MYSTERIOUS CZERNINA DUMPLINGS. ON SWEDISH DISHES AND THEIR TRANSLATED NAMES IN THE POLISH EMIL OF LÖNNEBERGA

Abstract: This article starts with a short overview of the fundamental role played by food in children’s literature. The motif of food can convey deep psychological as well as philosophical meanings, and Astrid Lindgren made use of it with various purposes in mind: symbolical, comical, anti-didactic or educational. The main analysis is limited to the Polish translation of the name of one dish in the old Swedish cuisine – palt – which appears in different contexts in Astrid Lindgren’s trilogy about Emil of Lönneberga.

Keywords: food, Swedish palt, children’s literature, didacticism, Astrid Lindgren, cultural translation

In children’s literature the motif of food and broadly understood cooking has always occupied a major position. It may be simply explained as an expression of greed that is typical of many children, or as a manifestation of an obvious human pleasure derived from food, to which the young can totally abandon themselves, especially when it comes to sweets. A frequent reappearance of this motif, however, may also be viewed from a broader perspective, with regard to its origins and a deeper psychological, sociological and even philosophical meaning.

Maria Nikolayeva (1999) interprets the motif of food in children’s literature as a continuation of the reformulated rite of passage characteristic of myths and folktales. The hero is often eaten or, once he is resurrected to a new life, he frequently consumes ritual food as part of the initiation process. According to Nikolayeva, food, similarly to other mythical motifs, is connected with the archaic conceptualizations of life, death and resurrection; at the same time, it refers symbolically to sexuality, fertility and re-
production. With time, it has lost its pure, sacral and esoteric connotations, but the familiarity with its origins often contributes to literary interpretation. In folktales as we know them today, the original functions of food have undergone transformations, and subsequent alterations have resulted from the didactic approach to this genre of children’s literature.

In Astrid Lindgren’s books food is an important component. Many scholars have discussed its significance (cf. Lundkvist 1979; Lager 2006), including Vivi Edström, an expert on Lindgren’s books, who writes that “while reminiscing about her childhood, Astrid Lindgren emphasises that she and her siblings were astonished by how much food adults would consume at Christmas parties” (2000: 137; trans. A.M.O.). Lindgren translated that astonishment into expressive humour present in the Emil trilogy. In the books, she brings back her childhood delicacies: wild strawberries, fried pancakes, the unforgettable Småland cheese cake. The importance of culinary motifs in Astrid Lindgren’s work is pointed out by Göran Lager Järnspisar in his Hackekorv & tabberas. Mat, smak och tradition i Astrid Lindgrens värld (Hackekorv & Tabberas. Food, Taste and Tradition in Astrid Lindgren’s World)\(^1\) where whole chapters are devoted to dishes described by Lindgren in her books.\(^2\)

The variety and frequent use of culinary motifs and references to dishes is clearly much more pronounced in books about Emil of Lönneberga than in other books by Lindgren. Parties where sausage (korvkalas), cherry (körsbärskalas) or crayfish (kräftikalas) are served provide a splendid opportunity for get-togethers, breaking the farming routine. The dichotomy of hunger-repletion is one of the many contrasts on which the tale is based. Emil’s attitude to food characterises him as a good-natured boy who willingly shares food with others, and his generosity is all the greater since it does not stem from an unlimited access to food, as in Pippi’s case. The hero’s self-determination and obstinacy are frequently illustrated by culinary scenes, which are also humorous. The majority of his pranks are associated with food (eg. the famous soup bowl, dumpling dough, sausage eaten in the larder, or fermented cherries).

Summing up, various culinary motifs occupy a prominent position in Astrid Lindgren’s books, performing manifold functions which can be

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1 Interest in this subject is further confirmed by such German publications as Bei Astrid Lindgren zu Tisch by Sybil Gräfin Schönfeldt (2007) and Das Astrid Lindgren Kochbuch by Mamke Schrag and Andreas Wagener (2008).

2 I refer to this text in the analytical part below, where I describe old Swedish cuisine.