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PRECEDENT NAME IN J. SHEPARD'S NOVEL *THE BOOK OF ARON*¹

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Abstract. The article examines the receptive program of Jim Shepard's novel *The Book of Aron* (2015). The study focuses on the literary reception of the historical precedent figure of Janusz Korczak and its role in programming readerly participation in a Holocaust narrative. The aim of the study is to describe how Korczak's presence in the novel's imagery and the organization of narration through a child's voice guide interpretation: they make the reader complete the image of the pedagogue and reassess the moral status of the characters' choices under the conditions of survival and coercion. Methodologically, the article combines reader-response and narratological approaches and the techniques of narrative pragmatics. It analyzes focalization, subject-object relations, address modes and forms of reader involvement, drawing on the phenomenon of unreliable narration. As a result, the study shows that Korczak's name and reputation operate as a mechanism of pre-interpretation that sets four receptive frames: cognitive (a documentary effect through toponyms, dates, and "archival" allusions), didactic (an expectation of moral transformation), affective (regulation of empathy and emotional tension), and ethical (programming of moral judgment). The analysis demonstrates that these frames are deliberately transformed through the restricted child's perspective, minimalistic diction, and the "desacralization" of the hero. The novel constructs an ambivalent image of Korczak and transfers part of the evaluative work to the reader. This is also achieved via biblical allusions to betrayal and redemption. The article concludes that Shepard's Korczak functions as a norm-setting figure that reinforces trust in the child's statement and orients reading toward distinguishing crime from error. The findings can be employed to carry out pragmatic analysis of subject-object structures in fiction, as well as to explore the images of historical characters.

Key words: American literature; American writers; literary creative activity; literary genres; novels; literary plots; literary images; receptive program; receptive strategy; unreliable narrator; hero-narrator; theme of Holocaust; J. Shepard; precedent names

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ПРЕЦЕДЕНТНОЕ ИМЯ В РОМАНЕ ДЖ. ШЕПАРДА «КНИГА ААРОНА»

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Аннотация. В статье исследуется рецептивная программа романа Джима Шепарда «Книга Аарона» (2015). Тема работы – художественное осмысление precedentной исторической фигуры Януша Корчака и изучение ее роли в программировании читательского участия в нарративе о Холокосте. Цель исследования – описать, каким образом присутствие Корчака в образной системе романа и организация повествования через детский голос направляют интерпретацию: побуждают читателя одновременно достраивать образ педагога и переосмысливать моральный статус решений персонажей в условиях выживания и принуждения. Методологическая база включает рецептивно-эстетический и нарратологический подходы, а также инструментарий повествовательной прагматики. Анализируются особенности фокализации, субъектно-объектной структуры, режимов адресации и форм читательского вовлечения. Исследование проводится с опорой на феномен ненадежной наррации. В результате показано, что имя и репутация Корчака работают как фактор пред-интерпретации и задают четыре направляющие рецептивные рамки: когнитивную (эффект документальности через топонимы, даты и «архивные» аллюзии), дидактическую (ожидание нравственной трансформации), аффективную (регуляция эмпатии и эмоционального напряжения) и этическую (программирование морального суждения). Анализ демонстрирует, что эти рамки целенаправленно трансформируются: через ограниченную детскую перспективу, минималистскую дикцию и «десакрализацию» героя роман создает новый, неоднозначный образ Корчака и переносит часть оценочных процедур на читателя. Это достигается в том числе посредством библейских аллюзий к предательству и искуплению. Делается вывод, что персонаж Януша Корчака в романе функционирует как нормазадающая фигура, которая укрепляет доверие к детскому свидетельству и ориентирует чтение на разграничение преступления и ошибки. Полученные выводы применимы при анализе субъект-объектной структуры текстов в рамках прагматического подхода, а также в исследованиях образов исторических персонажей в литературе.

Ключевые слова: американская литература; американские писатели; литературное творчество; литературные жанры; романы; литературные сюжеты; литературные образы; рецептивная программа; рецептивная стратегия; ненадежный нарратор; герой-нарратор; тема Холокоста; Д. Шепард; precedentные имена

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Introduction

Holocaust novels of the 20th–21st centuries are marked by reflection on its own means of representing tragedy. A culture of postmemory has taken shape, one that is “capable of reactivating and re-embodiment ... distant political and cultural layers of memory by linking them to living private and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” [Hirsch 2021: 66]. The literary text more and more often assumes the role of mediator between historical knowledge and the present, between the personal and the collective.

As literature has been assigned new tasks, the focus of fiction has shifted from historical verisimilitude to the communicative potential of narrative. Writers construct modes of address and forms of readerly engagement that prompt co-participation, the recognition of moral collisions, and the projection of the past’s lessons onto the present. To achieve this aim, characters with real-life prototypes, the contexts of their lives, and their relationships with descendants are subject to interpretation, supplemented by fictional events, and even rethought through narrative forms atypical of this kind of writing, for example, fantastic (“The Devil’s Arithmetic” (1988) by J. Yolen) or graphic (“Maus” (1986) by A. Spiegelman) novels.

Researchers note that “foreign” techniques do not diminish the significance of the tragedy; rather, they foreground its scale and consequences. Thus, R. H. Dinu emphasizes: “Other writers focusing on the Holocaust similarly maintained the belief that comprehending history necessitates transforming it into imaginative expressions” [Dinu 2022: 161]. As a result, fiction of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries synthesize biographical, documentary, and fictional traditions, while narrative choices are designed in accordance with a specific receptive programme – anticipated trajectories of reading and the receptor’s responses. In our view, the artistic reception of historical personages occupies a special place within this tendency. Figures with a stable cultural status (Rudolf Höss, Adolf Eichmann, and other war criminals on the one hand, and Janusz Korczak, Anne Frank, Oskar Schindler on the other) serve as points for the formation of trust and scepticism, empathy, and moral evaluation.

In order to speak about historical individuals and their cultural status, authors of contemporary prose use receptive strategies that simultaneously sustain an effect of authenticity and underscore the conventionality of the artistic utterance. Among the techniques that shape such strategies are restricted focalization (often through an immature, unreliable, or marginal narrator), minimalistic diction and ellipsis, the imitation of archival discourse, as well as markers of narratorial unreliability, understood as “combinations of expositional, narratorial and focal unreliability” [Pettersson 2015: 115]. Under these conditions, the view of the historical figure proves incomplete, ambiguous, and even distorted. Nevertheless, this technique has considerable receptive potential: an image endowed with new meanings becomes a precedent figure. It is fixed in

fiction discourse, and increasingly serves as a prototype for characters.

Moreover, a historical figure often functions as a kind of foundation, against in background of this other characters are developed. A similar tactic is employed in Jim Shepard’s *The Book of Aron*, in which one of the main characters, Janusz Korczak, appears not only as a self-sufficient and symbolic figure in the history of the Jewish people. But he also appears as a moral “tuning fork” and as a catalyst of personal change for the protagonist.

The Aim of the article

It is important to analyze how the presence of Janusz Korczak within the novel’s imagery shapes the receptive programme of J. Shepard’s *The Book of Aron*. Particular attention is given to the narrative features that guide the reader’s perception of the protagonist and, in a distinctive way, compel the reader to complete Korczak’s image. We identify the characteristics of the novel’s subject- and object-oriented organization in order to describe its receptive potential.

Material and Methods

Jim Shepard’s novel *The Book of Aron* (2015) recounts the life of community in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War. Korczak’s attendance in the novel endows the text with huge receptive potential. We consider it productive to examine this potential within the methods of reader-response theory and narratology. The study is also conducted within the paradigm of narrative pragmatics, one of whose tasks is to identify the author’s communicative aims relatively the addressee.

As researches note, literature can activate, test, and even call into question a reader’s value commitments: “literary text may ... pose a face threat to the reader by infringing on the reader’s moral and ethical norms” [Kizelbach 2023]. In order to identify the means by which this task is accomplished, we use tools of narrative analysis, in particular the phenomenon of the unreliable narrator, whose narration “is reducible to moral-ethical and epistemological shortcomings on the part of the narrator, identified through textual – local and structural – markers” [Kudryashov 2024: 276]. Of particular interest for our purposes is narratorial unreliability as it relates to the value system of the represented world. According to J. Jacke: “For a narrator’s actions can go against specific values ... even if her own moral attitudes or her evaluative utterances do not. Or her actions can be in accordance with the relevant value system, even if her opinions and uttered judgments are not” [Jacke 2018: 9]. The narrator character’s biography and the decisions he makes, in our view, generate a conflict (resolved in a distinctive manner) between unreliability and a kind of authenticity of the experience being presented.

A key analytical instrument in this study is the concept of the text’s “receptive strategy”: a system of poetic techniques and cultural signals through which

a text anticipates and guides the reader's expectations and interpretive decisions¹. Moreover, this element of a fiction's poetics becomes "a way of solving communicative tasks that the author seeks to accomplish in relation to the reader" [Zhironkina 2025: 183]. The receptive strategy of a text may be constructed through its subject-object structure.

A review of the literature

Studies by M. Yu. Lotman [Lotman 1992] were devoted to problems of interpreting the historical image and describing its functions in the literary text. Among more recent works, we may single out those by F. Lavocat [2016], E. M. Dzyuba [2018] and I. S. Dvoryankina². The analysis of historical figures in Holocaust literature often concerns images of war criminals as objects that generate ethical problematic. Reflections of this kind, for instance, appear in Eaglestone's work [2017].

In our view, Janusz Korczak has become a precedent figure, an embodiment of self-sacrifice, love for children, and fidelity to one's foundations. For this reason, the analysis of Shepard's novel also draws on scholarship on precedent names in literary texts, in particular on the work of F. S. Kudryasheva. The researcher notes that the phenomenon of precedence "represents a system of cultural values, both of a particular ethnos and of an individual person" [Kudryasheva 2016: 693]. This thesis – that the novel's receptive programme incorporates a demand to reflect on national and cultural values, embodied by Korczak – constitutes one of the central claims of the present article.

Now, *The Book of Aron* has not received due scholarly attention. English-language criticism tended to read the novel as an ethically forceful and emotionally controlled work built on the tension between a limited child perspective and Korczak as a moral counterweight. M. Waxman emphasized the novel's documentary basis and its presentation of Korczak through Aron's eyes, that is, through a constrained yet affectively powerful child perspective³. In the Nicholas Miriello's essay Korczak is described as a saint, albeit a complicated one, and the novel's impact is linked to the conjunction of Aron's dry voice and Korczak's difficult, humanized authority⁴.

The narrative specificity of *The Book of Aron* resonates with the narrative choices of many novels about war and the Holocaust. Writers such as U. Orlev (*The Island on Bird Street*, 1981), D. Grossman (*See Under: "Love"*, 1986), and J. Boyne (*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, 2006) introduce child narrators who are drawn into the events of the Holocaust, or they foreground child focalization while employing an external narrator. Researchers have described the specificity of this kind of narration, including from the perspective of reader's reception. Studies by S. Baackman [2022], D. C. White [2021], V. Nesfield and P. Smith [Representing Childhood... 2022] are devoted to this topic. The image of the child in fictional narratives about war is also addressed in N. N. Nikolina's article [2023a]. Thus, in D. C. White's view, "Sometimes that horror is addressed through fiction's use of a character who alienates the reader through his or her naiveté or innocence in the face of evil" [White 2021: 65–66].

The child's naïve and unformed voice, and his focus on friends and relatives – through which the horrors of the Holocaust recede into the background – shape both the narrative features of such texts and their reader's reception. Particularly expressive plotlines are which connected with the child's interaction with significant adults, the influence of those adults on children. It is for this reason that we consider it important to examine the specificity of the object-oriented organization of *The Book of Aron* in the context of a child's "unreliable" narrative perspective.

Results and Discussion

The Book of Aron is devoted to events in the Warsaw Ghetto, including the orphanage's struggle for survival and its subsequent deportation to a concentration camp. Henryk Goldszmit (Korczak's real name) was a physician and educator, among the earliest advocates of children's rights, and the director of an orphanage. During the Holocaust, despite offers of rescue made by the Nazis, Korczak made a conscious choice to remain with the orphaned children who were sent to the Treblinka and to accept death together with them.

In a fiction, a real biography functions as a factor of pre-interpretation. Possessing knowledge about the prototype's life, the reader is a priori inclined to trust this character's words and actions as an ethical standard. In our view, the figure of Janusz Korczak, grounded in his biography, performs in Shepard's novel the function of guiding receptive frames:

1. Ethical – a moral compass, an example. From the outset, the reader apprehends Korczak and his decisions as a kind of ethical benchmark.
2. Affective – empathy, an impulse toward compassion, indignation, and a feeling of repulsion toward antagonists. For a reader who knows the outcome of the Korczak's orphanage, the character's presence generates emotional tension within the narrative.
3. Didactic – an expectation of transformation in characters who interact with the educator. It is assumed that the protagonist exerts a positive influence on any of them.
4. Cognitive – a sense of the events' plausibility and of trust in the testimony. The retention of real names and locations prompts the reader to perceive what is happening with minimal critical distance.

These four perspectives shape the reader's expectations. Yet the novel's receptive strategy engages

¹ Zhironkina E. S. Receptive strategy as an element of poetics (based on J. Littell's novel "The Kindly Ones"): PhD thesis: 5.9.3. Kazan, 2024. 181 p.

² Dvoryankina I. S. Poetics and functions of historical characters in the dramaturgy of T. Stoppard: PhD thesis: 10.01.03. Moscow, 2022. 202 p.

³ Waxman M. L. (2015, May 19). *The Book of Aron*. Jewish Book Council. Available at May 23, 2026 from <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/the-book-of-aron>.

⁴ Miriello N. (2015, June 12). "Siphoning Away the Warmth": On Jim Shepard's radical empathy. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Available at May 23, 2026 from <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/siphoning-away-the-warmth-on-jim-shepard-radical-empathy>.

these expectations by constructing a new and ambiguous image of the educator. One that remains close to the historical referent but is not identical to it. We will consider how the guiding receptive frames identified above are transformed in Shepard's novel. Let us begin at the end of the list.

**Historical Statement and Literary Narrative:
Interpreting Korczak's Image in the Novel
(Cognitive Aspect)**

The receptive programme of *The Book of Aron* is organized by an entire complex of poetic elements and by the text's subject-object structure. Proper names, toponyms, and dates instantly activate the reader's cultural memory, while allusions to archival testimony enhance trust and establish a mode of reading grounded in co-participation. To this end, the narrative includes the narrator-character's story about the formation of the Warsaw Ghetto, discussions of plans to create a Jewish state in Palestine and in Madagascar, references to real names (Stefania Wilczyńska, Lejkin, Rabbi Yitzhak of Berdychiv), and places (Dzile-na Street, the Umschlagplatz). Through the narrator-character's report, the author depicts the ghetto on the basis of real facts, for example, the contraction of living space for Jews and the creation of an enclosed zone: "Each proclamation listed new streets that were to be cleansed of Jews. Pages advertised Aryan-owned apartments inside the walls to be traded for Jewish-owned ones on the outside" [Shepard 2015: 34].

Despite the imitation of documentary authenticity through the ghetto's realities, the historicity of Korczak as a character lies not in a precise reconstruction of his image but in the recognizability of his name, biography, and reputation. This activates the reader's extratextual knowledge and sets the horizon of expectations. The point of introducing a real precedent name is that the recipient encounters the novel's events already equipped with an established image of Korczak. This is an image the author reinforces by referring to real events, yet at the same time deconstructs through a kind of desacralization. The educator is portrayed as a vulnerable person with his own weaknesses, mistakes, and morally ambiguous decisions.

The author mentions Korczak firstly when the orphanage run by the Old Doctor (nickname of Korczak) moves into the ghetto. The narrator reports: "We couldn't hear what they were singing but the kids kept coming ... followed by wagons piled high with wicker baskets... and then a wagon mounded with coal and another with potatoes. <...> All of the wagons had red geraniums in window boxes along their sides, and beneath them decorations made from streamers" [Shepard 2015: 36]. The narrator emphasizes the wagons' heavy load and their bright details, as well as the group's cohesion. He conveys an outsider's impression of the orphanage. Those not initiated into the life of the orphan community (the protagonist and the ghetto's inhabitants) perceive its circumstances as relatively prosperous, and the Old Doctor as a privileged man. The reader, not yet immersed in the hardships faced by the orphanage, likewise apprehends Korczak as an all-powerful mentor, capable of creating humane con-

ditions even in dire times.

The narrator-character draws attention to the orphanage director's courage. Korczak defends his provisions: "He shouted something at the German and then repeated it to the Polish policeman: that if the German didn't release the potatoes he would report the theft to their superiors" [Shepard 2015: 37]. Korczak also protects one of his wards from the young Boris, the leader of the smuggling gang to which Aron belonged: "You have pants like a hobo's," Boris said. 'A hobo wouldn't take them,' Korczak told him. 'You know where I found him?' Boris said, nodding at the kid. 'Looking through the garbage. Maybe you should feed your kids.' 'Anyone who's gotten in my way can tell you I can still kick pretty hard,' Korczak told him" [Ibid: 78].

The narrator-character's perspective changes when, having lost his entire family and been expelled from the house by Boris for betrayal, he ends up at the orphanage himself. Korczak saves his life, treats him, and offers him shelter: "You can have a little soup and warm up and then tomorrow you can go home." "I don't have a home," I told him, and Korczak looked at me like he'd already known that was what I was going to say" [Shepard 2015: 102]. Once accepted into the orphanage, the narrator-character begins to notice his rescuer's pedagogical methods and his systematic work with the children.

Upon admitting Aron to the orphanage, the staff introduce him to its rules. Thus, he begins to work like everyone else, starting with the dirtiest tasks, "from the bottom": "Korczak decided my feet had healed enough for me to work and told the heavy woman so and she came over and gave me the job of the chamber pots" [Ibid: 106]. Living among the orphans, the Aron increasingly registers Korczak's earthiness, which differs from the public image of the Old Doctor and from the impression he had made on the ghetto's inhabitants. Aron notes Korczak's unhealthy habits and their effect on his appearance: "With only one light on, he looked ancient. His hands shook and he rationed his cigarettes and vodka with saccharine and every few minutes he cleared his throat" [Shepard 2015: 110]. Korczak's inclination toward alcohol is also hinted at in Boris's words during their street confrontation: "Get out of here, Grandfather," Boris told him. 'I can smell the vodka.'" [Ibid: 78]. Aron's narration underscores that the educator is an elderly man, worn down by his responsibilities: "You know what I dream of? <...> Transparent walls so I wouldn't miss a single sunrise or sunset. And I'm just the silent Jew from who knows where." [Ibid: 114]. The desire to remain solitary and unknown suggests that Korczak's heroism is not an unconditional trait, but a daily choice he makes in defiance of his own wishes.

Eavesdropping on Korczak's conversations with Madame Stefa, the narrator-character conveys fragments in which she becomes, quite literally, the voice of reason: "Your cigarettes are probably not helping," Madame Stefa said. He told her that smoke was a good expectorant for the children and she answered that this was his theory" [Shepard 2015: 133]. She supports the educator, who not only complains about his fate

but also takes out his irritation on his assistant: "I tell everyone, 'Stefa always reminds me that I'm a miserable human being who makes everyone else miserable,' he said" [Ibid: 121]. Korczak compares Stefania to the women in his family, to whom his father would yield for the sake of his own peace of mind. This behavioral detail lends the educator's image a certain infantilism and egoism: he finds it difficult to accept his assistant's rightness and to argue with her on the merits. Madame Stefa is not popular with Aron and the other orphanage residents, yet at times she appears more mature and rational, while Korczak, in her presence, gives free rein to emotion and handles his health imprudently. This shows readers an image not of a heroized figure, but of an ordinary person with his own weaknesses. The author even prompts the recipient to shift attention from the educator to his assistant, emphasizing her prudence, selflessness, and no less profound capacity for sacrifice.

Thus, from the cognitive frames, the text produces an effect of maximal verisimilitude. It is achieved not through documentary exactitude but through recognizability. This enables the author to "desacralize" Korczak's image safely: to shift the reader's focus from his nobility to his inner contradictions. Such a receptive strategy encourages reflection on the nature of heroism and instills the idea that, under inhuman conditions, self-sacrifice becomes possible through daily choice and through the support of the Other.

Korczak and Aron: Paths of Moral Transformation (Didactic Aspect)

Against the background of Aron (Sh'maya), Lutek, Adina, Zofia, and especially Boris, Korczak functions as a moral tuning fork for the reader. As noted earlier, in the first half of the book the Old Doctor appears as a noble and unattainable figure, set against the more "earthbound" characters and their families. In the second half, he is presented as a man with many weaknesses whose only strength lies in fidelity to his principles. This difference in perception is underscored through two modes of focalization: from within and from outside the orphanage.

The narrator-character initially remains within his own social circle: first his family, then the group of smuggler friends. In conditions of poverty, the gang led by Lutek and Boris obtains food and valuables outside the ghetto, steals, and harms others. Thus, Boris cracks the skull of a boy from a rival gang with a brick and threatens an orphan from Korczak's home.

The novel provides a backstory for Aron and his fellow. Yet if the process of the character's growing up and the formation of the gang are narrated rather straightforwardly, Korczak's story is one the reader must piece together independently. The reader should do it attending to the Old Doctor's actions and to how other characters evaluate him, as well as to fragments of the educator's life that the narrator-character "overhears" in his mentor's conversations with Stefania. In particular, through a character's words, the author reproduces a contested episode from the pedagogue's biography (on the basis of Korczak's diaries and literary texts, popular consciousness often emphasizes the

idea of a conflict with his father; however, a number of researchers consider this information not entirely reliable [see Sęczek 2025]). This detail is connected with the possibility that Korczak was not accepted by his father: "My father called me a clod and an idiot and a crybaby and an ass,' he said. 'He was right'" [Shepard 2015: 119]. The protagonist also foregrounds Korczak's naïve plans for transforming the world: "Throw away all the money was always step one. My plan always broke down at step two." [Ibid: 118]. Korczak's stories resonate with fragments of Aron's life: a cold but beloved father, and an inability to think through consequences, emerge as shared elements in the two biographies. These intersections likewise contribute to the "desacralization" of Korczak as a character.

The narrative's didactic function is ensured not only by fragments from Korczak's life but also by Aron's. The children's coming-of-age story, and the depiction of the decisions they make in order to survive in the ghetto, confront the reader with troubling questions.

Aron makes many mistakes: he informs the police about his gang's activities, which results in Lutek's death; he betrays the whereabouts of the woman who sheltered his friend Zofia. At the beginning of his narrative, the character admits that his relatives believed that "Sh'maya thinks only of himself." Drawn into petty crime and subjected to blackmail, Aron is forced to choose who will remain alive: "I said I didn't know what he was talking about and he said if I refused then the Germans he was with would take ten kids from the orphanage and shoot them" [Shepard 2015: 122]. His collaboration with the policeman Lejkin follows first from a desire to protect his family, and later from his wish to protect Korczak and the children from the orphanage. Through Aron's example, the author demonstrates that every decision is followed by consequences. The result of the character's maturation – and thus of his transformation – is not merely an acceptance of responsibility, but a renunciation of the fear of death and an ability to sacrifice himself for another person.

This transformation was undoubtedly facilitated by Aron's experience of meeting the educator and sharing everyday life with him. The example of the Old Doctor (selfless, yet doubting and capable of acknowledging his mistakes) changes the young delinquent. Scenes of Korczak's interaction with Aron "activate" in the reader an expectation of the protagonist's transformation – an expectation that is ultimately fulfilled.

In this aspect, the novel's receptive strategy is not aimed at dismantling and "reassembling" readerly expectations. Rather, it underscores the force of Korczak's influence and his pedagogical mastery. The reader observes shifts in the child's temper and behavior. Yet, at the level of empathy, Aron's transformation remains only partial: more on this below.

Janusz Korczak as the Empathic Center of the Receptive Programme (Affective Aspect)

Aron and Janusz Korczak remain within the focus of the child narrator (Aron himself), and for the reader the two characters empathically complement one another. The child's voice is the mediator between charac-

ter and reader. It functions as a kind of central point of the novel's receptive strategy.

The narrative format (Aron's dry, factual voice, largely devoid of self-reflection) foregrounds the performative role of the reader. Aron's narration operates as a trigger: an adolescent who recounts the death, his expulsion, his collaboration with Nazi accomplices. This is a figure that "draws" the reader's attention and empathy to himself, especially prior to his admission to the orphanage.

As scholars have observed, a child often functions as an unreliable narrator [Nikolina 2023a]. Owing to limited experience, he is "incapable of making reliable judgments about the world" [Smolenskaya 2025: 56]. Yet the plot underscores Aron's emerging responsibility under wartime conditions. Aron solves "adult" problems such as obtaining food for the family. He (albeit temporarily) saves his father from a concentration camp; he endures the death of his younger brother and mother, and the execution of his friends. The character's experience increasingly exceeds the bounds of the child's, and as it expands he not only transmits what he has seen but also begins to focus on what matters, to discern causal connections in events. This becomes especially evident after he enters the orphanage. Thus, Aron reflects on his own behavior: "I was with him (Korczak – E. Zh.) because now each time the lights went out I remembered my mother when she woke and couldn't find me in the hospital" [Shepard 2015: 129]. The educator's presence in the child's life does not merely push him toward moral transformation; it compels him gradually to acquire self-awareness and to feel the pain of another person.

The child narrator intensifies the affective dimension of perception. Unreflective actions combined with orphanhood, conveyed through the child's voice, incline the reader to sympathize with its bearer, as though dulling the capacity for critical judgment. This narrative choice produces, in the recipient's mind, a conflict between sympathy for an orphan in the ghetto and a pragmatic assessment of a selfish juvenile delinquent through whose fault his friends die and who keeps himself apart from the other destitute children in the orphanage.

The fact that Janusz Korczak is presented precisely through the lens of such a narrator has a significant impact on the novel's receptive programme. Aron's voice "leans" on Korczak's authority, programming a stance of "witness-disciple." Korczak's figure raises the index of credibility and empathy attached to the child's testimony, "frames" the boy's chaotic experience and thereby stabilizes the reader's perception.

The narrator-character gradually learns to empathize, to help and to ask for help, to notice the other children. Nevertheless, he detached from them and narrates their stories primarily by reproducing his mentor's direct speech. For this reason, the main empathic center remains not Aron who feels attachment only to the educator, but Korczak. For the reader, Aron the narrator seems to give priority in his own story to Old Doctor. The boy ceases to be focused in himself, instead recording the image and biography of his mentor: his decisions, thoughts, and doubts.

Thus, delegating speech to a child narrator and evaluating Korczak's actions from a child's perspective program attitudes of empathy and co-responsibility. Yet the novel's receptive strategy demands from the reader something other than a merely sentimental reaction. It is important not simply to feel compassion, but to listen to a fragile voice, to trust it, and to supplement its report.

Korczak as Subject and Object of Moral Evaluation (Ethical Aspect)

The novel's receptive programme brings together different ways of prompting the reader to reflect on the moral evaluation of events in the Warsaw Ghetto (the activities of child smugglers, collaboration, the orphanage's survival). We will consider one of these ways, an allegorical mode. The narration is saturated with biblical images and plots. Thus, like Jesus, Korczak is three times tempted by the possibility of rescue: he receives offers from the Polish underground, from Boris, and from Lejkin (the latter two are approached at Aron's request). In all three cases, the Old Doctor remains steadfast in his decision to stay with the children.

The author introduces a moral dilemma into the narrative, testing the reader's conviction that the educator's decision is unequivocally correct. Through the characters' voices, the reader is offered arguments opposed to the path Korczak has chosen. Thus, Boris who is planning to resist in the ghetto, justifies saving the educator as a good for the Jews, since the world will listen to the Old Doctor: "But we want to get you out not just because you're the famous Dr. Korczak. We want you to help spread the word about what's going on." [Shepard 2015: 149]. The narrative pushes the reader to consider what takes priority: responsibility toward one's children or responsibility toward one's people. Korczak's choice is uncompromising: "Tell them they're all just on their own" Korczak asked, and his anger surprised even them" [Ibid: 150].

The narrative traces parallels between Aron and the apostle Peter (in relation to Korczak) and Judas (in relation to other people). These analogies are connected with acts of betrayal. Under pressure from the policeman Lejkin, Aron gives up the whereabouts of ghetto residents who violate Nazi rules; as a result, his friends die. In addition, he "denies" Korczak unconsciously, before even knowing him personally: "Are you with him?" a Polish policeman said, stepping in front of us. He pointed a baton at Korczak. 'Is he drunk?' 'I don't know what he is,' I told him..." [Shepard 2015: 37]. Through these scenes, the novel poses an ethical question to the reader: how should one regard betrayal committed out of ignorance and without understanding the consequences?

The title *The Book of Aron* is likewise saturated with Christian allusions: the novel's title evokes the naming pattern of Old Testament books associated with prophets. Korczak is the first to utter this phrase, joking about his ward's reflections on life at the orphanage: "He laughed to himself. 'The Book of Aron, chapter 2, verse 2,' he said" [Shepard 2015: 107]. By choosing such a title, Shepard places Aron's story

within a scriptural frame and encourages the reader to perceive his voice as morally significant and interpretively privileged. This artistic move has evident receptive potential: it invites the reader to treat Aron not merely as a child witness, but as a figure whose painful experience acquires the weight of ethical statement, while Korczak appears as the mentor who authorizes that perspective.

At the same time, the author underscores that the characters are not moral exemplars. This is achieved by directing the reader's attention to the flaws of both the narrator-character and the educator. Thus, even as he undergoes moral transformation (renouncing egoism and self-preservation), Aron retains a selective empathy. On the way to Treblinka, he understands that saving his mentor is impossible, because of Korczak's will proves stronger than fear of death and stronger than the temptation to flee. Aron does not desire his own rescue, yet he also does not think about the other children; that is, he selfishly wants to preserve Korczak's life, but not what Korczak holds dear and for which he is ready to sacrifice himself.

To the distraught boy, Korczak reads aloud his document on children's rights. The novel ends with the educator's words: "...The child has the right to grieve. The child has the right to learn. And the child has the right to make mistakes." [Shepard 2015: 161]. In the narrative's finale, Aron's voice is replaced by Korczak's voice, which articulates the novel's central ethical imperative: the right to make mistakes. The educator forgives Aron, thereby "legitimizing" the adolescent's statement and inviting the reader to trust it.

Thus, the novel's receptive strategy programs reading as a search for the boundary between guilt and error. Aron's story is multifaceted: it speaks of his character, losses, weaknesses, his bargain with conscience, and the acquired sense of guilt and duty. The frank narration in his voice (Aron does not attempt to conceal his mistakes or justify himself), as well as Korczak's final word addressed to the boy, programs the reader to accept the adolescent's experience and to recognize his story as reliable and credible. The explicit articulation of the novel's central idea in the ending, together with the de-idealization of the characters throughout the narrative, prompts the reader to revise an ethical assessment of victims' modes of survival. In particular, it requires the reader to solidarize with the

child's experience and to acknowledge the child's right to make mistakes.

Conclusion

The Book of Aron possesses a distinctive receptive strategy that prompts the reader to reflect on the boundaries between crime and error, punishment and atonement. The narrative demonstrates how a character's historicity becomes the foundation of the receptive programme: a real figure enables to regulate the reader's expectations and to establish ethical and epistemic procedures of reading.

Janusz Korczak functions as a norm-setting figure, a regulator of empathy and responsibility. The Old Doctor is presented as a moral authority, yet not through overt heroization, but through a series of concrete, small-scale scenes of the daily routine. This optics (reliance on everyday details and micro-gestures) performs a dual function within the novel's receptive programme. On the one hand, it produces an effect of participation in the ghetto's real world; on the other, it dictates to the reader the perceptual rules.

The choice of a child narrator likewise directs the reader's focus. This tactic forces the recipient to traverse the path of growing up alongside Aron, while at the same time filling semantic lacunae, assuming interpretive responsibility, and delivering a moral evaluation of the character.

The author does not merely juxtapose two opposing experiences; he depicts a process of transformation and the character's acquisition of self-awareness. If Korczak embodies absolute self-sacrifice and a rejection of collaborationism even in thought, Aron's decisions are shown as a chain of minor bargains with conscience made for survival. This character has neither freedom of choice nor a fully formed value system. He acquires by both entering the everyday life of the orphanage and seeing before him an example of living for others.

Thus, in Shepard's text Korczak's character functions as the basis of the receptive programme's object-oriented organization. He becomes the central object through which trust in the narrator, the degree of empathy, and the ethical dispositions of reading toward accepting the child's experience and mistakes.

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