Bakhtin called “the new bodily canon” presenting “an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body” (1984: 320).

The above reflections uncover the fact that the three characters’ physicalities differ significantly from one another. While Mary Poppins’ body is “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited”, the bodies of both Pippi Longstocking and Mr. Inkblot are characterized as permanently open to the world, which manifests itself through the constant blurring of boundaries between “self” and the reality external to “self”. A comparative analysis of their outfits confirms the existence of this fundamental difference. Mary Poppins’ interpretation of the idea of perfection expresses itself, among other things, in her continuous search for neatness and symmetry in appearance as regards herself, the Banks children and all other carelessly dressed town dwellers. The perfection of her outfits is easily associated with order, however, it is not the regular, general, and anonymous order, but a strict, scathing and ruthlessly perfect ideal of order still framed by the Victorian norm. This ideal, cool and aloof, strong-

¹ All quotations from Brzechwa’s *Akademia pana Kleksa* are taken from the not yet published English translation by Marek Kazmierski.

ly hinders the possibility of physical contact, which is, according to Bakhtin's concept, one of the possible ways of crossing the boundary between one's body and the world (1984: 317), an act impermissible from the Victorian world-view (Huff: 45). Consequently, Mary Poppins cuts short any attempts at physical contact, including those made by the children: "I'll thank you to let go of my shoes!" she snapped. "I am not an object in a Bargain Basement" (Travers 2016b: 18). It is symptomatic that her perfect clothing is an impassable barrier between her and the children, and in this context may be interpreted as an armour, protection against physical contact: "You've c-come b-back, at l-last!" stammered Michael excitedly, **as he clutched her neatly shod foot. It was warm and bony and quite real and it smelt of Black Boot-polish**" (Travers 2016c: 16, my emphasis). Pippi Longstocking's and Mr. Inkblot's outfits function in a totally different way. Not only do they not constitute a layer protecting a vulnerable body from excessive exposure to the world, but they are a tool for a downright demonstrative blurring of borders between "self" and "not-self" at every possible opportunity.

Wearing her shortish, motley dress, unfitting stockings and oversized boots, Pippi Longstocking embodies a grotesque and clumsy child version of the clown². It is also how the town dwellers perceive her, which can be seen, for example, in the scene of her confrontation with young rowdies (*Pippi Longstocking*). Deriding her appearance, they focus on those elements of her outfit and looks that bear a direct association with the circus clown:

At first he simply stared in astonishment, and then a broad sneer spread over his face. "Hey, blokes!" he said. [...] take a look at this. What a girl! He slapped his knees and laughed. [...] "Have you ever seen such hair! It's a real flaming bonfire! And what shoes! [...] Couldn't I please borrow one of them? I'd like to go for a row, and I haven't a boat." (Lindgren 2015a: 19).

As a rule, laughter, both derogatory and friendly, accompanies public manifestations of Pippi's odd appearance, most frequently depicted from the "spectators" perspective, as in the following scene: "The people in the circus couldn't help laughing. It looked so silly, they thought, to see the beautiful Miss Carmencita held fast by a little red-headed scamp who stood on the horse's back in her big shoes looking as if she'd never done anything but perform in a circus" (74). What is particularly conspicuous here is the juxtaposition of the appearance of both characters galloping on the horse. Pippi's clownish demeanour is all the more grotesque and bizarre, the prettier, according to the binding norm, Miss Carmencita looks: "a beautiful lady dressed in green silk tights" (73).

Vivi Edström points out that Pippi is "thoroughly theatrical", unrestrained in changing roles, tirelessly searching for and providing entertainment for herself and all interested ones (1992: 96). Lena Kåreland puts forward a similar

² Pippi's clownishness has been noticed by Vivi Edström and Ellen Buttenschøn has compared Lindgren's heroine to a court jester (Edström 1992: 91).

interpretation, suggesting that all activities of Lindgren's title character are featured by "theatrical gesture" (1999: 294). For Pippi, her whole life is a stage, a circus arena. By the same token, she perfectly fits into the dialectics of fool or clown figures, described by Bakhtin as "life's maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist" (2008). Pippi's theatricality refers both to her behaviour and appearance, which is manifested in the form of various dressing-ups. Particularly interesting are formal outfits, worn for important occasions, when she plays the role of a stylish lady:

At three o'clock that afternoon a very elegant young lady walked up the steps of the Settergreen home. It was Pippi Longstocking. For the sake of being different, her red hair was unbraided, and it fell about her like a lion's mane. She had painted her mouth a violent red with chalk, and blackened her eyebrows so much that she looked quite dangerous. With the red chalk she had also coloured all her nails, and she had put big green bows on her shoes. "I should think I'll be the fanciest at this party," she muttered, rather pleased with herself, as she rang the doorbell (Lindgren 2015: 92–93).

Individual details of the disguise depicted above catch the reader's attention, as they are inconsistent with the generally accepted image of a stylish lady. Pippi's loose hair, red and hanging "like a lion's mane" around her, introduce an element of primary wildness and unbridledness, which is further intensified with the description of her intense eye make-up. Red lips may be associated with a clumsy attempt to imitate "adult make-up" undertaken by a little girl, but can also be interpreted as a typical element of the disharmonious mask of the circus clown. The big green bows, a grotesque ornament on Pippi's enormous shoes, also create an impression of clownishness rather than stylishness.

A grotesque child wearing an artificial layer of "adult" make-up and disproportionately loose, baggy clothes undoubtedly typifies the clown figure, a mask put on for a while, bestowing a temporary right to "hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not 'to be oneself'; the right to live a life in [...] the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks" (Bakhtin 2008). This principle may be illustrated with the description of dress-ups in another Astrid Lindgren's novel, *The Children of Noisy Village*, where the act of putting on an adult costume by a child automatically negates the high status of adulthood, making it an object of the child's laughter:

Britta said she was going to dress up as a man, so she took Dad's striped trousers and a brown jacket, and his round black hat, and put them on. The trouser legs were too long of course, so she fastened them up with safety pins, and she had to roll up the sleeves as well. Then she drew a moustache and beard on her face. She looked like a funny little old man, and Anna and I laughed at her so much we could hardly get our skirts on. [...] Lasse put on a dress which belonged to

Olle's mum, and shoes with high heels. [...] Lasse ran around flapping his arms and speaking in a squeaky voice. „How *do* you make your ginger biscuits so delicious, my dear? Oh, *may* I have the recipe?” He thinks that's how grown-up ladies speak (Lindgren 2014: 86–88).

The very fact that a child assumes an unfitting “adult” image discloses the ambivalence of being adult, ruthlessly and publicly exposing its other, usually concealed side, which is repulsive, hideous, and laughable. Therefore, the adult role of a grown-up lady is ridiculous both in its interpretation by Lasse, a carnivalesque boy in a woman's dress, and when performed by Pippi, whose elegance is thwarted by her oversized, “adult” boots.

The depiction of Mr. Inkblot's clothes reads as follows:

Mr. Inkblot is of average height, but we don't really know if he is fat or thin, seeing as he always seems to be drowning in layers of clothing. He wears wide trousers, which sometimes, especially when a wind is blowing, look just like a balloon; a very spacious, long frock coat, the colour of chocolate or red wine; a lemon-coloured velvet waistcoat, buttoned up with glass globes the size of plums; a stiff, very high collar and a velvet bowtie instead of a cravat (Brzechwa: 28).

Brzechwa's title character's excessively loose and motely clothes evidently come from the same circus clown wardrobe as Pippi's low-cut dress, enormous boots and big straw hat. As Willeford points out,

[t]his lumpishness suggests chaos registered by consciousness as a mere, crude fact: the audience is confronted with something relatively shapeless, yet material – there, with a human presence. The motely of medieval jesters, figures in the *Fastnacht* processions, and many circus clowns implies a rudimentary differentiation of the primal lump, the guise that chaos assumes when attention is paid to it (16).

What is more, Mr. Inkblot's set of clothes described above, containing a velvet waistcoat, stiff collar and a bowtie, can also be interpreted as a dress-up – a motely and incongruent version of an outfit of an elegant gentleman.

In the light of the above considerations, it seems impossible to describe Mary Poppins' appearance as clownish. One must remember however, that clowns' or fools' costumes encompass a vast array of possible variants, including harmonious and geometrical, “balanced” forms:

In every epoch, we [...] face a similar process, in which one should probably see a persistent desire to return to the beginnings. The moment the representatives of the next generation of carnies gradually acquired civility, and their clothes – elegance and harmony, immediately new figures appeared next to them, whose clothing, clumsiness, roughness and churlish behaviour referred anew to the mythical first period. An example of such a figure was the clown from the English harlequinade, born in reaction to the gradual refinement of the harlequin

character, as well as the auguste, who originated the characters of the first burlesque films (Sznajderman: 20)³.

Therefore, it is very telling that a similar phenomenon occurs in the *Mary Poppins* novels, as misshapen or ridiculous characters of clowns, beggars and freaks appear beside the trig and trim figure of the title character. The physicality of two such characters is particularly striking. What they have in common is that they appear on the pages of the novel only indirectly, as main characters of a story Mary Poppins herself tells the children. The first is Dirty Rascal:

[A] tall, slim figure, curiously dressed. He wore stockings of red striped with yellow, a red-and-yellow tunic scalloped at the edges, and on his head was a large-brimmed red-and-yellow hat with a high, peaked crown. [...] He was the strangest person they had ever seen, and yet – there was something about him that seemed familiar (Travers 2016b: 147).

The second is the Tramp:

His tattered clothes were so old that you couldn't find one bit of them that wasn't tied with string. The brim of his hat framed a face that was rosy and mild in the sunlight, and through the brim his hair stuck up in tufts of grey and silver. His steps were alternately light and heavy, for one foot wore an old boot and the other a bedroom slipper. (Travers 2016d: 13–14).

The Tramp's clothes are an example of “a medley of multicoloured patches, spots, scraps and snippets” (Sznajderman: 19), and his unsymmetrical, unfitting footwear representing different spheres of life produces the effect of lameness, a physical deficiency which, along with amorphous clothes, Willeford and Sznajderman claim to be characteristic for a clown's appearance, “a gate through which [chaos] enters [...] the world of cosmic order” (Sznajderman: 19). A scene from the opening chapter of *Pippi Longstocking*, when Pippi becomes the subject of Tommy and Annika's assessment for the first time, is very telling in this context. The silent presentation that the siblings are witnesses to contains a set of signs which become manifest not only in the already discussed external appearance, but also in the manner of walking: “Pippi went on down the street, walking with one foot on the pavement and the other in the gutter. Tommy and Annika watched her until she was out of sight. In a moment she returned, walking backwards” (Lindgren 2015a: 6).

Dirty Rascal as well as the Tramp not only act as main characters of the stories devoted to them, they can be interpreted as Mary Poppins' representations. Their semantic identification with the nanny reflects itself in the way the tales told by her function in relation to the Banks children. Georgia Grilli points out that, during her story-telling performances, Mary Poppins embod-

³ Unless otherwise stated all quotations from Polish, Swedish and Russian appear in my translation.

ies the mythical storyteller, gathering listeners at her feet (11). The structure of both tales is similar. The initial situation in the case of the tale of Dirty Rascal is the picture of a kingdom ruled by a king so stupid that he is unable to learn anything, despite the efforts of many life-risking professors. The story about the Tramp starts with an idyllic image of a group of characters relaxing by a stream. Each of them is convinced of their own uniqueness, concealed beneath rather unattractive factual circumstances which they call “disguise”.

The situations outlined above are both disrupted with the appearance of a strange creature. The activities that the newcomer undertakes in the represented world of the stories are carnivalesque in nature: the rules that govern reality are contested, the masks of the drama’s participants – pulled down, all this to unveil, if only for a moment, the true, simultaneously absurd and harmonious nature of the world. At the same time, the opportunity to look into the naked face of reality liberated from the shackles of the order- and hierarchy-breeding norm is the only chance for **self-recognition** – the feeling and understanding of one’s identity and one’s existence in the world. This is what the King of the Castle experiences: “Ethelbert! What are you doing? You forget yourself!” cried the Queen angrily. ‘I do not, my dear!’ the King called back. ‘On the contrary, I am remembering myself for the first time!’” (Travers 2016b: 164). The characters of the story about the Tramp are exposed to this as well, when in the despised “disguise” they recognize the truth about themselves.

Consequently, the bizarre newcomer, the grotesque fool and the tramp function in those stories as a mirror which reflects things as they really are. They stop for a moment in a specific section of space-time, renew it, and go on. Therefore, in relation to the reality of Mary Poppins’ stories they play an identical role as Mary Poppins herself in relation to the represented world of Travers’ novels. It is characteristic that this sameness refers both to the structural layer (just as the nanny, Dirty Rascal and the Tramp are catalyst characters in the narrative structures of both stories) and the semantic-symbolic layer (Mary is the Banks children’s guide on their way to cognition and self-cognition rather than to the socialization to the rules of the binding norm, as could be suggested by the social function of the nanny, whose role she plays⁴).

The stories about fools and tramps may thus be interpreted as parables, **responses** to Jane’s and Michael’s tormenting questions about what the world is like, who they themselves are in it and who Mary Poppins is, taken into narrative brackets⁵. What occurs here is a specific looping of meaning. As fool characters, Dirty Rascal and the Tramp are figures of Mary Poppins, and thus unveil her own figurativeness within the represented world. While Pippi

⁴ I would not agree on this point with Giorgia Grilli, who maintains that Mary Poppins “trains the children to respect what are considered to be norms” (5).

⁵ Grilli perceives the story-telling episodes as the only moments when Mary Poppins succumbs to children demanding explanations and stories (11).

Longstocking plays the role of a little girl in Lindgren's trilogy and Mr. Inkblot – the role of a teacher in Brzechwa's novel, Mary Poppins plays the role of a nanny in Travers' series. None of the three is, as Bakhtin reminds, „what they seem” (2008). In line with this interpretation, Mary Poppins' perfectly symmetrical, always neat clothes and her normatively flawless appearance are a “disguise” concealing a real, inaccessible and mysterious figure, made manifest through, among others, the fool, festooned with bells, and the ragged, lame tramp.

Mary Poppins always leaves Cherry Tree Lane flying upwards⁶, this is also the direction that she comes from. Blown by the east wind (*Mary Poppins*), pulled down at the end of a kite string (*Mary Poppins Comes Back*) or appearing as a result of a firework burst (*Mary Poppins Opens the Door*), she is undoubtedly out of this world, a character “‘borrowed’ for a moment from that unknown place where Mary Poppins has always existed”, to use Grilli's description (3). This fact inevitably translates into her otherness, evident regardless of the perfection with which she meets the rules and constraints of the binding norm. Despite her neat outfits and impeccable appearance, she is perceived by the children under her care as “a figure [...] at once strange and familiar” (Travers 2016b: 147). The category of strangeness also concerns the other characters analysed in this paper, as each of them is, in a way, “borrowed”. Pippi's peers describe her as “the most curious child [they] had ever seen” (Lindgren 2015a: 5), and adults as “a remarkable child” (3), an opinion bolstered by the narrator's objectivizing statement: “He was right. Pippi was a very remarkable child” (3). These adjectives are also used with reference to Mr. Inkblot, both by the characters of the novel and the narrator, just as in Pippi's case.

The oddity of all three characters stigmatizes them as Others and is an external signal of their being out-of-this-world. Bakhtin explains that clown and fool figures have “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available [...]” (2008), and a character “‘other’ in this world” is one whose past and future are in no way rooted in the represented or even implied layer of the novel. Jean Starobinski elevates Bakhtin's “right to be ‘other’” to the level of a rule without exceptions, pointing out that every true clown comes from another world, and his appearance must necessarily mean crossing the boundaries of what is real (Kårelund: 299), while in Sznajderman's conceptualization, the fool “is always someone strange, an outsider, in the cultures of the past and in the culture of today” (24). Thus, the clown or fool figures' descent and past are always unclear: mysterious and puzzling (the *Mary Poppins* series), blurred in an array of possible variants (the *Mr. Ink-*

⁶ Staffan Bergsten interprets this fact in a broader context of mythical plots and refers to Mary Poppins' flights as Ascensions (27–30).

blot trilogy) or signalled in the form of contradictory signs, which function as disinformation rather than a source of knowledge (the *Pippi Longstocking* novels). As Willeford points it out, a fool “comes and goes like an apparition glimpsed for a moment” (4).

The readers’ pursuit of an unambiguous answer to the question of who these characters are, of pulling down their masks and peeking behind the curtain of the theatre they play in is doomed to failure, not so much due to the effectiveness of camouflage strategies adopted by the authors, but due to a more general cultural principle, by which “the fool is a creature devoid of identity” (Sznajderman: 18). Bakhtin emphasizes fools’ lack of identity as well, stating that these characters may only realize a reflected, alien existence, because “that is all they have” (2008). Willeford and Sznajderman point out that this lack of identity is signalled in the etymology of the fool’s designations in many languages, very often linked to the symbolism of the wind (Willeford: 10). When examined from this perspective, the fool is as free and unpredictable as the wind, but at the same time “has neither aim nor direction, neither weight nor meaning” (Sznajderman: 19).

The air element, the wind, “puffed cheeks” (Willeford: 10), the lightness of a body (Grilli: 80) rising up freely are all Mary Poppins’ attributes. Blown by the east wind to the Banks’ house, she quickly proves her ability to move in the air in the same natural and controlled manner as on the ground:

And at that moment, before the children’s astonished eyes, Mary Poppins did a curious thing. She raised herself stiffly on her toes and balanced there for a moment. Then, very slowly, and in a most dignified manner, she turned seven Catherine wheels through the air. Over and over, her skirts clinging neatly about her ankles, her hat set tidily on her head, she wheeled up to the top shelf, took the cake, and wheeled down again, landing neatly on her head in front of Mr. Turvy and the children (Travers 2016b: 107).

What is striking here is the grotesque incongruity between Mary’s slow, dignified moves and the circus activity of turning cartwheels. In the congenial image of Harlequin’s somersaults performed in hell Bakhtin recognizes an ambivalent carnivalesque act: “Harlequin’s somersaults are topographical; their points of orientation are heaven, earth, the underworld, the top and the bottom. They present an interplay, a substitution of the face by the buttocks [...]” (1984: 397). A similar demonstration carried out by Pippi may be found in the scene of the merry-go-round ride (*Pippi Longstocking Goes Aboard*):

She stood on her head on the horse, with her legs right up in the air. Her long evening dress fell down round her neck. All that the people standing round could see, was a red bodice, a pair of green nickers, Pippi’s long thin legs with one brown and one black stocking, and her big black shoes which waved playfully backwards and forwards. “That’s how it’s done when a Real Lady goes on a merry-go-round”, said Pippi when the first turn was over (Lindgren 2015b: 55).

Provocatively displaying her intimate clothing, Pippi fulfils “one of the more ancient functions of the fool”, which was, as Bakhtin states, “the making-public of specifically nonpublic spheres of life – for example, the sexual sphere” (2008). Moreover, standing on her head, she reverses the vertical bodily order, whose points of orientation are “top” and “bottom”, presenting to the public her hind-quarters, which are, in Bakhtin’s interpretations, “the face turned inside out” (1984: 373). Mary Poppins gives in to a similar activity, “gracefully” landing on her head, but in this case, there is no question of her baring or exposing her body publicly: the intimate spheres of her physicality remain prudishly covered by “her skirts clinging neatly about her ankles”.

The air is also Mr. Inkblot’s basic element. He freely flies in and out through windows, reaches the last, inaccessible floor of the Academy building through the chimney and sits effortlessly in the air, all he has to do is to “puff his cheeks”. The tendency to rise up, caused by the natural “lightness”⁷ of the body, externalizing an affinity with the wind and air, is built into the construction of both characters, Mary Poppins and Mr. Inkblot, in a very similar way. They do not as much fly as let themselves be elevated by the air which fills up their bodies:

Mr. Inkblot puffed his cheeks and flew upward on the tails of his frock-coat, as he usually did when he was about to leave on a journey. He briefly floated about above our heads, whereupon he sneaked away through the open window, soared upwards and drifted away in the south-east direction (Brzechwa: 214).

Within those similarities, there is an astonishing identity of scenes⁸ in which both Mr. Inkblot and Mary Poppins demonstrate the ability to slide up the banister. The descriptions are as follows:

Actually, it is impossible to say that he “walks downstairs”, seeing as he slides down the banister, sitting on it as if on a horse, holding onto his glasses with both his hands. **And there would be nothing unusual about this, if it wasn’t for the fact that Mr. Inkblot is just as adept at riding the banister back up the stairs.** In order to do so, he holds his breath, swells his cheeks and becomes as light as a feather (Brzechwa: 32, my emphasis).

[...] Jane and Michael, watching from the top landing, had an excellent view of the extraordinary thing the visitor now did. **Certainly she followed Mrs. Banks upstairs, but not in the usual way. With her large bag in her hands she slid gracefully up the banisters, and arrived at the landing at the same time as Mrs. Banks.** Such a thing, Jane and Michael knew, had never been done before. Down, of course, for they had often done it themselves. But up – never! They gazed curiously at the strange new visitor (Travers 2016a, my emphasis).

⁷ The word “lightness” was used with reference to Mary Poppins’ figure by Giorgia Grilli, inspired by Italo Calvino’s conception (80).

⁸ It is possible that Jan Brzechwa knew *Mary Poppins*, as the Polish translation by Irena Tuwim was published in 1938.

The similarity of both scenes is visible not only in the very idea itself, but also in the way they are narratively realized. The nanny's and the professor's behaviour is presented via the child protagonists' observations⁹, hence, on the level of explicitly formulated comments, their conduct is presented as aberrant solely because it overcomes the constraints imposed by the laws of physics. Sliding the banister is, however, one of those activities which come to an end when childhood does. Hence, the implied layer of both descriptions contains an additional element of puzzlement. This element is ambiguous, as it stays in contradiction with the explicitly formulated assessments of the young spectators – in their view, the very act of riding the banister performed by their guardians was “nothing unusual” (Mr. Inkblot's Academy) as “they had often done it themselves” (*Mary Poppins*). Meanwhile, the demonstrative juvenility of the title characters' behaviour is additionally emphasized by the fact that, according to the cultural and social norm, the professor's and the governess' roles they play are based upon authority.

As put forward by Grilli, air affinity and the ensuing lightness of the body flying away are connected with the symbolism of a threshold which joins separate, usually disjunct realities. She juxtaposes Mary Poppins' figure with the ritual liminal roles in primal societies (witch doctor, Native Indian medicine man, etc.), known from ethnographic records, with the trickster Greek god Dionysus and the ambivalent dandy character (43–76). The perpetual crossing of thresholds, effacing boundaries, mixing different orders is, however, primarily the domain of the fool, who Willeford calls “a mascot who maintains a relationship between the ordered world and the chaos excluded by it” (15). Sznajderman expands on this remark, calling the fool “a mediator, in constant transition between various states and worlds: between this and that world, between life and death, wisdom and folly, culture and nature, spirit and body, between the heavenly, the chthonic, and the human world” (24). A clown effaces, blurs, and dilutes thresholds and borderlines – being “in-between” constitutes the essence of his dual nature. Consequently, Mary Poppins and Mr. Inkblot, who soar in the air, and Pippi Longstocking, who balances on a circus rope, eternally oscillate between different orders of reality. Pippi, who lives “[a]t the end of a little [...] town” (Lindgren 2015a: 1) lodges on the border of the orderly society and unpredictable nature¹⁰. Mr. Inkblot and Mary Poppins reverse the social roles of the nanny and the teacher, and subjecting them to the upside-down logic, they unveil the absurdity of the didactic norm ascribed to these roles. All three hover somewhere between the human and the non-human state: Mr. Inkblot, who turns into a starling, a button and an ink bottle,

⁹ The fact that in this episode Mary Poppins is described from the perspective of children watching her was noted by Maria Nikolajeva, who used this observation for a different kind of analysis (51).

¹⁰ Scholars often call Pippi a wild child of nature and emphasize her being outside of the social structure (Edström: 91–92, Kåreland: 284).

Mary Poppins, the relation of animals, celestial bodies, book characters and plasticine figures, and Pippi, whose companion, Mr. Nilsson, is a living metaphor of the agility of her mind and body¹¹, but, on the other hand, as a monkey in clothes, clearly represents clownishness¹².

The liminal, unclear, “in-between” position of clown or fool figures is not ideology-free. In the case of works referred to in this paper, the ideological aspect strongly correlates with pedagogy, which is typical of children’s literature and could be most expressively illustrated with Pippi Longstocking’s character and her ambivalent social status. Despite being a child, a creature subordinated and submissive by definition, dependent on the world of adults, she still manages to cultivate her own freedom, ensured through financial independence, supernatural physical power, and orphanhood understood as lack of external control. Pippi, a catalyst character, distributes her own freedom to others, making it a common rule for the use of a jolly caricature of the normative order, into which the world depicted in the novel converts under her influence. This childish freedom is cheeky and rebellious. Not only does it infringe the system of the adult world, mercilessly ridiculing it in the process, but, above all, it challenges and subverts the hierarchy of power. In the reality of the Lindgren’s trilogy Pippi acquires typically adult position, that of the supreme ruler.

Both Mr. Inkblot and Mary Poppins are adults, but the ambivalence of status, resulting from a position between childhood and adulthood, pertains to them as well. The age of Brzechwa’s character, just as any other aspect of his identity, remains unspecified. “You just thought to yourself that I must be 100 years old, right? Meanwhile, I am 20 years younger than you” (Brzechwa: 26), he says one day to the narrator and protagonist, Adaś Niezgodka (Adam Notagreed). Seemingly old, Mr. Inkblot turns out to be younger than the youngest children, so young that he does not yet exist. Other indications of his child or even infant status may be found in the story told by Matthew, the starling:

[H]e told me that every day at midnight Mr. Inkblot begins to shrink, until he is the size of a newborn baby, losing his hair, moustache and beard, then lies down as if nothing was amiss in the minuscule bed next to Matthew. At dawn, Mr. Inkblot rises, puts the magnifying pump in his ear and a few moments later brings

¹¹ Cf. the Swedish phrase “vig som en apa” (agile as a monkey). Many scholars point out to Pippi’s linguistic prowess, one of the character’s basic features (Edström: 105, Kåreland: 289). In Swedish, Pippi is “vig i munnen”, that is linguistically “agile”. Mr. Nilsson’s figure may be thus investigated as a kind of a realized metaphor.

¹² According to Margaret Sullivan, „The monkey is an important character in a history of fool and folly imagery, and interest of the subject of folly reached its height in the first half of the sixteenth century”. In the didactic discourse of that time, folly symbolized sin and moral perdition. Illustrations depicting “Dame Folly” were common, showing her as she walks towards clowns clothed in their characteristic garments with bells and leads bound monkeys on a chain leash. “This suggests the element of progression that is implicit in much of the literature. The monkey represents men who are even further down the road to damnation than the fool” (117–118).

himself back to standard size. Next, he swallows a few hair growth pills and this way, after about ten minutes, he regains his usual form (Brzechwa: 27).

Oscillating between early old age and infancy, Mr. Inkblot continuously travels in time, at the same time violating the temporal logic of the represented world.

Staffan Bergsten draws attention to Mary Poppins' childishness (60–62). Referring to Wordsworth and his *Immortality Ode*, the scholar juxtaposes the romantic figure of the philosopher/poet/artist with the title character of Travers' series. The philosopher/poet/artist, in Wordsworth's understanding, is someone constantly in touch with nature, reading its secrets like a book. This is a feature he has in common with the child – the priest of nature: "This blessed seer is then identified with the child" (60). Likewise, Mary Poppins, consequently described as an unusual being, akin to all natural phenomena, whether they refer to the universe, plants, or animals, may be unquestionably called the priestess of nature. Comparing her to Wordsworth's "blessed seer", Bergsten invokes two specific tales from Travers' series, which focus on the youngest members of the Banks family, infants. The first relates to the twins, John and Barbara (*Mary Poppins*), and the second to the new-born, only one-day-old Annabel (*Mary Poppins Comes Back*). What is typical of the series structure, both chapters are symmetrical to each other, and are closely interlinked by the plot, the mood, and the leitmotif – the loss of skills characteristic of early childhood. John and Barbara, on account of their infancy, are part of the world of nature: they understand the speech of all its components, including the sunlight ray, birds and the wind. This gift disappears as soon as the babies develop their first teeth. When the little Annabel is born, she brings to the world the memory of where she had come from, but loses it after a few days spent in the Banks family. In both cases, the sad necessity to forget, a fate common to all developing human beings, is heralded by the Starling, as in "John and Barbara's Story":

"I say you will," [...] "You'll forget because you just can't help it. There never was a human being that remembered after the age of one – at the very latest – except, of course, Her." And he jerked his head over his shoulder at Mary Poppins. "But why can she remember and not us?" said John. "A-a-a-h! She's different. She's the Great Exception. Can't go by her," said the Starling, grinning at them both (Travers 2016a).

And in „The New One”:

Beaks and Claws! Of course you will. By the time the week's out you won't remember a word of it – what you are or where you came from!" Inside her flannel petticoat Annabel was kicking furiously. "I will! I will! How could I forget?" "Because they all do!" jeered the Starling harshly. "Every silly human, except –" he nodded his head at Mary Poppins – "her! She's different, she's the Oddity, she's the Misfit –" (Travers 2016b: 135).

Both quoted excerpts emphasize the uniqueness of Mary Poppins, who defies the laws of growing up. Unlike Mr. Inkblot, who continuously abandons and returns to early childhood, she unchangeably remains in several stages of development at the same time. Mary Poppins seems to be young and old at once, she integrates adult and child features. (“I don’t know about you –” she says in response to the Starling’s sighing over the flow of time. – “but I’m quite as young as I was, thank you!” [Travers 2016b: 143]).

Mr. Inkblot, Mary Poppins and Pippi Longstocking alike oscillate between adulthood and childhood. As fool figures, they “fix the very moment of transition and a change, a change of two powers and two truths, old and new, dying and emerging”¹³. All three embody „the playing boy of Heraclitus who possesses the supreme power in the universe” (Bakhtin 1984: 82). Consequently, they may be interpreted as fools of the world of children’s literature: mischievous and disobedient, unpredictable children in power – the kings of misrule.

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¹³ The quoted excerpt has been omitted in the English translation. In the original the full sentence reads as follows: “Все эти топографические образы стремились зафиксировать именно самый момент перехода и смены – смены двух властей и двух правд, старой и новой, умирающей и рождающейся.” (Bakhtin 1990: 95).

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