**The Imagined Child and Reader Experience: Understanding Death in Children’s Literature**

This study aims to undertake an in-depth investigation into the portrayals of death and grief in children’s media and children’s reactions to these portrayals. Research has shown that fears surrounding death and injury permeate the minds of children from a relatively early age (Nicholson & Pearson, 2003). Whilst these fears are a common aspect of childhood development; it is generally understood that adults need to help children learn how to cope with them. Maria Nagy, a Hungarian psychologist, conducted a study on children’s perceptions of death in 1948. Her research revealed that younger children perceive death to be reversible and preventable, and sometimes conceptualise death as a personified figure such as the Grim Reaper, while older children are better able to understand the concept of mortality (Nagy, 1948). Branch and Bison (2007) argued that while younger children cannot cognitively conceptualise the reality of death, they perceive death through the lens of loss. Children both imagine death and experience grief in different ways to adults (Lowe, 2009). The Harvard Child Bereavement Study, a longitudinal research study that documented children’s responses to loss into adulthood, reported that children might have delayed reactions to loss, the consequences of which could span across their lifetime (Wiseman, 2013). “[T]hese findings underscore the importance of addressing children’s grief… and providing them with opportunities to reflect on their feelings and remember the person they lost” (Wiseman, 2013). Lowe (2009) argues that educators need to recognise the part that literature can play in helping children cope with death, loss, and grief.

I would argue that it is crucial for children’s literature scholars to investigate the ways that children’s media presents these concepts. Maria Tatar argues that children’s literature offers children a safe space to explore the dark and scary aspects of the world, such as death and grief (2009, p. 12). Texts can act as both inclusive spaces in which children can explore different concepts and as barriers which protect them from harsh realities. In literature, death is conceptualised in many different ways. Death can be used as a metaphor for the end of childhood or the end of innocence; it can be used as a vehicle to create cultural martyrs; it can be used as a catalyst for change in the lives of surrounding characters, or as a plot point around which mysteries are solved. Some novels create space for mourning, whereas others present death devoid of grief.

Representations of death and grief in children’s literature have always been of interest to me. During my MPhil, I conducted an empirical case study that focused on the responses of two specific children aged 9 and 11 to the depictions of death and grief management in the Disney film Big Hero 6. The preliminary research for this essay indicated the lack of empirical work surrounding children’s reactions to portrayals of death and grief in children’s literature. Instead, work on mortality in children’s literature tends to focus on specific representations of death. This focus tends to be based on the examination of broader cultural trends, such as the representation of Dia De Los Muertes; the exploration of spiritual or religious implications of texts portraying death; or close readings of specific novels. Another branch of academic research on death in children’s literature takes an ‘overview’ approach, which prefers a broad survey of the subject matter and content of a large number of children’s texts or films (e.g. Cox, Garrett, & Graham, 2005; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017; Graham et al., 2018). Lesley D. Clement and Leyli Jamali (2015)’s edited collection, Global Perspectives on Death in Children’s Literature, is one particularly useful contribution to the current literature into the implications of specific representations of death in children’s literature. The authors in this book attempt to expand on existing research on children’s literature’s treatment of mortality by examining texts from outside of the British and American tradition. However, this work continues to investigate specific texts and broader cultural implications without consulting child readers. I want to add to this growing body of literature by examining how real child readers interact with these texts. This research will provide an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the overlap between the intended comprehension of novels by the imagined child reader, and the experience and responses of the real child reader to these texts.

I propose a bipartite approach to my thesis. In the first section, I will analyse several children’s texts that handle the concepts of death and grief. I want to focus specifically on middle-grade books, as other work on death in children’s literature tends to examine either picturebooks such as Grandad’s Ashes, or Young Adult books such as The Fault in Our Stars. Picturebooks allow parents to be the intermediary between the difficult subject matter of death and their children, while young adult readers tend to have a greater understanding and lexicon through which to grapple with notions of mortality and mourning. Middle-grade readers, however, are reading without their parents, but lack the greater social awareness of their older peers. Owing to the relative lack of research into middle-grade books on death, as well as the specific developmental stage of middle-grade readers, I would argue that it is important to focus this study on middle-grade media surrounding death and grief. In this section of my research, I would like to undertake an in-depth examination of my chosen texts in order to ascertain how death and grief are conceptualised, and what purpose they serve in the larger narratives. I would like to approach these books through the lens of sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory recognises the way that membership to different cultural and social groups, linked to the global and local contexts in which these groups exist, influences the varied ways in which people read texts (Clement, L. D. & Jamali, L., 2015, pp. 625). One of the key objectives of this analysis is to identify the authors’ possible intentions and the ways in which potential readers might interpret these texts.

The second part of the thesis will be a small-scale empirical study of reader experience. Given the current the lack of empirical, reader-based research on the effects of the representation of death and grief in children’s literature, this project has the potential to provide new insights into young readers’ engagement with these critical issues. This insight is important because the understanding of death and grief can be integral to social integration and belonging. I would like to explore the responses of a group of around 8-10 middle-grade aged children (age 9-12) to the representation of death and grief in a number of children’s texts. I would be interested in investigating the differences in response between children who have some experience with grief and those who do not. Given the literature I have explored so far, I plan to utilise reader-response theory (see: Lober, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2010; Lewis, 2000) to develop a set of semi-structured group and individual interviews. Using the research model developed by Anna Purkiss, these discussions would take place in the context of a book club. I am aware of the fact that there will be ethical concerns relating to an empirical project wherein children interact with notions of death and grief. However, I feel that using an adaptation of Purkiss’s research model will help to mitigate these concerns. This model emphasises an inclusive research approach by which the children involved in the research are included in some of the decision-making process connected with the research (Purkiss, 2019). This approach actively attempts to ensure the willing participation and comfort of the children in the project (Purkiss, 2019). My research will also interact with the psychology of childhood grief and mourning.

In my thesis, I propose to expand the understanding of the impact of including death and grief narratives in children’s literature. I intend to conduct an empirical study which would compare the content of children’s media dealing with death and grief, as well as my academic understanding of this content, with real child readers’ comprehension. Despite the fact that we recognise the lasting potential impacts (both positive and negative) in media, the practice of consulting real child readers on their response to and processing of difficult subject matter like death and grief continues to be under studied. By contributing to this literature, I hope to empower researchers, authors and parents to better understand how these types of texts impact children during this crucial stage of development. I would like to conduct this research under Georgina Horrell, who was my supervisor during my MPhil, and with whom I have a good working relationship. She also has experience working on heavier topics such as death.

**Potential Chapter Outline:**

Introduction

Part I: Representations of Death

 Chapter 1: Crossing the Bridge – Metaphors of Death

 Chapter 2: Dia De Los Muertes – Death and Culture

 Chapter 3: Tadashi is Here – Grief in Children’s Media

Part II: Understanding of Death

 Chapter 4: Theoretical Background

 Chapter 5: Expectations and Methodology

 Chapter 6: Results

Conclusion

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