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THE EVOLUTION OF ALPHABET BOOKS: FROM DIDACTICISM TO MULTIMODALITY

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Alphabet books occupy a distinctive position in children's literature, combining educational purposes with literary and visual forms of representation. Originally associated with teaching children the alphabet and basic reading skills, they have gradually developed into more complex literary and artistic forms. Their evolution reflects a broader transformation from didactic models to texts characterised by language play, visual experimentation, and multimodal organisation.

The English-language tradition is characterised by terminological differentiation of alphabet publications according to their structure, functions, and the relationship between verbal and visual components. In Western scholarly discourse, such texts are referred to by the terms *alphabet books*, *ABC books*, *alphabet picturebooks*, *concept books*, *phonics books*, as well as *abecedary / abecedarium* [13].

The terms *alphabet books / ABC books* are traditionally used to refer to children's publications structured around the sequential presentation of the letters of the alphabet through words, images, or short texts. Related types include *concept books*, which introduce basic concepts, and *phonics books*, which focus on letter–sound correspondences. By contrast, the term *abecedary* is often used to refer to literary, experimental, or unconventional authorial alphabet books in which the alphabet performs not only a didactic but also a structural, compositional, and aesthetic function [13].

In contemporary research, *alphabet books* are regarded not only as didactic texts but also as aesthetic and literary constructions in which verbal and visual components interact [9]. At the same time, they are predominantly studied within the context of *picturebooks*, with particular attention paid to the functions of alphabet books, the interaction between verbal and visual components, and the cognitive aspects of children's perception [8].

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Alphabet poems are regarded as a distinct subgenre of children's poetry. Such texts are usually structured according to the principle of the sequential presentation of the letters of the alphabet through individual lines or stanzas, with rhyme and rhythm functioning as structural mechanisms.

However, scholars argue that contemporary illustrated alphabet books should be regarded not merely as auxiliary tools for literacy instruction but as *aesthetic and literary devices*, emphasising the need to analyse them not only as pedagogical resources but rather as an independent literary genre [9]. In particular, M. Sanjuán traces the evolution of the alphabet-book genre from early didactic models to contemporary multimodal and postmodern forms, outlining the following developmental sequence: didactic alphabet → thematic alphabet → literary-playful alphabet → alphabet picturebook → postmodern alphabet [10]. According to the researcher, as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, two contrasting tendencies had emerged: the strengthening of the didactic function (thematic and encyclopaedic alphabets) and the increasing importance of the artistic and playful function through rhyme, humour, nonsense, and typographic experimentation [10, p. 44]. One of the earliest examples of this transition was Edward Lear's *Nonsense Alphabets*, in which the alphabet becomes a means of language play, humour, and parody, marking one of the first steps in the transition from the didactic alphabet to the literary one [10, p. 47].

The following functions of traditional alphabet books are distinguished: the primary didactic function (teaching reading); the secondary didactic function (moral, religious, encyclopaedic); the aesthetic and entertaining function of language; the aesthetic function of illustrations; the playful typographic function of letters; and the entertaining function of the book as an object [9]. Thus, the alphabet book is no longer simply a "letter → word → picture" model but a complex multimodal text that may incorporate intertextuality, metafiction, structural play, visual codes, typographic experimentation, poetic constraints, and nonsense [9].

The English-language tradition is characterised by a smaller number of canonical verse alphabets as complete texts, but by a considerable number of alphabet picturebooks, phonics books, alphabet books, and texts that partially employ the alphabetical principle.

The analysis of the English-language tradition makes it possible to trace the gradual evolution of alphabet books from didactic models to experimental and multimodal forms. Classical rhyming alphabets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including *A was an Apple Pie*, were characterised by a clear alphabetical sequence, rhymed structure, and the predominance of an educational and didactic function [2, p. 156].

The subsequent development of the genre is associated with the nonsense poetry of Edward Lear, who reinterpreted the traditional alphabet model, transforming it from an educational tool into a structural mechanism of language play and nonsense. In his *Illustrated Nonsense Alphabets* [7], the alphabet retains its structural function, while its didactic orientation gives way to linguistic experimentation, for example: "*A was once an ant,/ Tiny,/ Busy,/ Speedy,/ Shiny/ In the ground/ Little ant!*" [7]. Significantly, E. Lear draws on the traditional image of the *Apple Pie*, familiar from classical didactic alphabets, but transforms it through nonsense, sound play, and occasional word formation, for example: "*A was once an apple pie,/ Pidy/ Widy/ Tidy/ Pidy/ Nice insidy/ Apple Pie!*" [7].

A new stage in the development of the genre is represented by the work of Dr. Seuss. Thus, in *Dr. Seuss's ABC*, the alphabetical structure is combined with rhythm, alliteration, linguistic (phonological) play, and word-formation experiments [14], for example: "*BIG D,/ little d,/ what begins with D?/ David Donald Doo/ dreamed/ a dozen doughnuts/ and/ a duck-dog, too.*" [3, p. 12]. In this example, language play is realised through intensive alliteration, repetition, the rhythmic organisation, occasional word formation, and graphic play. The author's illustration performs the function of visual concretization. This interaction between verbal and visual codes creates a multimodal narrative, enhancing the playful potential of the process of learning the alphabet.

At the same time, *illustrated alphabet books* (*alphabet picturebooks*) have been actively developing, in which the alphabetical principle is realised primarily through the interaction between text and illustration. Some of these books are based on the principle of alliteration (*The Alphabet Book* by P. D. Eastman [4], *Alligators All Around: An Alphabet* by Maurice Sendak [11], *Animalia* by Graeme Base [1]), while others expand the possibilities of the genre through narrative mini-stories and a more complex multimodal organisation of the page (*Once Upon an Alphabet* by Oliver Jeffers [6]). Nevertheless, they consistently combine alphabetical organisation, language play, and multimodality. This approach demonstrates a further expansion of the generic possibilities of the alphabet book. Significantly, most of the alphabet books mentioned above were created by author-illustrators, who integrate the textual and visual components within a unified authorial conception. This ensures a high degree of multimodal integration and contributes to the formation of a coherent artistic conception of the alphabet book.

A distinct strand is formed by postmodern and experimental abecedaries, in which the traditional didactic function is deliberately disrupted or reinterpreted. These include *The Utter Zoo: An Alphabet* by Edward Gorey [5], the satirical *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book* by Shel Silverstein [12] and others.

Thus, the English-language tradition of alphabet books demonstrates a gradual shift in its functional paradigm: from the didactic model of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to contemporary multimodal, linguistically creative, and postmodern forms.

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