

Game Spirit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

Yumeng Sun^{1,*†}

¹ Faculty of Foreign Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, 100089, China

*Corresponding author. Email: ¹202121198119@stu.blcu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

The Tale of Peter Rabbit is a popular children's picture book written by Beatrix Potter, which is an appropriate text for investigating about game spirit. This paper studies the manifestation of the game spirit in the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* through stylistics of fiction as a research perspective and finds that the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* shows the game spirit characterized by children's humour, children's imaginations and the freedom of children's spiritual subjects with the image of a naughty boy Peter, unpredictable and interesting plots and children's unintended humour as carriers. These provide nutrients for the maintenance of children readers' spiritual health and contribute to further literature research.

Keywords: *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Stylistics of Fiction*, *Game Spirit*.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

The Tale of Peter Rabbit, firstly published by Frederick Warne & Co. in 1902, is a popular children's picture book written by Beatrix Potter. The main theme of it is about the adventures of a naughty Peter Rabbit, as he is chased around the garden of Mr. McGregor. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has won the title of "best books for kids" awarded by the New York Public Library, which has been translated into 44 languages and with more than 45 million copies sold. Till now, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* is still loved by children and adults around the world. The mystery of its popularity deserves further research.

1.2. Research Method

Leech and Short introduce a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories. The categories are placed under four general headings: lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context [1]. This paper utilizes this checklist to make a stylistic analysis of the game spirit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

1.3. Research Objective

The research objective of this paper is to study the manifestation of the game spirit in the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* based on stylistics of fiction. This paper elaborates that the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* shows

the game spirit characterized by children's humour, children's imaginations and the freedom of children's spiritual subjects with the image of a naughty boy Peter, unpredictable and interesting plots and children's unintended humour as carriers, providing nutrients for the maintenance of children readers' spiritual health.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Game Spirit in Children's Literature

Children's games are indispensable activities in the development of human life during childhood, which play an irreplaceable role in children's development. Game spirit is a spiritual quality originated from games and is particularly developed in childhood. According to Li, for children, game spirit is "the self-regulation and transcendence of emotions, the promotion and construction of optimism, the stimulation and release of childhood life forms with its core of imagination and creativity....." [2].

Children's literature is essentially a kind of imaginary game. Through reading children's literature, children readers gradually move from the "physical play" of realistic games to the "spiritual play" of aesthetic experiences. Different scholars have discussed the relationships between game spirit and children's literature in different ways [2][3][4]. Zhou points out that game spirit "will always be the most important aesthetic feature and benchmark of children's literature" [3]. According to Li, game spirit is the value or spiritual

interest of children's literature as an imaginary aesthetic game, which is characterized by the external features of games such as "imagination, freedom, repetition and rules" [2]. Xu and He clearly point out that game spirit is characterized by children's humour, children's unique rich imaginations and children's freedom of spiritual subjects. In children's literature, three main carriers of game spirit are the images of urchins, novel and interesting plots and humorous dialogues [4].

2.2. *Studies of The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

Studies of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* mainly focus on areas of political economy, psychology, linguistics and translation. The Parkins analyze the text from the perspective of political economy, suggesting that the conflicts between Peter and Mr. McGregor in the celebrated garden scene brilliantly pinpoints those acute contradictions and levels of over-determination characteristic of pre-capitalist cabbage production [5]. Robertson, Gritziotis and Campbell demonstrate how the moments of interference between psychoanalysis and literature allow readers to read the interplay of two desiring systems which are the text of mind and the text of story [6]. While exploring the choices afforded to Beatrix Potter in creating engagement between the viewer or reader and the participants, Guijarro analyzes the interpersonal meanings conveyed by the verbal and the visual modes of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* [7]. Ketola compares *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and its Finnish translation from 1967, showing that the Finnish translator has made the story more frightening for child readers by adding various elements, and the process of translating can at least add an air of patronage to the story [8]. Pei conducts a case study of the picture book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to explore the ideational meaning from the multimodal perspective based on not only the Halliday's systemic functional grammar, but also the Painter, Martin and Unsworth's framework. It relates to the micro-level multimodal phenomena to the macro-level social contexts and interprets the thematic significance of the story [9].

2.3. *Research Gap*

The above literature review suggests that academic opinions on children's games, game spirit and the manifestation of the game spirit in children's literature varies, and no consensus has been reached. Current studies of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* mainly focus on areas of political economy, psychology, linguistics and translation. There are very few previous review papers on studying the game spirit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* from the perspective of stylistics of fiction, which is a research gap. Therefore, this paper analyzes the manifestation of the game spirit in the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* based on fictional stylistic research methods, and concludes that game spirit is the thought of developing

children's aesthetic ability and maintaining their spiritual health based on the authors' self-expression and recreation of childhood. Also, the text of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* shows the game spirit characterized by children's humour, imaginations and freedom of children's spiritual subjects with the image of a naughty boy Peter, unpredictable and interesting plots and children's unintended humour as carriers.

3. **STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE GAME SPIRIT IN THE TALE OF PETER RABBIT**

The manifestation of the game spirit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* can be analyzed through the lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context of Leech and Short's checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories. The analysis is divided into three parts which are the image of a naughty boy Peter, unpredictable and interesting plots and children's unintended humour.

3.1. *The Image of A Naughty Boy Peter*

According to Su, a naughty boy is a typical character image in children's literature. The naughty boy Peter is not a problem child, nor a bad child. Instead, he is a child with game spirit, which is different from a traditional good child [10]. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the image of a naughty boy Peter is mainly shaped by descriptive adjectives and evaluative adjectives in lexical categories.

3.1.1. *Descriptive Adjectives "Little" and "Big"*

In the text, the descriptive adjective "little" is used six times. Except for describing Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail once and describing Benjamin once, the remaining four times are all of Peter's descriptions. The descriptive adjective "big" appears three times. Once for describing peter's tears and two times for describing the tree where peter lives. The study focuses on analyzing the adjective "little" describing peter and the adjective "big" describing the tree. Below are some examples cited from the book:

(1) *Once upon a time there were four **little** rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter. They lived with their mother in a sand-bank, underneath the root of a very **big** fir-tree [11].*

(2) *He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat **little** rabbit to squeeze underneath [11].*

(3) *Mr. McGregor hung up the **little** jacket and the shoes for a scarecrow to frighten the blackbirds [11].*

(4) *Peter never stopped running or looked behind him till he got home to the **big** fir-tree [11].*

From the narrator or an adult's perspective, the child Peter's jacket, as well as his body, is "little". In contrast,

the world is “big” from the young Peter’s perspective. This contrast implies that a child is a small and fragile being in the large and complex world. However, it is such a little Peter that successfully completes his adventure in the big world without being caught and “put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor”. Through the triumph of the underdog Peter as a rebellious and brave boy over the powerful in a virtual story, children readers are able to subvert the reality of their underdog’s position and to balance and release the emotions of hopelessness in their lives.

3.1.2. Evaluative Adjectives “Good” and “Naughty”

In the text, the author uses an evaluative adjective “naughty” to distinguish Peter from other three “good” rabbits. Below are the example of this text:

(5) *Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries; but Peter, who was very naughty, ran straight away to Mr. McGregor’s garden [11].....*

In this example, the narrator directly defines Peter as a naughty boy. Naughtiness is a rebellion and a breakthrough against constraints, also an expression of the children’s free nature. It is Peter’s naughty characteristic that gives him a chance to go on an adventure, which makes him stand out and avoid being generally categorized as “good little bunnies”. The admiration, appreciation and affirmation of the naughty boy character satisfies the repressed desires of children readers to be “wild” in reality. Children readers can follow Peter on a thrilling adventure in their imaginary world, stimulating their rich imaginations and realizing the freedom of their spiritual subjects from restraints.

3.2. Unpredictable and Interesting Plots

Plots are storytelling techniques. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the unpredictable and interesting plots are produced by the adversative conjunction “but” in cohesion and context and inverted sentences in grammatical categories.

3.2.1. Adversative Conjunction “But”

For the description of Peter’s adventure, most verbs are of the material process of the transitivity system, which is based on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar. “But” as an adversative conjunction appears ten times between these verbs, which helps readers develop lots of unpredictable and interesting plots. Please see below the examples:

(6) *Mr. McGregor was on his hands and knees planting out young cabbages, **but** he jumped up and ran after Peter, waving a rake and calling out, “Stop thief [11]!”*

(7) *Peter gave himself up for lost, and shed big tears; **but** his sobs were overheard by some friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great excitement, and implored him to exert himself [11].*

(8) *He found a door in a wall; **but** it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath [11].*

“But” in the Example (6) illustrates the moment that Mr. McGregor stops his action of planting cabbages and begins to chase Peter when he finds Peter. “But” forms a turning point, after which Peter’s risky journey starts. In the Example (7), “but” connects two different situations that are Peter feeling hopeless and Peter being encouraged by some friendly sparrows. Here “but” works as a lucky signal which brings a sign of hope to the helpless Peter. In contrast, in the Example (8), Peter finds an exit to save himself happily, while “but” and the following locked door leaves Peter in despair. “But” forms a dramatic turn of events and Peter’s change of mood from joyful to depressed. These uses of “but” help the plots become exaggerated and interesting, and children can transcend the bland life of reality through their imaginations. This satisfies children’s curiosity and adventure impulse to explore the world freely and protects their freedom of spiritual subjects.

3.2.2. Inverted Sentences

Inverted sentences are deviations from the normal order of words. The use of inverted sentences can function as a topic introduction and context setting, which helps the plots become more surprising and interesting, also stimulates the imaginations of children readers. Please look at the below examples for reference:

(9) *Once upon a time there were four little rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail, and Peter [11].*

(10) *But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor [11]!*

The Example (9) is an inverted sentence of the “there be” form, functioning as a topic introduction and context setting. The opening line introduces four rabbit characters, especially the hero Peter, and uses “Once upon a time, there was/ were.....” narrative pattern, which is a common opening for a fairy tale to intentionally demonstrate that the story is a complete narration. This inverted sentence sets up story suspense, stimulating the imaginations of children readers.

In the Example (10), “whom should he meet” breaks the conventional structure of a sentence and expresses the little Peter’s surprise and horror at suddenly meeting Mr. McGregor. This inversion creates tensions between sentence structures and improves the unpredictable and interesting level of the text.

3.3. Unintended Humour

According to Xu, Children's humour can be divided into unintended humour and intended humour. Unintended humour happens when children communicate with objects unconsciously according to their particular innocents and naive activities, thereby falling into a humorous situation spontaneously [12]. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the unintended humour is mainly carried by the subjunctive mood and the contrast.

3.3.1. Subjunctive Mood

Subjunctive mood is a mood that represents an act or state as contingent or possible, instead of being regarded as a fact. The followed examples and analysis can have a deeper explanations on it.

(11) *After losing them, he ran on four legs and went faster, so that I think he might have gotten away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket [11].*

(12) *It would have been a beautiful thing to hide in, if it had not had so much water in it [11].*

In the Example (11), the storyteller appears and communicates with children readers, guessing that Peter will not lose his new beautiful jacket if he does not run into the gooseberry net. Peter's wrong decision and its result produce a child's unintended humour. By conveying her tone of pity, the storyteller makes readers aware of how pathetic but funny Peter is, which improves the humorous levels of this text for readers to read.

The Example (12) expresses a subjective wish of the narrator that Peter can hide in a can without water. However, the reality is the opposite, through which readers can feel pitiful towards Peter. Peter's action of jumping into a can and its result that Peter cannot hide in the can full of water produce unintended humour.

3.3.2. Contrast

Contrast is a way to show the differences between two or more people or issues when they are compared or put close together, easily forming humour in children's imaginations.

(13) *He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath [11].*

(14) *I am sorry to say that Peter was not very well during the evening. His mother put him to bed, and made some camomile tea; and she gave a dose of it to Peter! "One table-spoonful to be taken at bed-time." But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper [11].*

In the Example (13), the narrow doorway and Peter's fat body make a contrast, helping children actively imagine Peter's embarrassments and disappointments, which is a way to prove children's unintended humour.

In the Example (14), naughty Peter who survives death is not well and is put in bed; on the contrary, the other good bunnies enjoy a delicious dinner. Imagining the two different scenes forms great humour. In this way, children can realize the cognitive and emotional self-release and transcendence in real life, achieving relaxing and enjoyable reading effects.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis based on stylistics of fiction, this paper elaborates on the game spirit in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. This paper fills in the research gap that there is seldom previous research on game spirit of children's literature. After reviewing the book of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the results are characterized by children's humour, imaginations and the freedom of children's spiritual subjects with carriers as the image of a naughty boy Peter, unpredictable and interesting plots and children's unintended humour. It is of great importance to summarize these characteristics, which will be helpful for readers to read this book systematically and for children's writers to consider how to write an interesting book in the future. Also, for literature researchers, it provides a new perspective for analyzing children's literature. Due to the word limits, this paper is not able to review all sections of this book with very detailed examples. However, the examples that this paper selects are representative to show these characteristics. Probably future literature analyzers can learn from these perspectives to read and analyze children's literature carefully. Also, this paper will to some extent contribute to the popularity of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

REFERENCES

- [1] Leech, G. N., Short, M. H. (1994) *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. Longman Group Limited, New York.
- [2] Li, X. B. (2010) *Game Spirit of Children's Literature*. Ph.D. Thesis. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CDFD&dbname=CDFD0911&filename=2010084025.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=TTKnMy_gSoMAtMA28fDzq2KUUof9Xo6TlkjBJ9yloRJ0cU2HDYuMT0jLG1SxnZZn
- [3] Zhou, Y. (1994) On the Game Spirit and Children's Literature. *Journal of Zhejiang Normal University(Social Sciences)*, 6: 83-88.
- [4] Xu, D. R., He, F. F. (2018) On the Representation of Game Spirit in Children's Literature Translation. *Foreign Languages and Cultures*, 2: 115-127.

- [5] Parkin, R., Parkin, C. (1974) Peter Rabbit and the Grundriße. *European Journal of Sociology*, 15: 181-183.
- [6] Robertson, J. P., Gritziotis, E., Campbell, T. (2000) The Psychological Uses of Ruthlessness in a Children's Fantasy Tale: Beatrix Potter and The Tale of Peter Rabbit. *Changing English*, 7: 177-189.
- [7] Guijarro, A. J. M. (2010) A Multimodal Analysis of The Tale of Peter Rabbit within the Interpersonal Metafunction. *Atlantis*, 32: 123-140.
- [8] Ketola, A. (2017) Peter Rabbit in the Garden of Terror: Patronizing the Reader in Picturebook Translation. *A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 55: 12-19.
- [9] Pei, R. Y. (2018) A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Ideational Meaning in Children's Picture Books—— A Case Study of The Tale of Peter Rabbit. Master. Thesis. <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CMFD&dbname=CMFD201901&filename=1018791322.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=52lnSsRrUNWAGNqbwnvtKux8-z3OL5Ire1TE6QIAUwU7aYiTUfwDGMaYaFwPC98a>
- [10] Su, P. (2005) On the Image of Urchin in Children's Literature. *Academic Review*, S1: 150-152.
- [11] Potter, B. (2010) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. The Penguin Group, London.
- [12] Xu, Y. (2005) Pure and Happy—— On Children's Humor and Child Development. Ph.D. Thesis. <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CDFD&dbname=CDFD9908&filename=2005150093.nh&uniplatform=NZKPT&v=uugPcjoVAkneVLx1sCKfz-euIBQ7-K1GDBpRXMed2hNYj8lqlolKvB-qZHvVYZHG>