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doi: <https://doi.org/10.15330/clid.2.2.13-34>**CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: READING AND CRITICAL THINKING****ДИТЯЧА ЛІТЕРАТУРА: ЧИТАННЯ І КРИТИЧНЕ МИСЛЕННЯ****Tetiana Kachak**Vasyl Stefanyk Carpathian National University,
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Abstract. The article explores the potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature as a resource for the development of critical thinking in children of different ages. It provides an analysis of the genre and semantic multidimensionality of literary texts and identifies reading algorithms that foster young readers' skills in analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and argumentation. In practical terms, selected works included in the longlist of the best children's and young adult publications of 2025, according to the experts of the Children's Reading Laboratory at the National Center "Minor Academy of Sciences of Ukraine" and the BaraBooka platform, are examined as representative examples of texts with high aesthetic and cognitive potential.

The study considers various genres of children's literature – picture books, poetry, fairy tales, adventure, fantasy and science fiction prose, detective stories, dystopian novels, and non-fiction – with respect to their impact on the development of cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural competencies in young readers. The process of reading and interpreting children's books involves the development of linguistic, textual, and cultural awareness, enabling the reader to analyze language, structure, and semantic strategies of the text, as well as to integrate their own emotional, intellectual, and value-based experiences into the process of interpretation.

The potential of children's literature to foster critical thinking is realized through a range of literary and content-related mechanisms. One such mechanism is the problematic nature of plots, which stimulates independent interpretation and supports the formation of personal positions. Another is multi-layered character representation, which enables readers to analyze characters' motives and relate them to their own value frameworks. Dialogic text structures also contribute to this process by creating a space for co-thinking with the author. Finally, the integration of emotional and rational dimensions fosters the ability to reflexively assess one's own emotions, thoughts, and judgments.

The study demonstrates that reading and systematic engagement with multi-genre children's literature cultivates autonomous, reflective, and critically thinking readers capable of analysis, evaluation, and forming well-reasoned positions, while also promoting empathy, socio-cultural awareness, and active participation in community life.

Key words: children's literature, reading, critical thinking, text comprehension, cognitive potential of children's literature.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, reading is increasingly understood not merely as a technique for decoding written text, but as a complex cognitive, emotional, and cultural process that contributes to an individual's conscious perception of the world. In this context, children's literature holds particular significance, as it provides the first systematic experience of a child's interaction with artistic language, imagery, and meaning. Reading during childhood stimulates the development of imagination, thinking, empathy, and self-reflection, opening opportunities for the cultivation of linguistic, communicative, and cultural competencies.

The contemporary humanities paradigm emphasizes that studying literature without awareness of language, its symbolic nature, and its meaning-making potential is methodologically flawed and pedagogically ineffective. In this sense, a literary text cannot be considered in isolation from the reading process as an active intellectual activity. Essentially, a text remains merely a text until it is read, interpreted, and related to the reader's experience (Wolf & Heath, 1995). Reading constitutes the primary act that triggers the complex mechanism of textual comprehension, activating critical, theoretical, linguistic, cultural, historical, contextual, or socio-political analytical levels, which often require specialized skills, appropriate reading strategies, and engagement beyond the text itself.

In contemporary educational contexts, increasing attention is being given to the so-called "fifth skill" – the capacity for thinking that extends beyond the traditional four core language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Recent educational practices demonstrate the integration of texts and tasks in curricula and textbooks that require interpretation, reflection, and critical thinking, aimed not only at developing linguistic competence but also at fostering broad cultural awareness (McRae, 2014, p. x). In this regard, children's literature has a unique potential, as it naturally combines aesthetic experience with cognitive challenge, offering accessible yet multidimensional models of the world.

Thematically and generically diverse literature for children and adolescents represents a highly valuable platform and tool for developing young readers' thinking, while children's reading itself constitutes a form of cognitive and communicative activity, "an instrument enabling the realization of the functions of literature for children, associated with pedagogical, socio-cultural, and artistic-aesthetic aspects" (Kachak, 2021).

The relevance of investigating the potential of children's literature as a means of developing critical thinking in young readers is further underscored by the changing nature of reading activity amid the rapid evolution of digital culture, the fragmentary perception of information, and the increasing role of visual and multimodal texts. Under these conditions, cultivating a child's ability for thoughtful, interpretive, and critical reading becomes particularly important. This entails not only understanding the content of a text but also asking questions, uncovering implicit meanings,

analyzing the author's perspective, and relating the reading to one's own experience and cultural context. Children's literature, due to its imagery, symbolism, and emotional richness, creates favorable conditions for the development of critical thinking from the earliest stages of reading, making it a significant focus of contemporary interdisciplinary research in literary studies, pedagogy, and cognitive sciences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article is to theoretically substantiate the potential of children's literature as a means of developing critical thinking in young readers through reading, interpretation, and discussion of texts. It also seeks to outline the interrelationship between reading strategies, the poetics of literary texts, and the development of children's linguistic, textual, and cultural awareness. From a practical perspective, the article demonstrates the realization of these possibilities using selected literary works included in the longlist of the best children's and adolescent publications of 2025, as compiled by experts from the Children's Reading Laboratory of the National Centre *Small Academy of Sciences of Ukraine* and the Barabooka platform (Barabooka, 2025). These works are considered representative examples of texts with high aesthetic and cognitive potential.

The research methodology is based on an interdisciplinary combination of literary studies, pedagogy, and cognitive approaches. The study employs theoretical methods of analysis, synthesis, and generalization to examine scientific concepts of reading, children's literature, and critical thinking; literary analysis is applied to explore the poetics of the texts, including narrative and plot organization, imagery, and genre and stylistic features.

Pedagogical and didactic approaches are used to determine the role of reading strategies in the educational process. Elements of receptive aesthetics and hermeneutics inform the analysis of the interaction between reader and text, while a contextual approach supports the interpretation of the works within broader socio-cultural and educational frameworks. This comprehensive methodology allows for the integration of theoretical reflection with practical analysis of the potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Children's literature, as both an artistic and socio-cultural phenomenon, attracts the attention of literary scholars and educators, who regard it as a distinct segment of literature, a domain of specific artistic thinking, and a unique literary world. Employing various critical approaches, methodologies, and interpretive lenses, researchers analyze not only the poetics of these texts but also the broader cultural, ideological, and reception contexts in which they operate (Goga, 2018; Hunt, 1996;

Kachak, 2018; Kyzylova, 2024; Marchenko, 2024; Nodelman, 2024; Świetlicki, 2023; Vardanian, 2018), revealing the educational and formative potential of literature for children (Michułka, 2022; Slyzhuk, 2025; Mielekestseva, 2019). Scholarly attention also focuses on the functional nature of books aimed at children, publishing practices, and artistic-typographical concepts (Zhenchenko & Prykhoda, 2024; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2023; Ohar, 2012). Contemporary studies in children's literature constitute a multidimensional and interdisciplinary field, integrating textual and contextual analysis, national and comparative perspectives, as well as literary and didactic strategies (Kachak & Blyznyuk, 2024).

In the context of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature, N. Marchenko offers a conceptual framework for its periodization and socio-cultural dynamics, encompassing the analysis of publishing processes, critical discourse, and trends in the formation of the literary canon in recent history (Marchenko, 2024). T. Kachak examines the genre and thematic diversity of poetry, prose, and drama addressed to children (Kachak, 2025), emphasizing the need for a systematic approach to the study of children's literature as an artistic and aesthetic phenomenon, which includes the analysis of content, structural, and stylistic features of works from specific historical and cultural periods (Kachak, 2018).

A significant contribution to the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon is the collective monograph *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Children's Literature* (Świetlicki & Ulanowicz, 2025), dedicated to the analysis of Ukrainian children's literature in its historical, social, linguistic, and cultural wholeness. Its authors "not only systematizes the history and current state of Ukrainian children's literature but, through interdisciplinary analysis, demonstrates how literature for young readers serves as a vital tool for shaping identity, memory, and hope even amid a prolonged struggle for survival" (Krul, 2025).

Reading is conceptualized not merely as a technical skill, but as an experiential and interpretive engagement with a text that serves as a prerequisite for the development of thinking and the formation of cultural identity in young readers. This understanding is further elaborated in the works of J. Appleyard (2005), O. Visich and T. Mykhalchuk (2024), O. Panko (2014), among others. T. Mykhalchuk analyzes the phenomenon of reading in Ukrainian literature for children and adolescents, emphasizing its role as an integral component of the artistic narrative and socio-cultural practices that influence the motivation, moral beliefs, and value framework of both characters and readers. This includes the depiction of the book itself as an artistic detail that functions with multiple layers of meaning within the text (Mykhalchuk, 2025).

Contemporary scholarly discourse also highlights a broader range of approaches to reading, including reader-response theories (Panko, 2014), receptive-aesthetic analysis (Kachak et al., 2022), and cognitive models of text perception, which allow the reader to be considered as an active agent capable of generating meaning and influencing the interpretive process.

O. Visych and T. Mykhalchuk emphasize the performative nature of reading in contemporary Ukrainian children's and adolescent literature, viewing it as a process of deep immersion in the text and the experience of artistic engagement (Visych & Mykhalchuk, 2024). The authors draw on the principles of receptive aesthetics, transactional reading theory, and performative studies to demonstrate that reading scenes in literary works not only model diverse forms of reader behavior but also foster interpretive competence, reflective thinking, and emotional sensitivity in young readers – an essential prerequisite for the development of critical thinking.

The effectiveness of using children's literature to develop critical thinking in young readers has been emphasized by Charles Temple (Temple et al., 2010), Miranda Muge Aisyah and Ali Mustofa (2023), Sandie Mourão (2013), Mary Lou Usery (1966), Patricia J. Cianciolo (1988), Mary Roche (2015), Dana Camelia Diaconu and Corina Guță (2025), as well as Agustín Reyes-Torres, Luis S. Villacañas-de-Castro, and Betlem Soler-Pardo (2014). Their works represent an interdisciplinary approach to understanding children's reading, in which a literary text is considered not only as an object of aesthetic appreciation but also as a tool for intellectual development, learning, and the cultivation of reflective and creative thinking.

The use of literary texts in educational and reading contexts is increasingly regarded as a productive pedagogical strategy, capable of supporting and fostering the development of complex cognitive skills, as well as linguistic and cultural competencies (Aisyah & Mustofa, 2023). The analysis of plots, character portrayals, moral dilemmas, and artistic conflicts in children's literature activates key components of critical thinking, including the ability to ask questions, draw conclusions, interpret subtexts, compare different perspectives, and justify one's own viewpoint (Usery, 1966; Cianciolo, 1988). Illustrated books and narratives with open-ended structures are particularly significant in this context, as they, according to M. Roche (2015), encourage dialogic reading, interpretive interaction, and cognitive flexibility in younger readers.

At the same time, contemporary pedagogical studies emphasize that critical thinking does not develop automatically; rather, it requires the purposeful application of reading strategies, including discussion, problem-based questioning, prediction, interpretation, and reflection, which transform the act of reading into a space of active intellectual collaboration among the text, the reader, and the educator (Mourão, 2013; Reyes-Torres et al., 2014; Diaconu & Guță, 2025).

Research presented *Thinking through Children's Literature in the Classroom* (Reyes-Torres, Villacañas-de-Castro, & Soler-Pardo, 2014) emphasize that children's literature can serve as a powerful tool for developing students' literary competence and critical thinking skills. The authors highlight the necessity of combining theoretical and practical aspects of instruction: the educator should act not only as a transmitter of knowledge but also as a mediator who guides students through the process of text interpretation, stimulating active comprehension and the formation of independent judgments.

The book illustrates how integrating literature into various educational contexts can simultaneously foster linguistic, cognitive, and cultural competencies, enhancing students' ability to analyze, compare, evaluate, and justify their conclusions based on literary texts. The scholars demonstrate diverse approaches to using children's literature in educational settings, including interdisciplinary frameworks, critical pedagogy, and the incorporation of texts into foreign language learning. Practical examples from the book – such as the use of cartographic illustrations in adventure narratives (Sundmark, 2014, pp. 64 – 78), poetry for teaching English, or adaptations of the Brothers Grimm's classic fairy tales – show how literary texts can stimulate creativity, interpretive skills, and reflective thinking.

The authors argue that critically engaging students in reading, where they become active agents capable of analyzing and comparing different literary worlds, creates conditions for developing enduring critical thinking skills and a deep understanding of cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“Young learners require opportunities to explore books emotionally and intellectually. In essence, this is what drives them to achieve a significant level of literary engagement, that is, to develop their ability to move from language users to fluent comprehensive readers, and most importantly, to read for pleasure and think critically” (Reyes-Torres, Villacañas-de-Castro & Soler-Pardo, 2014, p.1).

Critical thinking is a cognitive process whose main forms include independent judgment and reasoning, argumentation, and drawing conclusions. It develops through a child's intellectual growth and encompasses metacognition, metastrategies, and epistemological understanding, which together form its cognitive foundation (Kuhn, 1999). In children, its characteristics include independence of thought, relative autonomy in opinions, resistance to suggestive influence, behavioral models, and external demands; critical self-reflection, the ability to recognize one's own mistakes and respond appropriately to them; an investigative orientation of thinking, striving to find optimal solutions to learning tasks; and the ability to engage in dialogic interaction.

Critical thinking is part of the overall structure of cognition and constitutes higher-order thinking. The structure of thinking comprises general thinking, domain-specific thinking (e.g., historical, mathematical), and critical thinking. Each successive level encompasses the previous one:

- 1) general thinking refers to the overall process of information processing;
- 2) domain-specific thinking involves the processing of information within a particular field using scientific research methods, enriched by subject-specific and methodological knowledge;
- 3) critical thinking is the process of monitoring and regulating both general and domain-specific thinking, aimed at their improvement.

From a philosophical perspective, critical thinking is the ability to reason logically and construct well-founded arguments. In pedagogy, it is considered a form of higher-order thinking that relies on information, conscious awareness of one's own intellectual activity as well as that of others, and contributes to the development of creativity and the formation of creative thinking. Critical thinking comprises five interrelated components: the independence of thought, whereby the student forms their own ideas and beliefs; information processing, serving as the basis for deep and meaningful understanding; questioning and problem identification, which stimulate curiosity; the argumentation of one's conclusions based on logic and evidence; and the social dimension, in which the exchange of ideas and discussion help refine and deepen one's position.

From the perspective of literary theorists, critical thinking is an approach in which texts are deconstructed into their constituent elements. This approach examines how texts influence readers, as well as the motives of their authors. In the context of reading, critical thinking is associated with conscious, analytical, and reflective engagement with the text as a complex communicative phenomenon. Contemporary research describes critical thinking as a purposeful, reflective, and reasoned activity involving the analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of information, rather than mere decoding of words on paper or a screen. Scholars emphasize that critical thinking is a multifaceted construct encompassing higher-order cognitive functions aimed at independently processing textual meaning, constructing inferences, and evaluating the arguments presented within the text (Paige et al., 2024).

In the process of reading, critical thinking manifests through a set of skills: the ability to pose questions about the content of a text, analyze the logic of its presentation, distinguish between facts and value judgments, and formulate well-founded conclusions. Research in the field of reading instruction demonstrates that teaching reading strategies that deliberately guide students to analyze, question, and reflect on the text significantly enhances their ability to critically engage with its content (Rani, 2016).

Empirical evidence confirms a positive relationship between the development of critical thinking and text comprehension (Medranda-Morales, 2023), as well as reading literacy and the reading culture of young individuals (Kachak et al., 2020). Statistical studies in the field of reading often report a strong positive correlation between critical thinking skills and reading comprehension: students who engage with text-based tasks that stimulate inference, interpretation, and the evaluation of arguments demonstrate better performance in understanding both the content and the structural aspects of texts.

From the perspective of the contemporary educational paradigm, critical thinking in reading is considered a key cognitive competence that integrates basic linguistic skills with higher-order cognitive operations. Students capable of critical reading do not merely understand individual sentences; they relate the text to their prior knowledge, uncover implicit meanings, evaluate the credibility of claims, and

develop well-founded interpretations of the text. This constitutes an essential prerequisite for the development of more complex cognitive competence within the learning process, where reading and thinking become interrelated.

In the process of reading and interpreting children's literature, the development of critical thinking and the ability to process different types of visual and verbal texts involves the formation of at least three interrelated levels of cognitive awareness: linguistic, textual, and cultural. Linguistic awareness encompasses an understanding of how language functions in various forms – verbal, visual, and auditory; textual awareness is associated with the ability to recognize the structure, genre, poetics, and semantic strategies of a text; and cultural awareness opens a space for interpretation, in which the reader engages with the text emotionally, intellectually, and in terms of values (McRae, 2014), moving beyond the text itself and incorporating broader contextual frames.

It is important to emphasize that, in contemporary understanding, language is not limited to words alone. It can be visual, musical, symbolic, or even metaphorical, just as a text can take the form of a poem, story, fairy tale, song, dramatic work, or visual narrative. In this process, cultural awareness becomes the space in which the reader “unfolds,” engaging with the text mentally, emotionally, or associatively. At this level, reading ceases to be passive consumption and transforms into an active process of co-creating meaning.

Children's literature is highly diverse, encompassing picture books, children's poetry, and various genre-themed subsections of prose – literary fairy tales, adventure, realistic, historical, autobiographical, biographical, detective, science fiction, and fantasy prose, as well as non-fiction (Kachak, 2025, p. 258). Its specificity, reflected in themes, genre characteristics, narrative strategies, language, and the portrayal of main characters – that is, the poetics of the text – as well as in publishing formats, often determines the choice of reading strategies and influences the comprehension of the text. Furthermore, “adequate understanding of a text by young readers, as well as its strategic guidance, depends on intratextual projection, authorial intentions, and the ability to anticipate an ideal reader and construct their competence” (Kachak, 2019, p. 249).

The reader's age also plays a significant role. This perspective aligns with J. Appleyard's theory, which categorizes child readers as the reader-player, the reader-hero/heroine, the thinking reader, the interpreting reader, and the pragmatic reader (Appleyard, 2005). However, this does not imply that only the thinking or interpreting reader can meaningfully engage with a text. The reader-player, for instance, immerses themselves in the text, typically with the guidance of adults, through discussion, question-and-answer exchanges, joint reflection, and shared consideration of the children's book.

Early forms of children's reading traditionally include nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and short stories; later, adventure novels, science fiction, and socially and psychologically more complex texts emerge. Contemporary Ukrainian children's

literature is distinguished by its genre diversity, relevant themes, and focus on the child’s experience as an active subject of knowledge. In works for children and adolescents, issues of identity, moral choice, social responsibility, ecological awareness, and war and peace are addressed, stimulating the reader to interpret, evaluate, and critically engage with the literary text. Thus, reading ceases to be a passive process of information absorption and becomes an intellectual activity.

Selections such as the “Top BaraBooka – 2025” rankings demonstrate the diversity of high-quality contemporary Ukrainian children’s literature, which is capable not only of engaging and entertaining but also of stimulating thinking, cognitive activity, interpretation, and creativity (Fig. 1). Using specific books from this list as examples, we illustrate how, depending on the theme, genre, system of main character portrayals, language of the work, format of the children’s book, and the target age group, the process of text comprehension can be made meaningful and effective, thereby maximizing the cognitive and aesthetic potential of children’s literature.



Fig. 1. Top Barabooka: Longlist 2025

Picture books (Oksana Bula, *Kazky dlia Misiatsia. Charivnytsia-nichnytsia* [Tales for the Moon: The Night Witch] (Old Lion Publishing); Romana Romanyshyn & Andriy Lesiv, *Z pivslova. Pro spilkuvannia ta rozuminnia odne odnoho* [Half a

Word: On Communication and Understanding Each Other] (Old Lion Publishing); Olha Pinchuk, *Grushky* series (Murkit); Tanya Stus, *Maisternia obiimiv [The Workshop of Hugs]* (SILPO-Food LLC) activate children's critical thinking through the interplay of words and images and promote a holistic understanding of the literary material. Young readers, engaging with such "multimodal forms of art" (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015), are required to align verbal and visual information, make inferences, "read between the lines," and formulate their own interpretations. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, in their study of children's reception of picture books, note the ability of young readers to comprehend complex illustrations at literal, visual, and metaphorical levels. Children can analyze different perspectives, moods, messages, and emotions, as well as clearly articulate their responses to illustrations even in the absence of text (Arizpe & Styles, 2015).

For example, Olha Pinchuk's series *Hrushky idut u sadochok [Grushky Go to Kindergarten]*, *Hrushky idut u park [Grushky Go to the Park]*, and *Hrushky zahubylys [Grushky Are Lost]* introduces readers to the twin siblings Vira and Bohdan Grushky. The books reveal their preferences, ways of spending time, and personality traits through simple and accessible stories about the everyday life of a family. Such texts are easily comprehensible for young readers while simultaneously inspiring them to emulate the characters' behavior. They are "written in such a way that the reader is fully engaged in interaction with the book, taking direct part in the events experienced by Vira and Bohdan. The author achieves an effect of 'immersion' through first-person narration (a sense of presence, lively dialogue) and questions or prompts directed at the reader: help find something, count, solve a task, choose a path, express an opinion, etc." (Radchenko, 2025). The books also include interactive elements and games, such as *Find the Beauty (Grushky Go to the Park)* and *Catch the Kiss (Grushky Go to Kindergarten)*.

In the picture book *Tales for the Moon: The Night Witch*, Oksana Bula creates a captivating fairy-tale story about the moth Night Witch, who has lost the stars and searches for them together with forest inhabitants – Slukva, Thkhor, Vydra, and Lishchynov Tukoni. The author combines elements of picture books and comics, organically crafting an emotionally rich and coherent narrative. Special attention is given to the main character, showcasing a wide range of her emotions and physical expressiveness. The book concludes with the observation of the night sky and the introduction of the main characters onto a constellation map, encouraging young readers to engage in stargazing and exploring nature. This publication further demonstrates that "contemporary Ukrainian illustrators and authors actively experiment with styles and techniques, themes, and genres, enabling them to create unique picture books that reflect the richness of Ukrainian culture and contemporary social realities. These books not only provide children with opportunities to understand themselves and the world, but also contribute to the development of their social and cultural identity" (Kachak & Krul, 2024, p. 292).

The algorithm for reading and comprehending picture books may include the following steps: preliminary familiarization with the topic and illustrations; active observation of both images and text; comparison and interaction between visual and verbal components; posing questions and formulating personal interpretations; and discussion of emotional and narrative nuances. A key aspect of this process is joint “meaning-making,” in which children actively discuss and analyze picture books together with parents, teachers, or peers (Roche, 2015). This reflects the well-known pedagogical strategy *Critical Thinking and Book Talk* (CT&BT), which emphasizes a democratic, dialogic classroom and the development of cultural literacy in children through discussion rather than mere explanation. Effective practices include interactive reading and group discussion, which encourage children to formulate arguments, listen to others, and develop a conscious stance toward the text, rather than merely retelling the plot.

Reading and working with poems aimed at developing critical thinking in preschool children can follow the following algorithm:

- preliminary familiarization with the topic and key words of the poem;
- active listening or joint recitation;
- posing questions about the content and imagery;
- discussion of the emotional experiences of the characters; and formulation of personal evaluations and conclusions.

In poems, it is important to pay attention to artistic details, as “children perceive poetized representations of what they have actually seen and heard” (Kachak, 2024, p. 120).

Such practices can be applied in the reading of Natalia Kalchenko’s book *Zoryani virshi [Starry Poems]* (Magura), where the narrative poems are distinguished by clear rhythm, wit, and playful intonations, while their multi-layered semantics stimulate analysis and evaluation of the text. Similarly, the poems by Hryhorii Falkovych in *PozaKLASNA ukrainska. Virshi dlia ditei i dotephnykh uchyteliv [PozaKLASNA Ukrainian: Poems for Children and Witty Teachers]* (Chorni Vivtsi) are educational, aimed at learning the Ukrainian language and fostering the child’s cognitive development.

Reading fairy tales can follow an algorithm that includes:

- familiarization with the characters and plot events;
- analysis of cause-and-effect relationships;
- identification of moral and ethical meanings; comparison with one’s own experiences; and discussion of alternative decisions made by the characters.

For example, in Halyna Tkachuk’s book *Kotulaky i tsvit paporoti [Kotulaky and the Fern Flower]* (Ranok), the plot centers on the adventures of the twin brothers Lev and Myrchyk and their cousin Lada, who, together with their great-grandmother and other residents of a magical village, participate in a contest for the fern flower. Children encounter the ability to transform into animals, meet magical creatures, and overcome various challenges, combining a fantastical storyline with moral lessons.

The author emphasizes the value of intergenerational connections, the transmission of experience, and the life wisdom of elders, while humor and imaginative details make the work engaging for young readers. It is particularly important to include such fairy tales in the educational program, since for the effective development of critical thinking, it is not enough to read more; it is essential to select works that stimulate understanding and reflection and allow students to take an active stance on the artistic ideas presented (Cianciolo, 1988).

Realistic short stories and socially-psychological or school-centered novels emphasize the psychological portraits of characters, as well as the social and cultural aspects of their lives and conflict situations relatable to the reader's experience. Comprehension of these texts involves identifying problematic issues, moral dilemmas, analyzing characters' motives and behaviors, understanding their emotions, comparing with personal experiences or contemporary contexts, and forming one's own judgments and conclusions based on arguments, which contributes to the development of critical thinking and empathy. For instance, reading Nadiia Bila's novel *Zakokhanyi [In Love]* (Artbooks) or the short story collection *Use buvaie vpershe [Everything Happens for the First Time]* (Akademiya) allows readers to practice empathy and critically evaluate the behaviors of characters in social situations.

Group discussions and dialogues are especially effective for engaging with such works. During these interactions, not only is comprehension of the text and critical perspective enhanced, but emotional intelligence is also developed. Adolescents learn to "understand their own emotions and their impact, recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their mental organization, manage their emotions and impulses, empathize with and consider the feelings of others, communicate effectively and build relationships, adapt to changes and stressful situations, understand others' emotions, resolve conflicts, and collaborate within a group or classroom setting" (Slyzhuk, 2025, p. 171).

The potential for developing readers' critical thinking also depends on the thematic focus of children's literature. Socially and emotionally oriented books in various formats – art book Khrystyna Lukashchuk *Moi Kordony [My Boundaries]* (Zhorzh), historical and social nonfiction Iryna Slavinska *Slovo na Literu "F". Bazova Knyzhka pro Prava Zhinok [Word Starting with 'F'. A Basic Book about Women's Rights]* (Old Lion Publishing), realistic novel Larysa Fedorchenko *Pid Zhovtym Nebom Mriy [Under the Yellow Sky of Dreams]* (Old Lion Publishing) – help children and adolescents reflect on personal boundaries, gender stereotypes, and human rights. Working with such texts involves not reproducing ready-made answers, but engaging in reflection on one's own ideas, analyzing social norms, and developing the ability to argue one's position.

Books that address complex existential and historical themes (Nataliia Savchuk, *Tato miy Petliura [My Father Petliura]* (Bohdan)) create a space for critical reflection on the past and the present, fostering historical memory and moral

evaluation of events. Such texts do not provide straightforward answers but encourage readers to empathize, question, compare different perspectives, learn about the biographies of notable individuals, and contribute to the formation of national consciousness and patriotism. Discussing these books in a family setting or classroom is particularly effective, as young readers can ask questions, express their own judgments, and compare different viewpoints. Additionally, these texts motivate independent research, exploration of historical context, and fact-finding, while the characters – demonstrating courage, integrity, and devotion to ideals – serve as role models for emulation.

Reading and the algorithm for analyzing historical-adventure novels usually involves:

- working with the historical and cultural context, identifying key events and their cause-and-effect relationships;
- analyzing characters' motivations within the context of the era;
- comparing events in the text with historical facts;
- evaluating the actions of the characters and their consequences.

At the same time, adventure prose develops readers' ability to carefully follow the sequence of events and plot dynamics, analyze characters' decisions in various situations, and assess their actions in light of moral and ethical criteria. Working with this genre also helps readers improve their skills in identifying main plot lines and determining causal relationships.

For example, in the book Volodymyr Areniev, *Muzykany. Chetvertyi darunok* [*Musicians. The Fourth Gift*] (Old Lion Publishing), the adventure element is intertwined with the fantastical, featuring the Musicians – the capricious cat Rudy, the blind dog Mavr, and the anxious owl Nix. At the beginning of the story, they are traveling without shelter, and readers meet them already in the midst of their adventure, immediately immersing them in a dynamic plot. The events unfold in a fairy-tale, mythological, and symbolic manner, intertwining the characters' actions with elements of riddles, agreements, and magical objects, while the plotline with Maria, who experiences war and represents the generation of contemporary adolescents, adds emotional depth and social significance to the text. Here, readers practice identifying main plot lines and cause-and-effect relationships while simultaneously evaluating the characters' actions.

Fantasy prose (Leonid Zaluzhnyi, *Ostriv Tsyklopa* [*Cyclops Island*] (Magura)) requires readers to have a well-developed imagination, but in the process of interpreting the text, they also engage in decoding the meaning of the work, analyzing the logic of the constructed fictional world, interpreting symbolism, understanding conflicts and ethical issues; formulating their own ideas and hypotheses about plot development; and discussing fantastical elements in relation to real-world contexts and events. Fantasy and speculative literature aligns with the child's mode of thinking, "allowing the fulfillment of unmet desires, while resolving book conflicts helps overcome fear of reality; when reading fantasy, adolescents satisfy the need for

play and transformation” (Kachak, 2025, p. 422). In addition, as the child-reader interprets the author’s conceptualization of the world and the logic of plot events, they learn to understand subtext and gain new emotional experiences.

Fantasy prose involves active engagement of the reader with a conventionally mythological or alternative fictional world (Valeriia Savotina, *Vandalizm [Vandalism]* (Artbooks)). Understanding such texts includes accepting the rules of the invented universe, analyzing its system of values and the dichotomy of “good versus evil,” tracing the hero’s journey (initiation, choices, responsibility), interpreting symbols and archetypal images, and relating fantastical events to moral and social issues of the real world.

Reading fantasy fosters the development of ethical thinking, the ability to work with allegory, and the capacity to discern broader meaning beyond the adventurous plot of the story. For example, while reading fantasy texts, readers learn to analyze character motivation, anticipate the consequences of their decisions, and formulate their own positions regarding key conflicts. These possibilities are vividly illustrated in the book Yulita Ran, *Taimnytsi Chornokytsi. Siudy-tudy ta inshi katavasii [Secrets of the Black Cat. Here-and-There and Other Catastrophes]* (ASSA), which tells the story of twins Yaryna and Yarik in the Bukovinian town of Velykyi Pup, their encounter with a mysterious black cat, and a series of fantastic and detective events. The text combines a dynamic plot with elements of fairy-tale fantasy and detective fiction, encouraging children to analyze the actions of characters, anticipate the outcomes of their decisions, and form their own positions regarding conflict situations, while also developing imagination and emotional sensitivity. The book is well illustrated and presented in blocks reminiscent of a comic-book style, making it accessible even for children who are less enthusiastic about reading.

Reading and interpreting detective literature follows a specific algorithm: careful identification of key details and evidence; analysis of character behavior; prediction of plot development; testing of personal hypotheses; and justification of one’s own resolution of the detective intrigue. In this format, critical thinking plays a central role in understanding the text, as it interacts with cognitive functions, analytical processes, and information integration. At the same time, inductive and deductive reasoning skills are crucial predictors of reading comprehension, alongside listening comprehension, encoding abilities, and academic vocabulary (Paige et al., 2024).

Dystopian novels focus on the critical analysis of social models and possible scenarios of societal development. Working with such texts involves identifying signs of a totalitarian or crisis-ridden world, analyzing mechanisms of power, control, and manipulation, reflecting on the role of the individual under conditions of restricted freedom, and comparing the artistically constructed reality with historical and contemporary social processes. Readers formulate evaluative judgments, propose hypotheses about the causes and consequences of depicted phenomena, and discuss responsibility, freedom of choice, and the moral limits of progress. Dystopias, such as

Valeriia Savotina *Ty vse zminysh uchora* [*You Will Change Everything Yesterday*] (Kachak, 2025, p. 426), stimulate the development of critical thinking and civic consciousness, while the novella *MOX NOX* by Tania Maliarchuk fosters eco-awareness (Kachak & Blyznyuk, 2025), as well as skills in reasoned textual interpretation.

The algorithm for working with informational texts, encyclopedic publications, and nonfiction (Sashko Dermanskyi, *Velyki plany. Krylatyi istorii* [*Big Plans. Winged Stories*] (Vivat), Romana Romanyshyn and Andrii Lesiv *Z pivslova. Pro spilkuvannia ta rozuminnia odne odnogo* [*Half a Word. About Communication and Understanding Each Other*] (Old Lion Publishing), Anastasiia Yevdokymova *Shcho vono take? Ukrainska literatura* [*What Is It? Ukrainian Literature*] (Ranok)) may include:

- familiarization with the source and text structure – analyzing titles, subtitles, table of contents, tables, charts, and illustrations;
- determining the reading purpose and key questions – what do I want to learn from this text;
- identifying facts, arguments, and evidence – analyzing source reliability, distinguishing facts from assumptions;
- interpretation and synthesis of information – creating diagrams, tables, or mind maps;
- evaluation of content and personal conclusions – critically comparing with other sources, personal experience, or contemporary context;
- discussion and practical application of information – reflection and connecting acquired knowledge to real-life situations.

The potential for developing critical thinking in children's literature is realized through a range of artistic and content-based mechanisms. First, the problematic nature of the plot plays a key role. Many contemporary works lack a clear-cut resolution, which requires the reader to independently interpret the ending and formulate their own position. Such ambiguity stimulates thinking and reflection.

Second, complex character portrayal is crucial, as characters are not carriers of "ready-made truths." Heroes often make mistakes, experience doubts, and change, allowing readers to analyze the motives behind their actions and relate them to their own values.

Third, dialogical elements in the text are significant, manifested in internal monologues, open-ended questions, and direct addresses to the reader, creating a space for shared reflection in which the child feels like an equal participant in communication with the author.

Fourth, the combination of emotional and rational influence is particularly important. Through empathy with the characters, children engage with complex themes, and subsequent reflection on their experiences promotes the development of critical thinking as the ability to analyze one's own emotions and judgments.

Reading algorithms aimed at realizing the potential of children's literature as a resource for developing critical thinking in young readers are closely linked to

reading strategies and the purpose of reading. Reading strategies are deliberate approaches to working with a text, including predicting events, formulating questions, identifying key ideas, comparing with personal experience, interpreting characters and meanings, and evaluating the actions of characters. In the context of family reading, attention is given not only to the verbal text but also to the visual component. Therefore, when working with preschoolers and picture books, effective strategies include reading – observation and open-ended questioning, which combine shared reading, discussion of illustrations, and expression of emotional responses.

Independent reading, including classroom reading, activates other strategies, such as selective and analytical reading, constructing an internal dialogue with the text, formulating hypotheses, testing personal interpretations, and reflecting on what has been read. Based on reading experience, a comparative reading strategy is also realized, involving the juxtaposition of different characters, situations, or even different books with similar themes.

Deeper engagement with a text is required by performative practices, since for staging or expressive reading the reader must first understand the content of the work, interpret it, reproduce its key meanings and ideas, and convey its ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Reflective practices remain consistently relevant, including reading journals, drawing alternative endings, and brief written responses to questions such as “What surprised me?” or “What do I disagree with?”. Dialogic discussions of read books in a group also have a significant impact. Collective reading and the exchange of opinions, grounded in a diversity of interpretations, help children understand that a text can have multiple meanings and that one’s own position is formed through interaction with others. It is precisely such activities that shift reading from the level of emotional reception to the level of conscious, reflective thinking.

Depending on the reader’s age, the thematic focus, the genre specificity of the work, and the educational context, these strategies may be combined, gradually increasing the complexity of text comprehension and fostering the development of reading autonomy and critical thinking. In addition, the application of critical reading strategies – such as comparing texts, analyzing cause-and-effect relationships, and distinguishing facts from assumptions – contributes to the development of analytical thinking, the ability to draw well-argued conclusions, and to relate the text to personal experience or a historical and cultural context.

For older children and adolescents, strategies of interactive reading, discussion-based engagement, and the creation of mind maps and schematic representations are particularly effective, as they help systematize information, alongside strategies of self-monitoring and self-assessment. As a result, an active, critical, and goal-oriented reading behavior of the child as a recipient is formed – one that “has its own specificity and is determined by both literary factors (the level of reading experience, the development of critical thinking and literary interpretive skills) and extra-literary factors (education, breadth of worldview, affiliation with subcultures, and other features of socialization, etc.)” (Kachak, 2019, p. 250).

Reading a literary work of any genre is not limited to the mechanical decoding of words; it involves the active integration of information with the reader's prior knowledge, the generation of inferences, and reflective comprehension, all of which contribute to the development of critical thinking. Effective critical thinking in reading requires purposeful analysis of evidence, evaluation of the validity of claims, and the formulation of well-reasoned conclusions, and its development enhances young readers' overall ability to comprehend texts (Paige et al., 2024).

Encouraging children to read, granting them freedom of choice, and respecting their reading preferences create favorable conditions for expanding their reading experience. Each reader progresses at their own pace – from an initial encounter with a text to deeper understanding, from basic perception to critical thinking. In this process, children's literature emerges not only as an object of aesthetic consumption but also as a powerful instrument for shaping a thoughtful, emotionally responsive, and culturally aware individual.

CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary scholarly studies demonstrate that children's literature, owing to its genre and semantic multidimensionality, imagery, and aesthetic potential, creates a favorable environment for the development of young readers' critical thinking. Engaging children in the interpretation of artistic conflicts, character motivations, and implicit meanings of texts stimulates questioning, the formulation of personal judgments, and the ability to justify one's position – key prerequisites of critical reading competence in modern education. The processes of reading, interpreting a text, and moving beyond it depend on the poetics of the text, the choice of reading strategy and purpose, as well as the reader's age and experience, which together determine the level of critical engagement and the depth of interpretation.

Critical thinking is a key cognitive competence that integrates basic language skills with higher-order operations of analysis, comparison, interpretation, argumentation, and evaluation. When working with texts of various genres, young readers develop the ability to process information independently, draw well-grounded conclusions, and form their own positions regarding what they have read. The diversity of genres in children's literature ensures the multidimensional development of thinking. Picture books stimulate the simultaneous comprehension of text and image. Poetry and fairy tales foster attentiveness to artistic detail and moral evaluation. Adventure and speculative fiction cultivate the ability to analyze cause-and-effect relationships. Non-fiction and dystopian novels, in turn, encourage reflection on the social, historical, and ethical dimensions of life. Such genre diversity supports the integrated development of readers' cognitive and emotional competences.

The potential for developing critical thinking in children's literature is realized through a range of artistic and semantic mechanisms, including problem-centered

plots, complex character construction, textual dialogicity, and the integration of emotional and rational influence.

The effective development of critical thinking requires the implementation of purposeful reading strategies and structured interpretive procedures. These include preliminary familiarization with the topic, analysis of the text's structure, the formulation of guiding questions, comparison of personal experience with textual content, interpretation of symbols and imagery, and engagement in discussion and reflective practices. Interaction with texts through group discussions, interactive reading, and comparative analysis contributes to the formation of an autonomous reader's position and the ability to provide reasoned justification for one's judgments. The socio-cultural and emotional dimensions of reading play a particularly significant role, as the analysis of characters' behavior, moral dilemmas, and social issues enables children to develop empathy, clarify their own value orientations, and cultivate civic awareness. In this way, critical thinking emerges not only as a cognitive capacity but also as a socially significant competence.

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Качак, Т. (2025). Дитяча література: читання і критичне мислення. *Дитяча література: інтердисциплінарний дискурс*, 2 (2), 13 – 34.

У статті досліджено потенціал сучасної української дитячої літератури як ресурсу для розвитку критичного мислення у дітей різного віку. Проаналізовано жанрову та смислову багатомірність художніх текстів і визначено алгоритми читання, що сприяють формуванню у юних читачів навичок аналізу, інтерпретації, оцінювання та аргументації. У практичному аспекті розглянуто вибрані твори, включені до довгого списку найкращих дитячих і підліткових видань 2025 року за версією експертів лабораторії дитячого читання НЦ “Мала академія наук України” та платформи БараБука, як репрезентативні приклади текстів із високим естетичним та когнітивним потенціалом.

Розглянуто різні жанри дитячої літератури – книжки-картинки, поезія, казки, пригодницька, фантастична та фентезійна проза, детективи, романи-антиутопії, нонфікшн – з огляду на їхній вплив на розвиток когнітивних, емоційних і соціокультурних компетентностей юних читачів. У процесі читання та осмислення дитячих книг розвиток критичного мислення передбачає формування мовної, текстової та культурної усвідомленості, що дозволяє дитині аналізувати мову, структуру та смислові стратегії тексту, а також інтегрувати власний емоційний, інтелектуальний і ціннісний досвід у процес інтерпретації.

Потенціал розвитку критичного мислення в дитячій літературі реалізується через низку художніх і змістових механізмів: проблемність сюжету, яка стимулює самостійну інтерпретацію та формування власної позиції; багат шаровий образ персонажа, що дозволяє аналізувати мотиви його вчинків і співвідносити їх із ціннісними орієнтирами читача; діалогічність тексту, яка створює простір співмислення з автором; поєднання емоційного та раціонального впливу, що сприяє розвитку здатності рефлексивно оцінювати власні емоції, думки й судження.

Дослідження засвідчує, що читання й систематична робота з різножанровими текстами дитячої літератури формує самостійного, рефлексивного та критично мислячого читача, здатного до аналізу, оцінки й аргументованої позиції, а також сприяє розвитку емпатії, соціально-культурного усвідомлення та активної участі в громадському житті.

Ключові слова: дитяча література, читання, критичне мислення, осмислення прочитаного, когнітивний потенціал дитячої літератури.

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