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## THE THEME OF DEATH IN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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**Abstract:** The topic of this paper arises from the very nature of literature for children, literature that is special, separate part of the general literature, as well as an integral part. Such literature is close to the child, because it is offered another world, a world in which the child freely develops their imagination, dreams and aspirations. But also, the fact is that through this literature child perceives life and its laws. Children are facing death were in the family, whether it is about the death of close relatives, death of a pet, etc. Hence, it is inevitable literature aimed at children and young people to reflect developments in society and family. Accordingly, the essential part of literature for children and youth, is death as an integral part of our existence. For these reasons, the subject of this paper will be the treatment of the theme of death in literature for children and young people, through selected works.

**Key words:** death, children's literature, children.

Among the most prominent contemporary literary movements, realism strives to portray life as it is, without dulling or diminishing the true emotionalism and dynamism of life through exaggeration or fantasy. As an aspect of children's literature, realism and its basic tenets strongly appeal to young adult readers, however, that, simultaneously, has worried many adults who are anxious about confronting children with the often difficult subject matter present in most "real world" scenarios.<sup>1</sup>

Death is a sensitive and difficult issue for almost everyone, "the last taboo" as it has sometimes been called. Children today are protected from it and unprepared for it in a way that would have been impossible a century ago, but they cannot be completely insulated from it: pets die, grandparents die, sometimes even parents or siblings or friends die.<sup>2</sup>

General avoidance to give fair treatment to the topic of death and its consequences on the family, it reflects the willingness of our society to deny this issue. It may stem from trying to protect young people from the painful reality (Moss 1972), or, according to some theorists, when it comes to

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<sup>1</sup> Realism in Children's Literature, Children's literature Review, 2008, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-2859900012/realism-childrens-literature.html>, accessed on 20.10.2016

<sup>2</sup> Books for Bereaved Children, <https://humanism.org.uk/education/parents/books-for-bereaved-children/>, accessed on 20.10.2016



death, parents and educators are more willing to warn children about possible risk factors related to its security, thereby reducing the risks to his life than they are ready to talk about the theme of death. Conversation, and thus giving basic acceptable information about the death, often deferred to a later age child (Konstantinović 2006).

The fact is that no matter how much the parents, writers or teachers are trying to avoid or relativize the theme of death, it exists and children daily face with it. Regardless is it a death of a pet, grandparents, brother or sister, parents, closer or more distant relatives - death and birth is an inseparable part of life. In fact, it is proved that at the age of three the child begins to ask questions about death. Accordingly, it is considered that avoidance of parents or teachers to talk to their children about this subject can be considered dishonest and can lead to disruption of the emotional and intellectual development of the child. Also in this context, it is suggested that it is better for children to openly tell their family crises, rather than let them imagine the worst (Moss 1972). At the end of the day, pretending that death does not exist (that is out there) will not help it to disappear. No human being can escape; the man can not avoid "brutal fact of his mortality" (Swenson 1972).

The question is: whether the books can help students to understand and accept death without being morbid or to undermine the faith of students and parents?<sup>3</sup> Reading, which has long been used as a means of helping people cope with conflict, may be a viable way for children to deal with critical illness. From their reading, the children realize that others also experience similar fears, frustrations and concerns. By recognizing the similarities between themselves and the characters, children can work on solving their problems. Through reading, children realize that other people share their pain and feelings and that's quite normal. That, to them, is a kind of relief when they know that others suffer as they do. When children feel less isolated, they lose part of their embarrassment because of the situation they are in (Bernstein 1983: 28).

Lately, both in global and European context, and in this region, including in Macedonian literature for children and young people, there is an increased number of books that are talking about this topic. Moreover, it is interesting to know the fact about what kind of loss are faced the characters in the works or any instances of loss and sorrow the works present. Adults may not know whether these examples faithfully represent experiences related to death that children can meet. However, this literature gives occasion to approach this topic in an unusual way. Of course, this literature can help adults to identify with certain aspects of grief that are fundamental to all mankind (Corr 2003-2004). Many authors emphasize biblio-therapeutic function of literature on the issue. According to James (James), representations of death in fiction for children can provide an unusually clear opportunity to understand some of the ways that create the understanding for something in society. For some, any serious study of cultural approaches that provide answers about death, can present some of the basic features of social life [...] Second, children's literature can reflect these values because of her clarity, [...] and because the vigilance with which it is monitored (James 2009).

For illustration, we will mention only some works which, as it seems, in his own manner to treat this issue. As soon as we mention "Pinocchio" by Carlo Collodi (Collodi 2005), the reader immediately creates the image of the wooden boy who experienced various adventures before he become a real boy. His desire to become a real boy, but his inconsistency, have caused many accidents in which very often was jeopardized his livelihood. Thus, because of his laxness there is a danger of burning his feet: „But while he slept wooden foot flames and slowly began turning into coal until they become ashes“ (Collodi 2005: 30), then when the owner of the theater wants to throw him into the fire: „Bring me here that wooden puppet hanging on a nail. It seems to be made of very dry wood, and I'm sure if I plunge it into the fire, it will cause a big fire for roasting“ (Collodi 2005: 47); then, when the masked killers ask him for money: „Get your money or you're dead“, „And after we kill you, we will

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<sup>3</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk/education/parents/books-for-bereaved-children/>, accessed on 20.10.2016



kill your father“ (Collodi 2005: 69); when there is danger to be fried as a fish: „You want to be fried in a pan, or you prefer to be cooked in a pan with tomato sauce?“ (Collodi 2005:156); when transformed into a donkey Pinocchio is thrown into the sea and there is danger of drowning: "... he took the colt of a cliff on the seashore, tied stoun around his neck, and tied his hoof with a rope and held it in my hand strongly, than pushed it and dropped it in the water“ (Collodi 2005: 205); when he and his father are swallowed by the shark: "Monster has reached them, sighing and drank poor puppet as I drank egg hen. And with so much power and greed swallowed him, that Pinocchio was going down through the body of the shark was struck and remained stunned good fifteen minutes..." (Collodi 2005: 213), etc. Other than his own endangered in the novel, the hero is faced with the death of some dear people as Cricket winds (in fact, his conscience) whose death he caused and he later regrets about that: „...Pinocchio jumped furious from the desk, took a wooden hammer and threw it toward Cricket winds. Certainly he did not expect to hit him, but unfortunately it hit him right on the head so that the poor Cricket winds barely find the strength to let go one shh, shh, shh and remained dead and stuck on the wall“ (Collodi 2005: 23). Quite indicative are sequences in which Pinocchio meets a girl with blue eyes, in fact fairy, his death/death of fairy and visit on her grave, about whose death he also feels guilty and responsible, arguing that caused Quite indicative sequences in which Pinocchio meets a girl with blue eyes, in fact fairy, death / death of fairy and visit her grave, whose death felt too guilty and responsible, arguing that he caused it with his disobedience and irresponsibility: „Then on the window appeared pretty girl with bright blue hair and white face like it was a wax figure, with his eyes closed and arms crossed on his chest, which without moving her lips spoke with voice as if comes from another world: in this house there is none. Everyone is dead ... I'm dead ....- Dead? Well then what are you doing here at the window? - I am waiting the coffin to take me“ (Collodi 2005: 73). The following narrative sequence with the Pinocchio's arrival on fairy grave, very illustrative reveals the relationship of children to death as something temporary and can be overcome only by love: „... he start kissing the marble burial with his mouth and burst into loud weeping. Oh, my Fairy, tell me it is not true that you are dead! If you really love me ... if you really love your brother - arise ... come back to life as before!“ (Collodi 2005: 115)

Interesting is the attitude of Pinocchio toward drinking syrup to heal offered by the fairy. His rejection of the syrup is quite like the relationship of children to drugs: "... I can't drink this bitter water, I can't, no, no ...- my child, you'll be sorry ... Your illness is serious ...- I don't care ...- The fever will take you to the other world in a few hours. Aren't you afraid of death? - I have no fear at all! ... I prefer to die than to drink this ugly cure“ (Collodi 2005: 84). To amplify the effect the seriousness, on the stage appear four black rabbits (in the role of undertaker) wearing coffin intended for Pinocchio. However, after he changes his mind and drinking of the cure, they leave.

In the novel "Pippi Long Stocking" by Astrid Lindgren, Pippi's mother is dead before the beginning of the story, and the father is absent, disappeared during a storm, so the reader accepts Pippi as an orphan, which does not bother as only on the contrary: „Her mother died while Pippi was still a baby - while lying in the cradle. ... Pippi believed that her mother lives in a distant country, so, however, she could watch her little girl, who often waved, saying: -Don't worry, Mom! I will always handle!“ (Lindgren 2010:7).

But Astrid Lindgren failed to avoid the various controversies. And she never desired it. When she spoke of death in the book "Mio My Mio", it may notice that it was still present memory of World War II. How dare she to shake again the themes of fear and death in children? - was heard from various sides. Her response was that children can actually handle it, and that existential issues are extremely relevant to them. "Children need real fairy tales that will not timid to resist the terrible and difficult. We had enough ultraidillic versions of that genre“.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://magazine.danaucime.mk/?p=10550>, accessed on 22.10.2016

While previous novel was of miraculous type, the realistic novel "Heidi" by Johanna Spyri (Spyri 2010) we meet with the theme of death across a few places, but not directly as a death or loss of a dear and close person. The danger to the worst is still there. Death that occurred in the past we meet early in the novel when Aunt Deta with Adelaide-Heidi, who is already an orphan, is sent to the uncle on the mountain intending to leave him little Heidi so he can take care of her. On the way, she actually tells the whole history with the death of Heidi parents and thus introduces the reader into the fate of Heidi: „Two years after the wedding Toby worked on a house, then rested, and he fell a beam and hurt him. And when the unfortunate man was brought home, all crippled by terror and pain Adelhaida got a terrible fever and could not be cured... A few weeks after the death of Toby we buried Adelhaida“ (Spyri 2010: 11). Death as a theme is present in the life of Clara's doctor who lost his family and somehow considered Heidi for his own daughter and thus at the young reader causes a feeling of protection, security: „The doctor had an only daughter, who after his wife's death was all he had in the world. But a few months ago, this beautiful girl suddenly died. Since then Mr. doctor was never again cheerful, though it had never been sad before“ (Spyri 2010: 37). And third place where death is found as a real threat to the health of girls, particularly Clara's disease and unidentified disease of Heidi in Frankfurt: „Very rich relatives of her masters, living in almost the most beautiful house in Frankfurt, have one daughter who must constantly sit in a bicycle with three wheels, because on one side she is deprived, nor otherwise is healthy“ (Spyri 2010: 49); „ Doctor, tell me honestly if you still hope to change that? The doctor shrugged. –A little bit, he said in a low voice“ (Spyri 2010:139).

In the novel "Tom Sawyer" (Twain 1963) we meet another orphan child, whose mother died early and it happened in the past. For him and his brother takes care Aunt Polly. Cheerful and naughty nature of Tom leaves no room for compassion at the reader because he has no mother, because his ingenuity and resourcefulness is a remarkable and every child-reader identify with it.

The theme of death we meet later in this novel, when Tom and Huck in the cemetery directly facing the murder of a doctor: „ At that moment, Joe benefits from its case and stabbed to handle the young man. Doctor swayed and fell over Potter covering him with blood“ (Twain 1963: 80). Quite interesting and humorous is displayed mourning for Tom by his aunt when everyone is convinced that the children are dead (after they escape the island): „ I do not want to hear any bad word about my poor little child, Tom, now that it is no more in this world! God will take care of him ... Now he is no longer aware of any sorrows and tribulations“ (Twain 1963: 120-121). Their return home on the day of their own funeral, is also humorous displayed versus traore atmosphere in the church, the sad song in the church choir, preaching the virtues of the dead boys: „Influenced by this sad story, the audience was becoming increasingly sensitive. Finally she could not stand, so they joined relatives who were weeping and through church blew choir of bitter weeping. And the preacher gave sake of his sensitivity and began to cry from the altar“ (138). Then, there is the death of Indian Joe who was found on the door of the closed cave. Although young readers had a chance to see his malice, yet his agonizing death, displayed very vividly, leaves space so they can feel sorry for him: „ Tom was upset from the depth of his soul. He knew from personal experience how much this wretch had to suffer! And he sincerely regretted ...Unfortunate man died of starvation...“ (Twain 1963: 246-247).

And in the novel "Huckleberry Finn" (Twain 1979) main character is orphan Huck, which at the beginning of the novel we learn that has only a father, but he is drunk and is beating on Huck, and therefore Hack avoids him. Thus, he is left to himself, and because he can't adapt to new life conditions in the home of widow Douglas after finding treasure with Tom Sawyer, he constantly strives to free life. When his father returns to his life, it seemingly is the lifeline to a civilized way of life, but after a short time, his father goes back to his old habits and Huck will staging "his" heinous death so he can flee: „After I break the door, I brought the pig just to the table, cut his throat and put it on the ground so blood can leak ... I've been tugged of some hair, carefully trample blood mixed in with the hair and threw her in the corner...“ (Twain 1979: 39). On the journey that they take over, his partner is Nigger Joe, and through many adventures, they repeatedly are in dangerous situations. The author hides from

Huck the reader the scene of discovery of the body of Huck's father and towards the end of the novel Nigger Joe reveals the truth. Thus, he saves Huck to see his father's dead body, or to cause any trauma to him, though it was not his most favorite person.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis clearly shows that unlike in the past when in literature for children talking about death, dying (particularly in cases with a military theme) was pretty open, in recent times there is a tendency to "avoid" on the subject. Probably, writers, and parents wanting to protect children from feelings of grief, sorrow and themselves to protect themselves from unpleasant questions, avoid this subject, although it is part of life, that children encounter on a daily basis.

That does not mean that children do not think about death. On the contrary. When they witness the death, such as the death of a pet, countless questions are born in them like: Where did you go now? Why did you go now?, Are not we friends? Now who will be my companion? and similar other issues. If the child does not receive a response that will truly satisfy his desire for knowledge of reality, we face the danger to get distorted notions about life, or will suppress feelings of grief and sorrow in themselves and retreat. Thus, as previously said, we compromise at risk of negative influence on the emotional development of the child. Indeed, with these questions, child appeals to us, in his own characteristic way, that there is a deep need to share these feelings to someone. By reading a books that children are facing such experiences, they plunge into the emotions and responses that others offer (Walker 1986:8-16). For these reasons, we, adults, parents and teachers, it is necessary to recommend literature to children and by reading about these events and feelings, children will identify with the characters, so they can experience a kind of catharsis, i.e. the release of the tension.

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