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Interpretation of Poetry for Children as an Opportunity for Death Education: the Whys and the Hows

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Extended summary

Psychological and anthropological studies offer evidence that children think about death regardless of the place and time in which they live. Though nobody knows precisely when the children's conceptualization of death finishes, it can be assumed that the adoption of the sub-concepts about death begins at a preschool stage and ends around the age of 12 at the latest. The conceptualization, however, does not depend solely on the children's age: it is related to their cognitive development, (un)experienced death of a close person, and many other factors. This fact indicates that, as far as discussing death with children is concerned, one should not create an image of a homogenous group, but rather of many recipients who may respond differently to this kind of discussion.

From a socio-historical perspective, avoiding conversations about death with children, which is quite common in the modern society, is determined mainly by social and cultural factors. Despite Philippe Aries' claim that in the West, and up to the 18th century, the room of a dying person could not be imagined without children, today, family members suppress their grief for the deceased in front of the children. The reason for making death a taboo may lie in the socially imposed obligation to contribute to collective happiness which must not be compromised at any cost. Therefore, it should be born in mind that overlooking the topic of death is not an ideologically innocent act either: especially if it occurs at school, which can be rightly considered as an ideological apparatus of the state.

The silence surrounding the topic of death in schools can be stopped by using the literary works which deal with this issue. This theme can be covered in the Serbian language and literature classes, and the second part of the paper offers the solutions how this can be accomplished.

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Our selection of the texts dealing with death includes only the verses of the relevant Serbian poets who wrote poetry for children. A wider selection included all poets who have thematised death. These poems were analysed and the aspects of the representation of death in them were identified partly by means of a dialogue with psychological and sociological literature, and partly by means of induction. The narrow and final selection was made on the principle that the corpus should allow for a more comprehensive insight into the concept of death in the poetry for children and contain many different poetic voices. Limiting the selection to an acceptable size was another important criterion.

One possible discussion about the representation of death in the poetry for children may have the following sequence: a) the experience of a poem (emotions that follow the thematisation of death, the mode of representing death [intuitive awakening of the reflective, emphatic and/or humorous shaping of the death discourse]); b) content aspects of the poem (a dying subject, position and identity of the lyrical subject, the cause of death; the presence or absence of the process of dying, the manner of dying, the conceptualisation of death; socio-historical and ideological context, the figure of the dying person as an ideological instrument, ideological message); c) formal elements of a poem (stylistic figures and tropes, versification); d) intertextuality and intermediality (the intertwining with other, different in terms of the genre literary texts and artistic forms); e) synthesis (connecting the analysed parts and final summing up aimed at a more thorough understanding [representation] of death; the synthesis may lead to a debate on the ways of conceptualising death – whether it is a point of view that emphasizes the moral values and duration in memory, or the one cherishing the value of life regardless of the moral norms, or the one which takes the inevitable end of life with laughter).

A discussion about death in the poetry for children cannot start in medias res. Therefore, the first step would be to verbalise the children's experience regarding death. Some theses that could be helpful in contextualizing the discussion about a poem thematising death include: a) the children's first associations when death is mentioned; b) if death were a living being, it would look like ... ; c) encounters with death in everyday life (death of an animal, a person; death on the television, internet...); d) emotions most commonly related to death; e) the first encounter with death; f) the experience of talking about death with their peers or with the adults; g) the experience of reading about death (mythology, Christian tradition, etc.); h) religious and scientific views on death; j) the existence after death (heaven and hell; reincarnation; near-death experiences); k) if there is nothing after death, then ...; l) life without death would be

The paper does not explicitly recommend what grade is the most appropriate one for this kind of discussion. The decision is based on the fact that the age of the children is only one of the factors relevant for such discussion – the decision on starting a dialogue, and about its scope, depends mostly on the totality of the teaching situation.

It is hoped that this concept of death education would help develop at least two values in children: the respect for diversity (through self-awareness and respect for others' beliefs about death) and the development of empathy in children. After the concrete analysis of the poems, the various topics for discussion can be explored: from the requiem and the danse macabre, to various representations of death in visual arts, from the view on death exploited in the school

subject The World around Us, through the one that prevails in religious teachings, to the folk customs associated with death - the theme of death is a place where one can speak about the deepest issues of the human existence, including the children's existence.

Key words: death, poetry, children's literature, teaching literature, interdisciplinarity.

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