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Original  
scientific paper

## ***Methodological Approach to the Motif of Death in the Lower Primary School Instruction***

Paper received: Sep 30 2017  
Paper accepted: Nov 24 2017  
Article Published: Feb 7 2018

### **Extended summary**

Children's literature, particularly the reading lists in the lower grades of primary school, is, by definition, the space where optimism and happy endings abound. Various difficulties encountered by the main characters in the folk and fine literature are not only a functional part of the story, but they also have a strong educational purpose: to encourage the heroes in the story, and the readers, to persevere in their fight for justice and to overcome the obstacles. However, there are still many texts in the literature for children and in the school reading lists in which cruelty and the motifs of transience and death are strongly depicted and exploited.

The paper begins with a selection of literary works included in the curricula and the collections of literary texts for the lower grades of primary school, as well as the ones that can be included in the literature reading lists. The goal of the paper is to analyse the structure of these works in terms of themes and motifs, the ways of their representation in the methodological apparatus, and the potential meanings offered to young readers. This is a possible thematic step forward in teaching literature, especially at the younger age, with many questions and insights that accompany it: When should we recommend the literary works in which the motif of death is present, or even central, to young readers? What are the reasons for such a step forward? What are the hazards on this road? What can a child get and lose in the process? And what does literature instruction itself get or lose?

The analysis of all approved early primary readers for the school year 2016/2017 showed that there are two ways in which the theme of death is avoided or alleviated. The first way concerns the presentation of an artistic text in a textbook, namely, the way in which it is presented: in its entirety, as original version or partially changed. In the case of the longest prose texts,

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only the passages that are not related to the theme of death are selected. The passages with this motif are also left out from longer short stories or a story is suddenly interrupted and, as it were, falsified. Another way is to process the text by applying the methodical apparatus consisting of general and avoidance questions instead of scissors and editing techniques.

Our selection includes four texts (written by three different authors) that we considered paradigmatic: "The Sparrow and the Swallows" by Leo Tolstoy, "My Grandpa Was a Cherry Tree" by Angela Nanetti, "The Grandfather on His Last Journey" and "A Lullaby for My Grandmother" by Dragomir Đorđević. Tolstoy's story appears in the textbooks in its integral version and this paper explores the methodological apparatus pertaining to it. Given that the textbooks contain only the selected excerpts from Angela Nanetti's novel, our research focused on the nature of these excerpts and the accompanying questions and tasks. Dragomir Đorđević's poems mostly appear in the form of optional reading. In our opinion, the poems are a good example of how the topic of death can be exploited without euphemisms in the poems for children, while being in keeping with the children's age and their horizon of expectations.

In his poems, "The Grandfather on His Last Journey" and "A Lullaby for My Grandmother", Dragomir Đorđević uses a range of techniques and poetic procedures to emphasise the complexity and subtlety of the children's experience of an inevitable loss of dear ones (Naturally, the poet opts for a moment which is tragic, but which a child can bear: death of a grandparent, not a parent). The words in the titles, on his last journey and a lullaby, intensify the semantic tension between two syntagms typical of (children's) literature and their implied meaning. These poems provide an opportunity for starting a class discussion on pupils' personal experience with this topic and their dilemmas in regard to it. The nature of the poems, the openness with which difficult issues are presented, the absence of pathetic language, and empathy they invoke – all this can have a healing effect on a child's process of growing up and becoming more mature.

**Key words:** literature instruction, methodology of literature instruction, curricula, school reading list, reader, methodological apparatus, motif of death, Leo Tolstoy, Angela Nanetti, Dragomir Đorđević.

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