QO‘QON DAVLAT PEDAGOGIKA INSTITUTI ILMIY XABARLARI
(2026-yil 10-son)

FILOLOGIYA

PHILOLOGY

https://doi.org/10.70728/b.series.fil.v08.i10.032

UDK: 81’373.2

MYTHONYMS AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN’S FANTASY

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Abstract: This article examines the role of mythonyms — proper names derived from mythological traditions — and their function as instruments of symbolic representation in children's fantasy literature. Drawing on a corpus of canonical and contemporary works including those of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and Ursula K. Le Guin, the study analyses how authors deploy mythonyms to encode cultural memory, construct fictional cosmologies, and guide young readers toward ethical and philosophical reflection. The research employs methods of onomastic analysis, intertextual reading, and cognitive narratology to reveal the layered meanings embedded in character names, place names, and the names of mythical creatures. Results indicate that mythonyms in children’s fantasy operate simultaneously on three registers: the aesthetic-phonological, the intertextual-cultural, and the ideological-didactic. The discussion considers how these three functions interact and what implications they carry for the development of children’s symbolic thinking and literary competence. The article concludes that mythonyms are not merely ornamental features of fantasy texts but constitute a core mechanism through which children’s literature transmits cultural values, fosters imaginative engagement, and initiates readers into broader mythological and philosophical traditions.

Keywords: mythonyms, children’s fantasy, symbolic representation, onomastics, intertextuality, literary names, cognitive narratology, cultural memory, fantasy literature, proper names.

МИФОНИМЫ И СИМВОЛИЧЕСКАЯ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИЯ В ДЕТСКОМ ФЭНТЕЗИ

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается понятие мифонима, то есть имён собственных, возникающих из мифологических традиций, в детской фантастической литературе и его функция как средства символической репрезентации. На материале

классических и современных произведений таких авторов, как Дж. Р. Р. Толкин, К. С. Льюис, Дж. К. Роулинг, Филип Пулман и Урсула К. Ле Гуин, анализируется, как авторы используют мифонимы для кодирования культурной памяти, создания вымышленных космологий и побуждения юных читателей к этико-философским размышлениям. Результаты показывают, что мифонимы в детской фантастике действуют одновременно на трёх уровнях: эстетико-фонологическом, интертекстуально-культурном и идеолого-дидактическом.

Ключевые слова: мифонимы; детская фантастика; символическая репрезентация; ономастика; интертекстуальность; литературные имена; когнитивная нарратология; культурная память; фантастическая литература; имена собственные.

BOLALAR FENTEZISIDA MIFONIMLAR VA SIMVOLIK TASVIR

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada bolalar fantastik adabiyotida mifonim, ya’ni mifologik an’analardan kelib chiqqan atoqli otlar tushunchasi va ularning simvolik tasvir vositasi sifatidagi vazifasi tadqiq etiladi. J. R. R. Tolkin, K. S. Lyuis, J. K. Rouling, Filip Pullman va Ursula K. Le Gven kabi mualliflarning klassik va zamonaviy asarlari asosida tadqiqot mualliflarning madaniy xotirani kodlash, to‘qima kosmologiyalar yaratish va yosh kitobxonlarni etik-falsafiy fikrlashga yo‘naltirish maqsadida mifonimlardan qanday foydalanishini tahlil qiladi. Natijalar bolalar fantastikasidagi mifonimlar bir vaqtning o‘zida uch darajada: estetik-fonologik, matnlararo-madaniy va mafkuraviy-didaktik darajalarda faoliyat ko‘rsatishini ko‘rsatadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: mifonimlar; bolalar fantastikasi; simvolik tasvir; onomastika; matnlararolik; adabiy nomlar; kognitiv narratologiya; madaniy xotira; fantastika adabiyoti; atoqli otlar.

INTRODUCTION

Names carry worlds. In the long tradition of Western literary thought, from Plato’s Cratylus to twentieth-century semiotics, proper names have been understood as more than mere labels — they are sites of meaning, contested and overdetermined, saturated with the cultural assumptions of the communities that coin and transmit them. Nowhere is this more evident than in children’s fantasy literature, a genre that has consistently exploited the resonance of mythonyms — names drawn from or modelled on mythological traditions — to construct immersive secondary worlds and to invite young readers into forms of symbolic thinking that extend well beyond the pleasures of narrative.

The term mythonym, as employed in contemporary onomastics, refers broadly to proper names that originate in, allude to, or creatively adapt names from mythology, folklore, legend, and related traditions of oral and written narrative (Superanskaya, 2004). In children’s fantasy, mythonyms are ubiquitous: from the Norse-derived nomenclature of Tolkien’s Middle-earth to the classical echoes that animate the naming practices of J.K. Rowling’s wizarding world, from the daemon-names of Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials to the archipelagic place-names of Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea. These names do not simply identify characters and

locations; they encode value systems, signal intertextual affiliations, and participate in the transmission of cultural memory across generations.

Despite the richness of this phenomenon, scholarly attention has remained relatively scattered. Onomastic studies of fantasy literature have tended to focus on individual authors or single national traditions, while research in children's literature has more often addressed mythonyms as incidental features of world-building rather than as structurally significant elements of the texts in which they appear (Petzold, 2001). This article seeks to address that gap by proposing a systematic framework for the analysis of mythonyms in children's fantasy — one that attends simultaneously to their phonological and aesthetic properties, their intertextual and cultural functions, and their ideological and didactic dimensions.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the methods employed. Section 3 presents the results of the analysis, organised around the three functional registers identified above. Section 4 discusses the implications of these findings for our understanding of children's fantasy as a cultural and educational institution. A brief conclusion summarises the main arguments and points toward directions for further research.

METHODS

The present study adopts a qualitative, text-centred approach drawing on three complementary methodological traditions: literary onomastics, intertextual analysis, and cognitive narratology.

Literary onomastics provides the foundational toolkit for the investigation of proper names in literary texts. Following the theoretical parameters established by Superanskaya (2004) and developed in the context of fantasy literature by Tolkien (1983) himself — who wrote extensively on the linguistic and mythological dimensions of his own naming practice — the analysis attends to the etymological provenance of names, their phonological texture, and their structural integration into the world-building apparatus of the texts under examination.

Intertextual analysis, informed by Kristeva's (1980) foundational account of intertextuality and by more recent work in classical reception studies (Buxton, 2004), allows for the mapping of allusive networks between fantasy texts and the mythological traditions on which they draw. This approach is particularly productive for the analysis of authors such as Rowling and Lewis, whose naming systems are densely layered with references to Greek, Latin, Norse, and Celtic mythological traditions.

Cognitive narratology, as developed by scholars such as Herman (2002), provides a framework for analysing the reader-facing functions of mythonyms — specifically, the cognitive and affective responses that myth-resonant names may generate in child readers. This dimension of the analysis is necessarily speculative, given the methodological difficulties of empirical reader-response research, but it is grounded in established accounts of how children process literary language and develop symbolic competence.

The primary corpus comprises six texts selected to represent a range of national traditions, historical periods, and narrative modes: J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (1954–1955), C.S. Lewis's The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950), J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and

the Philosopher’s Stone (1997), Philip Pullman’s Northern Lights (1995), Ursula K. Le Guin’s A Wizard of Earthsea (1968), and Neil Gaiman’s Norse Mythology (2017). These texts were chosen on the basis of canonical status, generic representativeness, and the salience of mythonymic naming within them.

RESULTS

Analysis of the corpus revealed three distinct but interrelated functional registers through which mythonyms operate in children’s fantasy. These are presented in turn below.

3.1. The Aesthetic-Phonological Register

The most immediately perceptible function of mythonyms in children’s fantasy is aesthetic and phonological. Myth-derived names are characteristically distinct from the names of everyday experience: they tend toward unusual phonological combinations, archaic or foreign-sounding morphology, and a generalised quality of strangeness that signals the reader's entry into a secondary world governed by different ontological rules.

Tolkien’s naming practice exemplifies this tendency most elaborately. The names of Middle-earth — Aragorn, Gandalf, Lothlórien, Mordor, Shire — are constructed from distinct invented languages (Quenya, Sindarin, Westron) that draw on Old Norse, Old English, Finnish, and Welsh phonological and morphological patterns (Tolkien, 1983). The effect is one of defamiliarisation combined with a sense of deep historical rootedness: these names sound old, even to readers who have no access to their etymological substrata. For child readers in particular, this phonological strangeness functions as a powerful imaginative threshold, marking the textual world as decisively other while simultaneously investing it with a quality of mythological weight.

Similar observations apply, albeit with different phonological profiles, to Le Guin’s Earthsea names (Ged, Vetch, Roke, Pendor) and to Pullman's daemon-names (Pantalaimon, Stelmaria, Salcilia). In both cases, the names combine accessibility — they are pronounceable, if unusual — with a distinctiveness that sets them apart from both everyday names and the names of other fantasy traditions.

3.2. The Intertextual-Cultural Register

The second functional register is intertextual and cultural. Many mythonyms in children’s fantasy are not simply invented names that sound mythological; they are direct adoptions or deliberate adaptations of names from identifiable mythological traditions. In deploying such names, authors establish intertextual connections that enrich the semantic texture of their narratives and situate them within broader cultural conversations.

Rowling's practice is particularly instructive in this regard. The names of her characters and institutions draw systematically on Latin (Albus Dumbledore, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black), Greek mythology (Hermione, Narcissa, Andromeda), and British folk tradition (Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, the Whomping Willow). These allusions function on multiple levels simultaneously. For adult readers and those with classical educations, they signal the ethical and symbolic valences of characters before these are developed narratively: Remus Lupin’s lycanthropic associations are encoded in his name, as are Sirius Black's canine ones. For younger readers without this cultural capital, the names may function primarily at the aesthetic

register, contributing to the sense of an alternate world with deep historical roots. Over time and with rereading, however, the intertextual dimensions of the names become progressively available, serving as an invitation to wider cultural literacy (Buxton, 2004).

Lewis’s Narnia series operates within a similar logic, though drawing more explicitly on classical mythology (Aslan is a Turkish word for lion, while figures such as Bacchus, Silenus, and the Maenads appear by their classical names in Prince Caspian). Gaiman's Norse Mythology, by contrast, adopts the mythonyms of the Norse tradition wholesale — Odin, Thor, Loki, Freya, Yggdrasil — with the explicit pedagogical intention of transmitting this tradition to new audiences.

3.3. The Ideological-Didactic Register

The third functional register of mythonyms in children’s fantasy is ideological and didactic. Names do not merely reflect or represent values; they actively participate in their construction and transmission. In children’s fantasy, mythonyms frequently serve as condensed ethical programmes, encoding moral orientations that the narrative subsequently unfolds and endorses or complicates.

Le Guin’s treatment of names in the Earthsea cycle is the most philosophically developed in the corpus. In the world of Earthsea, knowing the true name of a person or thing is equivalent to having power over it — a premise that the narrative uses to explore questions of identity, integrity, and the ethics of knowledge. The protagonist Ged’s journey toward self-knowledge is simultaneously a journey toward knowledge of his own true name, and the climactic moment of the series' first volume involves Ged’s recognition that the shadow he has been fleeing is himself — a realisation literalised through the naming of that shadow (Le Guin, 1968). The mythonymic texture of the Earthsea world thus serves the series’ central philosophical concern: the relationship between naming, knowing, and being.

Pullman’s His Dark Materials series demonstrates an analogous but differently inflected use of mythonymic symbolism. The name of the protagonist’s daemon, Pantalaimon — derived from the Greek meaning “all-compassionate” — encodes the novel's investment in a secular humanism that counterposes authentic compassion and embodied selfhood against the repressive spirituality of the Magisterium. The names of the novel’s institutions (the Oblation Board, the Church of Eternal Flames) similarly carry ideological freight, signalling Pullman’s critical stance toward organised religion through the connotative resonances of their nomenclature (Pullman, 1995).

DISCUSSION

The three functional registers identified in the preceding section — aesthetic-phonological, intertextual-cultural, and ideological-didactic — are analytically distinct but practically interdependent. In the most accomplished examples of the genre, a single mythonym may operate simultaneously across all three registers, its phonological texture contributing to the sense of a richly realised secondary world, its intertextual resonances connecting that world to broader cultural traditions, and its ideological valences encoding the ethical concerns that animate the narrative as a whole.

This multifunctionality has significant implications for our understanding of children’s fantasy as a cultural institution. The genre has sometimes been dismissed as escapist or ideologically naive — a charge to which its wholesale adoption of mythological materials might seem to lend support. The present analysis suggests, on the contrary, that children's fantasy is one of the most culturally dense and symbolically sophisticated modes available to young readers. Through its deployment of mythonyms, the genre offers children access to the deep structures of cultural memory, initiates them into the conventions and concerns of broader literary and mythological traditions, and invites them to develop the symbolic and analogical thinking that is central to both literary competence and moral development (Herman, 2002).

At the same time, the ideological dimensions of mythonymic naming warrant critical attention. The cultural traditions from which fantasy mythonyms are predominantly drawn — classical, Norse, Celtic, and broadly Western European — are not culturally neutral, and their reproduction in children's texts participates in the reproduction of particular configurations of cultural prestige and canonical value. More recent fantasy writing has begun to draw on non-Western mythological traditions, and the onomastic analysis of such texts would constitute a valuable extension of the present inquiry.

A further dimension that deserves development is the question of how child readers actually process mythonyms — a question that the present study, given its text-centred methodology, can only address speculatively. Empirical reader-response research combining onomastic and cognitive-psychological approaches would provide a valuable complement to the literary-analytical work undertaken here.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that mythonyms in children’s fantasy literature are not merely decorative features of world-building but constitute a core mechanism through which the genre transmits cultural values, fosters imaginative engagement, and initiates young readers into broader mythological and philosophical traditions. Through the analysis of a corpus of canonical texts, three functional registers of mythonymic operation have been identified: the aesthetic-phonological, which contributes to the sense of a richly realised secondary world; the intertextual-cultural, which connects fantasy worlds to the broader traditions of cultural memory; and the ideological-didactic, which encodes the ethical and philosophical concerns of individual narratives.

These findings have implications for the theory and pedagogy of children’s literature, suggesting that careful attention to naming practices can open significant lines of inquiry into the cultural work performed by fantasy texts. They also point toward the value of interdisciplinary approaches — combining literary onomastics, intertextual analysis, and cognitive narratology — for the study of a genre that has often been treated as less demanding of analytical rigour than its adult counterparts.

Future research might productively extend this inquiry in several directions: toward non-Western fantasy traditions and their distinct mythonymic resources; toward empirical investigation of child readers’ engagement with mythonyms; and toward the history of

mythonymic naming across the development of the children’s fantasy tradition from the nineteenth century to the present.

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