UDK: 821.111.09-311.5

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Humour in the Mystic Fantasy World of *The Wee Free Men*

Izvorni znanstveni rad / original research paper
Primljeno / received 4. 8. 2023. Prihvaćeno / accepted 1. 7. 2024.
DOI: 10.21066/carcl.libri.13.1.3

The paper deals with the study of humour in Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* (2003). The paper provides a reading of the humour in a text belonging to the comic fantasy genre and argues that though the comic element in the book may entertain readers, the humour in the book is used to raise a series of issues and invite readers into a meaning-making process. The paper will refer to Julie Cross's "new 'compounds' of humour" and Bakhtin's theory of carnival to discuss the complexities of humour and the ways of its actualisation in the fantasy genre. The paper also refers to the gender aspect of humour and discusses the elements that subvert gender expectations. The analysis of humour and its impact on the implied reader is carried out with an account of the plot, the authorial intention, and the textual structure and its elements.

Keywords: comic fantasy genre, humour, humour theories, carnivalesque, gender, *The Wee Free Men*

Recent decades have seen growing interest in the study of humour in children's and young adult literature, yet humour has not been considered seriously by the critical community for a long time (Cross 2011). In 1967, James Steel Smith noted that "No aspect of children's literature is more carelessly thought about than its humor" (1967: 207). Discussing humour in children's and young adult literature, in the extensive introduction to "Humour in Contemporary Junior Literature" (2011), Julie Cross

argues that humour in literature for junior readers has long been ignored by the critical community due to bias against the comic genre in general. However, as the author further expands, children's literature itself was considered of low status and its literary merit was belittled due to considerations that children do not have enough skills to "reflect on how texts work" (Cross 2011: 1). Using the following quotation of Michael Cart that children "intuitively look for books that will make them laugh" (1995: 196–197) and referring to works of several theorists, Cross argues that junior readers have a certain degree of natural cognitive ability and that due to education and their social environment children are acquiring skills for understanding more complex forms of humour. Exploring the importance of humour, Cross notes the specific value of texts written from the 1960s onward. This was the period when, along with the social and cultural transformations in western society, new ideas about children and childhood emerged, which were largely due to "the economic prosperity and the economic empowerment of children as consumers" (Cross 2011: 2).

The above considerations of humour in children's literature have brought our attention to its role in the comic fantasy genre, which, as we believe, deserves special attention. In this type of texts, as we aim to show, humour's role can hardly be limited to serving for entertainment or being merely didactic. The fantasy genre may challenge readers into new avenues of thinking and reveal ways they may interact with their real world through associations with the imagined worlds. Discussing the interplay between humour and fantasy in Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" series, in the essay entitled "Debugging the Mind: The Rhetoric of Humour and the Poetics of Fantasy", Gideon Haberkorn contends: "[f]antasy can foreground the tools we use to make meaning. Humour can help us notice and correct mistakes our mind makes in its meaning-making" (2014: 160). What may at first seem like an ordinary funny book may actually require the reader to think in more sophisticated ways, relating the acts and emotions of characters to their own experiences. This is due to the meaning-making function of the mind, which, as stated by Roy Baumeister, "takes the straw of sensual perception and spins it into the gold of a meaningful pattern, by creating connections and relationships" (1991: 16). In her definition of humour in children's literature, Lisa Arter points out that humour is "a magical thing that helps us to learn to make sense of the world around us and to accept those aspects that do not, and may never, make sense" (Arter 2019: 169).

The aim of the present paper is to study the ways humour is materialised in Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* (2003) and discuss how humour and fantasy correlate to raise serious issues about social ambivalence, the child's identity, and gender. *The Wee Free Men* is the first novel by the author classified as a story of the Discworld series. It is worth noting that Terry Pratchett's reputation as a humorous fantasy author stemmed from his Discworld series, a series of novels set on a flat world supported by four massive elephants, which stand on the back of a giant turtle. As noted by Gideon Haberkorn, "the rhetoric of humour and the poetics of fantasy are central aspects of the Discworld novels" (Haberkorn 2014: 160). While the disc (the flat world) is a parody of the fantasy world, the novels in the series are not about the flat world. As noted by Lawrence Watt-

Evans, the stories are about "the various people on the Disc" (2008: 172), and it is not in the smallest part due to humour that the characters get flesh and blood.

In our study of humour in the selected book, we will dwell on Cross's "new 'compounds' of humour" (2011) which will enable us to discuss the complexity of humour and the ways of its actualisation.

Over decades, considerations of humour have resulted in three main theories: the relief theory,[1] the incongruity theory,[2] and the superiority theory[3] (Morreall 1987), which describe the phenomenon of humour based on certain aspects.

Many modern theorists agree that due to the complexity of the nature of humour it is extremely hard to limit its study within either the rigid or the all-encompassing boundaries of one theory. According to Cross, "there is no one global account of the phenomenon, so enormous and varied are the forms and properties of humour, which can have so many differing functions" (2011: 10). She contends that "there is much 'leakage' of one type of humour into another and one and the same humorous stimulus can be described in different ways" (2011: 10). Hence, Cross recommends avoiding any rigid categorisations of humour. This leads us to conclude that various potentials of humour can be actualised simultaneously in the same context.

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[1] The relief theory is concerned with the physiological and psychological benefits of humour and is closely related to the affective (the emotional) dimension. The origins of the theory can be traced back to Ancient Greece. The theory argues that humour is derived from the release of pent up emotions. According to Raskin, "laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc." (1985: 38). Through this theory, the social functions of humour are emphasised, as the latter are usually manifested in the role of humour in "easing conflicts, relieving tensions and promoting order" (Cross 2011: 6). In this respect, in the relief theory, the positive aspect of humour is emphasised.

[2] The superiority theory, in contrast to the relief theory, considers humour a negative human experience. The interpretations of the superiority theory are attributed to Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbs, and the theory was a dominant one until the eighteenth century. According to this theory, the feelings of superiority are always present in humour. Some researchers point to the "element of malice" (Bicknell 2007: 458), which pinpoints the weaknesses of another person (usually a victim). However, several superiority theorists refuse to consider humour as a totally negative experience. They consider laughing not merely an assertion of superiority over the victim but rather emphasise the corrective function of humour which is aimed at correcting the wrong behaviours by adapting them to social norms (Bergson 1911).

[3] The incongruity theory, which began to emerge in the eighteenth century and has remained the leading theory up to the present, deals with the cognitive dimension of humour and reflects positive views of the phenomenon. The development of the theory stems from the ideas expressed by Kant and Schopenhauer. As Kant wrote: "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Kant 1982, quoted in Morreall 2009: 47). According to Berger, "intellect is always involved in perceptions of the comic" (1997: 135). The intellectual or the cognitive aspect of humour has been noted by other theorists as well. S. Critcley argues that even dark humour is always lucid and reflects "a profoundly cognitive relation to oneself and the world" (2002: 102). Many theorists mention that when people laugh, they undergo a psychological and conceptual shift. According to Morreall, "This change may be primarily cognitive, as the incongruity theory shows— from a serious state of perceiving and thinking about things that fit into our conceptual patterns, to a nonserious state of being amused by some incongruity" (Morreall 1983: 38) and "the pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in laughter, which signals to others that they can relax and play too" (Morreall 2009: 50).

In terms of cognitive potentials, Cross emphasises that it is high humour that relies much on cognition and intellectual capacity. Among the forms of high humour, "humorous parody, comic irony, satire and humorous metafictive narrative devices (including word play, puns and wit)" are mentioned (2011: 14). While high humour is supposed to contribute to the spiritual growth of a person, the low form of humour "degrades the individual to his contact with the earth and the lower part of his body – belly, genitals […]" (Muela Bermejo 2021: 74). In an attempt to deny the binaries, Cross brings forth new dimensions, or as the author puts it, the "new 'compounds'" of treating humour in children's literature, combining high and low, cognitive and earthly elements, which, as she further contends, "will invite young readers to construct themselves as 'discursively competent'" (Cross 2011: 16), referring to the formulation of "a fully competent 'master of discourse'" proposed by Gillian Pye (2006: 56). In this light, the reader becomes an active participant, together with the author, in the creation of textual meaning.

Apart from the reference to humour theories, Tiffany Aching's story of empowerment, a quest accompanied by mythic creatures, her temporary crowning as Kelda, and her return to the normal setting at the end of the story mean that the book can be read in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival and the carnivalesque. In "Rabelais and His World" (1984), Bakhtin traces the history of the popular medieval cultural festivities and the impact of Francois Rabelais on that history. According to Bakhtin, the medieval carnival caused a disruption of the normal social order and a temporary reversal of the power structure, since "in the world of the carnival all hierarchies are cancelled" (1984: 251). Bakhtin argues, "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (1984: 10). In our reading of the humour of *The Wee Free Men*, selected pieces of the plot, the use of chosen words, and literary techniques will be discussed based on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

Last but not least, the paper touches on the gender aspect of humour in an attempt to demonstrate how the humour in *The Wee Free Men* challenges the stereotypical images of femininity on the one hand, and the reading preferences of young female readers, on the other.

Tiffany Aching's "humorous" world

The Wee Free Men features Tiffany Aching, the nine-year-old daughter of a farmer, who takes the responsibility of saving her younger brother, Wentworth, who was kidnapped by the Faerie Queen. A chain of alarming things started happening in the Chalk; the village was under the invasion of aliens: "Another world is colliding with this one [...]. All the monsters are coming back" (Pratchett 2003: 86). This is when Tiffany's encounter with magic starts as she quite unexpectedly discovers her witch's abilities.

The toad tries to stop Tiffany from the risk of handling the situation on her own, but his argument "There's no one to stop them" was met with Tiffany's determined answer "There's me" (Pratchett 2003: 86), vocalising the responsibility of a child to change reality and her readiness to take control of the situation. This determination to act can be linked to the ideas of "child (in this case female child) governance and child autonomy" which, according to Christopher Kelen and Björn Sundmark, "evoke widely varying responses. Child rule can be seen as natural or perverse; it can be shown as a threat or as a promise" (2017: 11).

We see no adult control over Tiffany, but there is the band of Nac Mac Feegle, the Wee Free Men, and the eccentric toad who accompany her on her quest in Fairyland. Cross considers humour in the context of child autonomy as an "important factor in identity construction in children" which adds to the "potentiality of empowering children" (2011: 15–16).

On the other hand, the narrative of magic helps construct a girl's power and autonomy relating to the facts of the real world. Clare Bradford claims that "discourses of magic are alive and well in contemporary fantasy, often featuring girls whose paranormal abilities afford them power that they would not otherwise enjoy" (Bradford 2017: 107).

Featuring a girl as a main character in children's literature, especially in the fantasy genre, remains a rare thing, and Tiffany's story can be considered reactionary; moreover, in a certain sense, it challenges the gender imbalance in children's literature. In the article, "Gender in Twentieth-Century Children's Books: Patterns of Disparity in Titles and Central Characters" (McCabe et al. 2011), the authors analyse the representations of males and females in the titles and in central characters in 5,618 children's books published in the US in the 20th century. Accordingly, the authors bring statistical data confirming that compared to females, males are represented nearly twice as often in titles and 1.6 times as often in central characters. On average, males are presented in titles in 36.5% of books each year compared to 17.5% that include a female (McCabe 2011: 209). As far as central characters are concerned, the data show that boys appear in that role in 26.4% of books, while girls only in 19%; the disparity is evident even in the ratio between male (23.2%) and female (7.5%) animals (209). The numbers talk. The authors argue that the disparity is evidence of the "symbolic annihilation of women and girls" (218) which suggests that women and girls occupy less important roles in society than their male counterparts. This trend is still relevant. Considering the parity of gender representation in children's books published from 2000 to 2020, more recent research shows that though there has been progress towards equitable representation, "female protagonists remain underrepresented in the most recently published books (male-to-female ratio = 1.22:1 for the last decade, and 1.12:1 for the last five years)" (Cassy et al. 2021: 7).

The Wee Free Men explicitly refers to girls' subsidiary role in the village of Chalk, where girls' roles are limited to their becoming wives and the ability to read and write, which are considered "soft indoor jobs" not suitable for boys (Pratchett 2003: 20):

> Most boys in the village grew up to do the same jobs as their fathers or, at least, some other job somewhere in the village where someone's father would teach them as they went along. The girls were expected to grow up to be somebody's wife. They were also expected to be able to read and write, those being considered soft indoor jobs that were too fiddly for the boys.

Hence, Bradford's further claim that Tiffany's story, and similar stories featuring girls as main agents, use "magic in order to comment on or advocate girls' agency and independence in the real world" (Bradford 2017: 107) provides a key to understanding the role of magic which offers an alternative world and opens the door for escape from limitations. Tiffany's growing as a witch demonstrates to the best advantage that she is empowered, independent, and is able to handle more than girls are expected to. We observe the symbolic representation of the empowerment through the image of the frying pan, which, from an ordinary kitchen utensil, turns into a magic weapon.

Humour's function in reference to Tiffany's world is twofold. First, it helps build the bridge between the fantasy world, where Tiffany's empowerment is unfolded, and the real world. The humour is vocalised throughout the narrative of her heroic quest. Further, it is notable that Tiffany is only nine years old; hence, it is essential for a quality book to provide young readers with cues to identify themselves with the character. One of the main cues in the book is the humour. Most of the dialogue, as well as Tiffany's narrated thoughts, reveal both the naivety and the questioning mind of a child, and create a humorous mood, even when the subject matter is serious. Having decided to become a witch, she starts to seriously question her name's suitability for the profession ("She'd decided only last week that she wanted to be a witch when she grew up, and she was certain Tiffany just wouldn't work. People would laugh" (Pratchett 2003: 4). We see her seriously concerned, but the episode contains humorous incongruity due to the clash between the child and the "witch-to-be" parts of Tiffany, which is further detailed in the comical conflict between the small and the larger parts of Tiffany's brain. It is one of the marked features of Pratchett's style to put his characters in dilemmas to create suspense and then dispel the situation by providing comic relief.

Humorous incongruities are integral to micro-dialogues which are typical of Terry Pratchett's narrative style. The following dialogue with one of the wandering teachers shows Tiffany both as a grown up and a child (Pratchett 2003: 24):

> "Oh, you've got to know where you've come from, miss," said the teacher. "Otherwise how will you know where you're going?"
> "I come from a long line of Aching people," said Tiffany. "And I think I'm moving on."

Contemplating the past and the future with the teacher, Tiffany recognises her ancestry, which testifies to her strong sense of belonging to the Aching family and the community in the broader sense. However, there is noticeable incongruity in her response to the indirect question "Otherwise how will you know where you're going?" (i.e. what path you choose for your future), which she takes quite literally, and comments on her immediate action "I'm moving on" (moving on to talk to another teacher).

Continuing with the theme of belonging and identity, we note that humour plays an essential role in delineating the importance of the place of belonging for a witch, her feeling at one with her roots, and drawing within herself the power of ancestors and the native hills of the Chalk (Pratchett 2003: 11–12):

> But sometimes her father insisted that there had been Achings (or Akins, or Archens, or Akens, or Akenns – spelling had been optional) mentioned in old documents about the area for hundreds and hundreds of years. They had these hills in their bones, he said, and they'd always been shepherds. […]
> He'd say, "Another day of work and I'm still Aching", or "I get up Aching and I go to bed Aching", or even "I'm Aching all over". They weren't particularly funny after about the third time, but she'd miss it if he didn't say at least one of them every week. They didn't have to be funny, they were *father* jokes. Anyway, however they were spelled, all her ancestors had been Aching to stay, not Aching to leave [emphasis in the original].

It is noteworthy that belonging and ancestry are so important in Tiffany's world that even the jokes have been handed down from "Aching to Aching for hundreds of years". The polyphony of the humour in the excerpt is manifested in the simultaneous use of "Aching" as a proper noun and "aching" (in the meaning of "feeling pain"; "longing") as a polysemantic word which is supported by the syntactic structure of the sentence ("I am still Aching"; "get up Aching"; "go to bed Aching"; "have been Aching to stay", "not Aching to leave"). Pratchett's play with the surname is suggestive of the characteristic features of Tiffany's ancestry: hard-working, rural, conservative, aware of family traditions, attached to the native place.

The following dialogue reveals Tiffany's thoughts about witchcraft and her strong belief in her Granny's abilities as a witch. She is trying to be as persuasive as possible to make Miss Tick, her witchcraft teacher, believe in her Granny's extraordinary abilities (Pratchett 2003: 29–30):

> […] "I think my grandmother was slightly a witch," she said, with a touch of pride.
> "Really? How do you know?"
> "Well, witches can curse people, right?" said Tiffany.
> "So it is said," said Miss Tick, diplomatically.
> "Well, my father said Granny Aching cussed the sky blue," said Tiffany.
> Miss Tick coughed. "Well, cussing, now, cussing isn't like genuine cursing. Cussing's more like dang and botheration and darned and drat, you know? Cursing is more on the lines of 'I hope your nose explodes and your ears go flying away.'"
> "I think Granny's cussing was a bit more than that," said Tiffany, in a very definite voice. "And she talked to her dogs."

That her judgements and individualistic thought process are still imbued with a childlike quality is revealed with the help of humour created through the similar sound of "cuss" (to swear) and "curse" (to say magic words that are intended to bring bad luck to someone), where the associative contexts of the two words clash and create a humorous effect. A more elaborated form of play on words is achieved in the following dialogue (Pratchett 2003: 11–12):

> "My name," she said at last, "is Miss Tick. And I *am* a witch. It is a good name for a witch, of course."
> "You mean blood-sucking parasite?" said Tiffany, wrinkling her forehead.
> "I am sorry?" said Miss Tick, coldly.
> "Ticks," said Tiffany. "Sheep get them. But if you use turpentine —"
> "I *meant* that it *sounds* like 'mystic'," said Miss Tick.
> "Oh, you mean a pune, or play on words," said Tiffany. "In that case it would be even better if you were Miss *Teak*, a dense foreign wood, because that would sound like 'mystique' or you could be Miss Take, which would —".

The play on words is multi-layered and the comic effect of the dialogue is increased gradually: Miss Tick – tick; Miss Tick – mystic; Miss Teak – mystique) at every level offering more relief. For Tiffany, the name of her witchcraft teacher associates with "ticks" (blood sucking parasites which hunt sheep), Miss Tick prides herself on the association of her name with "mystic" which, she thinks, makes her name witch-worthy, while for Tiffany it is just a "pune" (pun). The play on words expands further which increases the comic effect. The wrong pronunciation of the word adds to the comic effect. For a child, her vocabulary was rich due to her Granny's dictionary. According to the author's humorous interlude, she'd never heard the words spoken, "so she had to guess at how they were pronounced" (Pratchett 2003: 30).

It goes without saying that the play on words (including the use of puns, homophones, homonyms and polysemantic words) is the most effective method in the creation of incongruity. It is worth mentioning as well that the play on words is typical of British humour, which is often incomprehensible to non-native speakers of English. Terry Pratchett is a master of the technique, and the Discworld series, including *The Wee Free Men*, abound in humorous situations and dialogues built of this complex technique.

Another frequently used technique of creating comic effect is the playful deformation of words. In the following excerpt it is used to show Tiffany's cleverness and ability to challenge the authority of the elders (Pratchett 2003: 117):

> Last year Tiffany had spent three carrots and an apple on half an hour of geology, although she'd been refunded a carrot after explaining to the teacher that "Geology" shouldn't be spelled on his sign as "G olly G."

At the same time, in the following example, it is Tiffany's supposed intelligence that is highlighted through the deformation of the word (41):

> "Are you using persykology on me?" said Tiffany hotly.
> "I think you mean psychology," said Miss Tick.

The use of wrong words and grammatically incorrect forms contributes significantly to producing entertainment and laughter in readers. Nevertheless, beneath the funny moments there are hidden serious things connected with the role of education in Tiffany's world in the place where there were no possibilities for any formal education (Steinbrück 2018). Tiffany's only source of knowledge is the dictionary which she read

"all the way through" (Pratchett 2003: 4), as no one told her she wasn't supposed to. She has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge which she satisfies through her willingness to learn, her talent, and her inquisitive mind.

In *The Wee Free Men* we see that comic effect is created in numerous interesting ways, involving the characters, their attitudes and behaviours in various situations. Sometimes, the setting itself can be a stimulus for laughter and can cause a comic effect. One among such characters is Granny Aching, another central female character, who appears to readers through numerous flashbacks. Granny Aching is a popular figure in the Chalk; the five books from "Granny's Shelf" (Pratchett 2003: 12), which Granny owned were the only source for Tiffany to acquire knowledge. Her Almanack was the only source of knowledge available to the people of the Chalk: "Every family in the village bought a copy of the Almanack every year, and a sort of education came from that" (Pratchett 2003: 21).

Granny Aching is a revered authority in the village and is believed to have expertise in doing magical things. There is no evidence of her being a witch, except for Tiffany's and her father's accounts and perceptions. The way they speak of Granny Aching's supernatural abilities sometimes reveals they lack common sense and are a source of laughter. In the following excerpt, Granny's extraordinary powers are delineated with a deft comic touch (Pratchett 2003: 38):

> "And she knew about all kinds of herbs," Tiffany persisted. Granny Aching was going to be a witch even if Tiffany had to argue all day. "She could cure anything. My father said she could make a shepherd's pie stand up and baa." Tiffany lowered her voice. "She could *bring lambs back to life* […]."

Granny's authority in the village is indisputable. Even the Baron often turns to her for wisdom and help. She is an independent figure for whom there are no authorities except for the laws of her native hills (Pratchett 2003: 106):

> "*A man who takes arms against his lord, that man is hanged. A starving man who steals his lord's sheep, that man is hanged. A dog that kills sheep, that dog is put to death. Those laws are on these hills and these hills are in my bones. What is a baron, that the law be brake for him?*" [emphasis in the original; it signifies a flashback].

The physical bond between Granny Aching and the native land has made her authoritative and has endowed her with magical power. The strong attachment to the native hills is an exaggeration the overall effect of which is the oversimplification of Granny's worldview and her judgements on the rules that govern life in the Chalk (Pratchett 2003: 58–59):

> She'd lean on the fence with the dogs lying in front of her, watching the show intently and puffing her foul pipe. And Tiffany's father had said that after each shepherd had worked his dogs, the judges would look nervously across at Granny Aching to see what she thought. In fact, all the shepherds watched her. Granny never, ever entered the arena, because she was the Trials. If Granny thought you were a good shepherd – if she nodded at you when you walked out of the arena, if she puffed at her pipe and said, "That'll do" – you walked like a giant for a day, you owned the Chalk […].

Granny's character in the above excerpt acquires a comical status due to the fictitiousness of the Chalk and its people. The comic effect of the passage is achieved in showing Granny's influence in the social life of the village and targeting patriarchal power. During the Sheepdog Trials, the judges and all shepherds were nervous to know Granny Aching's opinion as her say was decisive. Those who got her approval "could walk like a giant for a day, they owned the Chalk". The humour is not devoid of exaggeration which is meant to ridicule social stereotypes and gender roles. In exploring Granny's character, it can be observed how the patriarchal hierarchy is subverted and the role of men in occupations conventionally thought of as masculine are undermined. It seems as if Granny's character subverts the entire patriarchal hierarchy with one look and with the puffing of her pipe.

Though in Granny's character and Tiffany's empowerment the book challenges the stereotypical perceptions of gender roles, through Pratchett's satiric sense of humour it becomes evident that society is not yet ready to accept girls being equal to men, as Tiffany's role as a hero is questioned at the end of her quest.

When she is back home, she hears the Baron and her father talking downstairs about how Roland was the one who saved all of them from the Fairie Queen only because he (only twelve) was older than Tiffany and took fencing lessons at school. Tiffany's bravery was praiseworthy. But her age ("but, well, she was nine, wasn't she?", Pratchett 2003: 364) and her inability to use a sword were reasons enough for them to deny her heroism. Tiffany does not feel happy about this and is angry with Roland, who took all the credit and became an accidental hero: "So […] Roland with the beefy face was the hero, was he? [...] That was *completely* unfair!" (Pratchett 2003: 364).

Toward the end of the story, we see Tiffany back at her usual chore of churning butter in the barn. This symbolises the return to the reality of the Chalk, where she is just Tiffany Aching. Her role is still confined to making cheese, but smiling Granny Aching's smile she realises that she should wait for the right time: "But you had to start small, like oak trees" (Pratchett 2003: 375).

Carnivalesque and Humour in the Wee Free Men's World

Humour is instrumental in the creation of the whole mystic-fantasy world of the book. At the same time, the humour is multi-layered and unfathomable, without which the book would have been dry and off-putting. The Pictsies, Nac Mac Feegle or the Wee Free Men are the other central characters whose perky and noisy world deconstructs the linearity of the plot and adds new layers to the humour, creating a carnivalesque atmosphere. In his essay, "The Wee Free Men: Politics and the Art of Noise", Roderick McGillis (2014) refers to the noise of the Wee Free Men as a feature of the carnivalesque, which, as he further contends (2014: 17):

> […] reflects the body in all its excesses. Noise describes the sound of protest as well as the sound of victory. Noise expresses joy as well as pain. Noise assures us that the future will hear about what matters. Noise carries the sound of humanity in all its roughness and charm.

The Wee Free Men are small people with "shaggy red hair, and are covered all over with blue tattoos and blue paint, in patterns which indicate their clan" (Pratchett and Simpson 2008: 74). *The Wee Free Men* provides the following depiction of the Feegles (Pratchett 2003: 98):

> They were all about six inches tall and mostly coloured blue, although it was hard to know if that was the actual colour of their skins or just the dye from their tattoos, which covered every inch that wasn't covered with red hair. They wore short kilts, and some wore other bits of clothing too, like skinny vests. A few of them wore rabbit or rat skulls on their heads, as a sort of helmet. And every single one of them carried, slung across his back, a sword nearly as big as he was.

The carnival spirit is created through their appearance, character traits and way of life. The unification of all the aspects of their appearance – their size, the coloured skin, the clothing and their armour – and their character traits and deeds are brought together to create "carnivalistic mesalliances" (Bakhtin 1999: 123). They are clannish and rural. They are fearless, but noisy and too fond of drinking. Their behaviour is nothing but fun which is demonstrative of the cheerfulness and the seeming "carelessness" of childhood. Tiffany's quest, accompanied and guided by these tiny creatures, reminds us of a game of fun full of noise and cheerfulness. In the following episode, we see the characters indulge in a carnivalesque pursuit when the Feegles try to lift Tiffany to make her fly as she embarks on her quest (Pratchett 2003: 116):

> Tiffany very cautiously raised a big boot. Daft Wullie ran underneath it, and she felt the boot being pushed upwards. She might as well have trodden on a brick. […] And then Tiffany was standing up on two pictsies. She felt them moving backwards and forwards underneath her, keeping her balanced. She felt quite secure, though. It was just like wearing really thick soles.

Another feature of the Pictsies is their love of freedom, as well as their willingness to help those in need. According to the anthropological data provided in the *Folklore of Discworld*, the Wee Free Men (Pratchett and Simpson 2008: 103):

> […] were denizens of Fairyland, and served its Queen as her wild champion robbers who went raiding on her behalf into every world there is […]. They themselves say they left in disgust because the Queen was a spiteful tyrant.

It goes without saying that they also had a sense of honour, which held them back from fighting the weak or doing any harm to the poor, a quality which was not approved of by the Queen of Faeries. Their rebellious character and anti-authoritarianism are vocalised in their famous slogan: "Nac Mac Feegle! The Wee Free Men! Nae king! Nae quin! Nae laird! Nae master! *We willna' be fooled again!*" (Pratchet 2003: 100).

This simultaneous manifestation of opposite qualities (disobedient and helpful, cheerful and rowdy) enhances the carnival spirit. We see a world "turned upside-down" (Novaković 2018: 31) where hierarchies are destroyed, and the boundaries between good and evil, the authoritative and the humble, the wise and the stupid are blurred.

Yet another feature adding to the layers of humour of the Wee Free Men's world is the mixing of Scottish realia, mythology, and language. According to Terry Pratchett and Jacqueline Simpson, "'Mac Feegle' means 'Sons of Feegle', and 'Feegle' is clearly a variation of 'Fingal', the eighteenth-century Scottish name for a great hunter and warrior hero in Celtic tradition" (2008: 114). They "embody the stereotypical Scotsman to great comic effect" (Firebird 2014). It is due to the mixture of fantasy and mythology that the book lends itself to be read like a Celtic myth fused with the story of a girl's empowerment.

According to *The Folklore of Discworld* (Pratchett and Simpson 2008: 105):

> […] for many centuries, one of their favourite places was an area of the Earth called Scotland. Nac Mac Feegles were already there in the time of the Ancient Romans […]. Later generations of Scottish humans were well aware of their presence.
> […]
> The time that the Feegles or their ancestors spent in Scotland had had a deep influence on them (unless, who knows, it was the other way around). Besides the tattoos and the kilts, they have developed a taste for strong liquor, and even for haggis.

The language they speak is notable. The speech of the Feegles is markedly Old Scots with a mixture of Glaswegian slang and Gaelic: "Most of it is a form of Lowlands Scots peppered with Glasgow slang, but there are several words adopted from Gaelic, the Celtic language of the Highlands and Isles" (Pratchett and Simpson 2008: 109, 112–113). The playful side of the language, actualised in micro-dialogues, is manifested with the help of different accents or dialectal words. Despite the mixture of accents and dialects, we can observe that the narrative unfolds naturally; there are no misunderstandings between the characters.

This is well illustrated in the following micro-dialogue, when two Feegles were caught by Tiffany in the act of stealing eggs (Pratchet 2003: 70–71):

> There were two tiny blue, red-haired men underneath. They were each holding an egg clasped in their arms. They looked up with very guilty expressions.
> […] "You're stealing our eggs," said Tiffany. "How dare you! And I am *not* a hag!"
> The little men looked at one another, and then at the eggs.
> "Whut eiggs?" said one.
> "The eggs you are holding," said Tiffany meaningfully.
> "Whut? Oh, these? These are *eiggs*, are they?" said the one who'd spoken first, looking at the eggs as if he'd never seen them before. "There's a thing. And there was us thinking they was, er, stones."
> "Stones," said the other one nervously.
> "We crawled under yon chookie for a wee bitty warmth," said the first one. "And there was all these things, we though they was stones, which was why the puir fowl was clucking all the time…"
> "Clucking," said the second one, nodding vigorously.
> "… so we took pity on the puir thing and –"
> *"Put* … the… eggs… *back,"* said Tiffany slowly.
> […] Both of the tiny men put the eggs back very carefully. One of them even breathed on the shell of his and made a show of polishing it with the ragged hem of his kilt.
> "No harm done, mistress," he said. […].

One of the assets of this fusion is the creation of the multicultural world through the descriptive nature of the fantasy world. This is the potential of the fantasy world through which readers get access to their own world with all the diversity of cultures, individuals, values, beliefs, etc. The pervasive humour and fantasy offer an alternative reality to readers where mutual understanding and cooperation are the key to change reality.

Pratchett can truly be called a master of micro-dialogues through the lines of which the humour permeates and reaches out to the hearts of readers. A set of means are employed in the above dialogue which add to the carnivalesque atmosphere: the dialectal words, the ungrammatical forms, the way the author refers to them ("two tiny blue, red-haired men"), the fear at the sight of Tiffany believing that she is a hag (witch), their nervousness, evidenced by the polishing of the eggs with the ragged hems of their kilts, are full of humour and make readers laugh because they feel superior to them. On the other hand, the comic effect is also achieved due to incongruity: how could these angry and rebellious creatures be afraid of a nine-year-old girl? However, the humour conceals serious things under the mask of being "just funny" and evokes feelings of compassion and empathy towards those little rebels.

In an article from *The Guardian*, Pratchett's fellow sci-fi novelist Neil Gaiman contemplates his friend's writing, whose health was deteriorating at that time. Gaiman considers inner rage the driving force of his writing; however, he also notes how masterfully "inner rage" and "love" are mixed to create a unique world which is meant to illicit from his readers, when they become acquainted with it, more than just laugher (2014):

> Terry's authorial voice is always Terry's: genial, informed, sensible, drily amused. I suppose that, if you look quickly and are not paying attention, you might, perhaps, mistake it for jolly. But beneath any jollity there is a foundation of fury. Terry Pratchett is not one to go gentle into any night, good or otherwise.
>
> He will rage, as he leaves, against so many things: stupidity, injustice, human foolishness and shortsightedness, not just the dying of the light. And, hand in hand with the anger, like an angel and a demon walking into the sunset, there is love: for human beings, in all our fallibility; for treasured objects; for stories; and ultimately and in all things, love for human dignity.

The injustices the Wee Free Men had to experience in Fairyland made them angry and rebellious, but did not deprive them of empathy for those in need. Despite all sorts of petty and serious crimes that they were involved in, freedom and jolliness remain their true values. It is through this antithesis that readers are exposed to Pratchett's love of humanity with all its rights and wrongs.

Observations

Considering the effect of the book's humour on the implied reader and the author's intention, we note that with the help of humour the book aims to engage readers into a meaning-making process, offering at the same time comic relief. However, the functions

of the humour in the book extend further. Featuring a young girl as a central figure in a quest story (which are generally geared more towards boys) has made it possible to underline the gender aspect of the humour which challenges the stereotypical images of girls and gender expectations. Tiffany's empowerment, together with her strong sense of identity and intellect, is an attempt to break the patriarchal boundaries and change attitudes to young girls' role in the family and society. This accounts for the book's popularity among female readers.

Although *The Wee Free Men* is written primarily for young adults, the book appeals to a wide range of readers, and every age will read the text based on their own experience. Commenting on the composition of his audience, T. Pratchett contends (n.d.):

> […] it's a misconception to suppose that my readers are all 14-year-old boys called Kevin […]. At least 50 percent are female. A very large proportion are old enough to be Kevin's mum. A small, yet significant proportion could even be his grandma or great grandma. And some of the Kevins of ten years ago are now qualified enough to be school teachers. So the whole audience has blurred.

We have conducted our own survey based on readers' comments from Goodreads (n.d.). The majority of the readers are girls and women who either read the book for themselves or for their daughters or granddaughters. Based on these comments, the readers find the book delightfully humorous, funny and consistently entertaining. This opposes the perception of girl readers who "*are thought to be giving preference to conservative, conformist cognitive humour with didactic elements*" (Cross 2011: 23). The comments prove the contrary. We note that the comments vary according to what aspect of the book they find humorous or thought provoking. Tiffany's wit, sense of responsibility, resourcefulness, seriousness, curiosity and bravery are the most admired features. Her ability to question other people, even adults, and her courage not to take things at face value are what most girl readers mention. Some readers qualify Tiffany as a great role model for young children. Many confess that they could identify with Tiffany, while others admit that they would like to be like her. Most readers find the book funny, but, at the same time, serious and deep. The Wee Free Men are also among the favourite characters whom the readers admire as hilarious, rowdy, and helpful creatures who are dedicated to things they find important. This survey supports our argument that young girl readers, like young boy readers (Hall & Coles 1999: 32–49), can favour riotous and witty characters and appreciate witty humour. In this we see how the book and its humour challenge societal perceptions of young girl readers.

Conclusion

The Wee Free Men by Terry Pratchett is a multi-layered text of the comic fantasy genre which accounts for the complexity of the humour and the range of its functions. Our analysis of humour was carried out by considering the plot, the authorial intention, the textual elements, and the effect the humour is likely to have on the implied reader.

Building our study on Cross's ideas of the "new 'compounds' of humour" (2011), our observations support the argument of the importance of a mixed-type approach to humour since the same humorous stimulus may perform several functions. Based on our analysis, with an account of the authorial intention and the issues underlying the humorous forms, we noted the simultaneous actualisation of two or more functions of the same humorous stimulus.

Our reading of the humour of the book was complemented by Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque which helps us highlight the role of humour in the creation of the fantasy world where Tiffany Aching engages on her quest. We could observe that the mythic Wee Free Men and their boisterous world add to the layers of the humour resulting in a unique atmosphere of carnival.

The story of the young girl's empowerment shows that humour in the book serves as a tool for subverting conventional gender expectations. The young girl's decision to embark on a quest in a mystic world, her authority over the fairy creatures, her independent and questioning mind, her witty remarks, and her resourcefulness in overcoming challenges are always presented with a comic touch. Though this feature causes laughter and brings comic relief, the book's power in urging reconsideration of societal expectations of girls cannot be neglected. The popularity of the book with young female readers demonstrates the power of humour to break limiting stereotypes. In this, we may safely underscore the educational potential of humour in the book.

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Humor u mistično-fantastičnom svijetu romana *The Wee Free Men*

Rad se bavi proučavanjem humora u romanu Terryja Pratchetta *The Wee Free Men* (2003). U radu se razmatraju humoristične sastavnice teksta koji pripada žanru komične fantastike te se pokazuje kako, premda komični elementi romana mogu zabaviti čitatelje, njegov humor ujedno otvara niz pitanja i poziva čitatelja na sudjelovanje u procesu stvaranja značenja. Rad će se osvrnuti na „nove 'spojeve' humora" Julie Cross i Bahtinovu teoriju karnevala kako bi se proučilo složenosti humora i načine njegove aktualizacije u fantastičnom žanru. U radu se također govori o rodnom aspektu humora i raspravlja o elementima koji podrivaju rodna očekivanja. Analiza humora i njegova utjecaja na podrazumijevanoga čitatelja provodi se uzimajući u obzir radnju, autorovu namjeru, tekstualnu strukturu i njezine sastavnice.

Ključne riječi: žanr komične fantastike, humor, teorije humora, karnevalsko, rod, *The Wee Free Men*