

*Death Shall Have No Dominion: Representations of Grandfathers' Death in Contemporary Picturebooks**

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The topic of death usually advocates the resistance of language, therefore creators search for linguistic or visual codes suitable for expressing the unutterable loss of beloved people in contemporary picture or illustrated books for children. For that reason, the meaning of death is portrayed in picturebooks with an immediate and symbolic way in both text and picture. Adopting a visual and textual approach, we examine the ways in which authors and illustrators portray the relationship between grandparent and grandchildren in picturebooks. Many stories in children's literature deal with the archetypal pattern of death and present it in a way which enables young readers to come to terms with it. In such stories, young protagonists, and thus young readers, are introduced into questions of ageing and decay, and inevitably of death, through an imaginative "travel" in time and space which is engendered by the grandparent's enchanting storytelling. Death comes to be viewed as simply a stage toward reunion with eternal nature in the hereafter. The grandparent's death is pictured as a "justifiable" event, integrated in the life cycle. Bereavement and grief seem to rely on the principal motifs of nature-as-space and nature-as-knowledge, which eventually manage to negate the dominion of death upon life.

Keywords: Grandfathers' Death; Picturebooks; Children's Literature

Introduction

Death, just like birth, is an essential part of human experience and an archetypal theme in literature. According to Philippe Ariès (1977/1991), in his landmark study of the subject, death is a socially constructed phenomenon in Western culture and one can recognize several changing social attitudes to it through the centuries. Death is mysterious and overwhelming; a meaningless monster, according to the eminent historian, that lurks at the edge of our consciousness, ready to destroy us and demolish whatever meaning we attribute to our lives. In today's world we encounter an "invisibility of death", a somewhat paradoxical situation, in that we deny the existence of death so effectively that we no longer develop personal and communal resources to give it meaning. Death's invisibility corroborates its terror; our culture's loss of spirituality reinforces the meaninglessness of death. Contemporary children's books deal with the subject through unraveling the mystery and the invisibility in it. People should not fear death; writers should not hesitate to represent it as far as death is not considered any more as a dark or unspeakable taboo.

*According to Judeo-Christian narrative "death shall have no dominion", as religion gives the promise of eternal life. In the same way, Dylan Thomas's poem "And death shall have no dominion", celebrates the undying and eternal strength of the human spirit. It is because of this strength that death does not claim ultimate victory over humanity. We never truly lose our beloved persons, as they live on in our memory and spirit.

Death in Picturebooks

As an inescapable condition, rather than just the end of existence, death has to be approached by both adults and children with as much sensitivity and understanding as birth. Death normally evokes grief, mourning and bereavement but, apart from this intolerable pain, it should be in most cases comprehensible, even by young children. Many stories in children's literature deal with death and present it in a way which enables young readers to come to terms with it. Actually, several death-related books for children emphasize in hilarious ways the importance of coping with death and loss. One such book is Babette Cole's *Drop Dead* (1997), in which death is described with great humor and funny illustrations as an integral part of the essential circle of human life. There are also more sophisticated stories for young audiences such as the controversial yet beloved novel by Katherine Paterson *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), which challenge the conventional boundaries of acceptable themes for children's literature, by taking the topics of death and loss in an uncompromising way.

Picturebooks on grief, bereavement, and mourning have so much to offer to children (Dennis, 2012; Corr, 2003-2004; McGeorge, 1998). Doubtless, death as a topic usually advocates the resistance of language used to describe it. The creators of modern picturebooks search for linguistic codes suitable for expressing the unutterable loss of beloved people. Picturebooks can vividly represent incidents from everyday life, the character

of a person, the physical environment and also the setting in a remote time. Text and pictures work together not only to convey the story, but also to illustrate the meaning of death both in a mimetic and direct way and also in an allegorical and symbolic style (Mitchell, 1995). Additionally, through their illustrated format, picturebooks fully develop their characters and settings, without compressing the loss conditions. Moreover, visual symbolic language has a pervasive influence on children, in the sense that it enables them to encounter the feeling of loss, mainly of grandparents.

Ellen Handler Spitz, in her book *Inside Picture Books* (1999), in which she studies picturebooks from the viewpoint of developmental psychology, stresses the therapeutic effect of these books on young readers. The meaning of death is portrayed in picturebooks with an immediate and symbolic way both in text and in picture. Death primarily concerns grandparents or elder people who play a secondary role in children's life. Besides, death of elderly emerges as the physical ending of an acclaimed life course. More specifically, the elderly are usually depicted sleeping in bed—weak from the lassitude of aging and the sickness—or telling fairytales and other stories to their grandchildren. In both cases, text and picture complement each other; when the absolute and final nature of death cannot be defined with words, it is with shapes and colors that bereavement is depicted; and the joyful shapes of illustration transform mourning into a less painful condition.

Through picturebooks, which are often read repeatedly to young children, the former learn about the world existing outside their immediate surroundings (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972). Consequently, storybooks constitute one route through which children can develop attitudes toward grandparents and older adults in general (Sciplino, Smith, Hurme, Rusek, & Bäckvik, 2010). In addition, together with television and the internet, literature is a primary resource which provides children with information and ideas about aging and older adults (Ansello, 1977; Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008). Through cultural and social experiences, children come to understand specific roles played by adults and develop behavioral expectations about them. Therefore, children become familiar with grandparent roles and grandparent loss not only through direct association, but also through media such as children's books (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1997; Janelli, 1988).

In this paper, we examine two well known and awarded contemporary picture or illustrated books that deal with the topic of grandfather's death, the following: Austrian writer Sigrid Laube's *Grossvater hebt ab* (1998) [*Ο παππούς πετάει*, 2000], illustrated by Maria Blazejovsky, and Greek writer Foteini Fragouli's *Το μισό πιθόρι* (2000) [*The half jar*], illustrated by Evi Tsaknia. The young protagonists of these books are introduced into questions of ageing and decay, and, thus, inevitably of death, through an imaginative "travel" in time and space which is engendered by their grandfather's enchanting storytelling.

The creators of such modern picturebooks search for linguistic codes suitable for expressing the unutterable loss of beloved people. Picturebooks can vividly represent incidents from everyday life, the character of a person, the physical environment and also the setting in a remote time. Text and pictures work together not only to convey the story, but also to illustrate the meaning of death both in a mimetic and direct way and also in an allegorical and symbolic style (Mitchell, 1995). Additionally,

through their illustrated format, picturebooks develop their characters and settings, without avoiding the condition of loss. Moreover, visual symbolic language has a pervasive influence on children, in the sense that it enables them to encounter the feeling of loss, mainly of grandparents.

Grandparents' Death in Two Picturebooks

Through the visual and textual approach of Sigrid Laube and Foteini Fragouli's books, we will examine the ways in which the authors and illustrators portray the topic of death, especially in picturebooks that pertain to the literary kind of fantastic literature (or even to the magic/"enchanted" realism and the literary fairytale respectively). According to Sheila A. Egoff (1988: pp. 7-8), the protagonists of such kind of books "are not called upon to participate in great events nor to test themselves against seemingly overwhelming odds. The children of enchanted realism do not change the world; instead they themselves are changed by their heightened concept of reality". In the books we examine the heroes come to an understanding of the rituals of life and death. In this kind of books, meanings like death can be more easily perceived according to Ursula Le Guin's belief that "truth is a matter of imagination. Facts are about the outside. Truth is about the inside" (Yolen, 1985: p. 13). Fantasy, first of all, returns to us what once belonged to us: the awareness of the unity of the natural and supernatural worlds, a view of our universe that was wrenched apart with the coming of the "Age of Reason". Therefore, fantasy, by its power to move us so deeply or to dramatize morality, can be one of the most effective means of establishing a capacity for adult values.

Another element of the visual as well the verbal text which is associated symbolically with the topic of death is nature. As we shall see later on, death is a natural phenomenon associated with the perennial circle of constant birth, loss and rebirth in the green world. As all other natural phenomena, human life is subjected to birth, decay and death. There are no moral or ethical dimensions in this process.

Sigrid Laube's *Grossvater hebt ab* (2000) is a demanding yet challenging gesture of artistic creation because of Maria Blazejovsky's illustrations. The text narrates grandfather and grandson's imaginative travel in which they are both submitted. This travel endures a whole day and it is completed at sunset. The two protagonists visit dreamlike landscapes that are located in the room as they are represented in the initial double spread. The consecutive scenes of their visits are but imaginary flights to the different corners of the grandfather's room; the idyllic village is inherited in the painted landscape hung on the wall, the pasture with strawberries



is totally connected with the bowl on the table, full of this kind of fruit. In addition to these images, we should note that the protagonists' encounter with the birds is repeated in the cover of the book on the taboret—it refers to W. A. Mozart's *Magic Flute* and the garden with the bluebells constitutes a detail of the vase with the blue flowers.

This framed and virtual travel alludes the emergency of the grandfather's health condition. The lyrical description of the text and the constant repetition of grandfather's figure who travels in time and space with closed eyes is completed at the end of the book with the crossed hands on the grandfather's



chest and the flowers on his body that could echo funeral burial customs (Meraklis, 1986).



Grandpa and grandson enter in an imaginative world through the open window which is represented in the first pages of the picturebook and is contradicted with the closed window in the last page that marks the “closure” of a life cycle. Grandfather’s departure is also pinpointed by the black-bird’s song that “travels up, to the sky” (*Grossvater hebt ab*: p. 33), the nebula created by the white curtain, the yellow butterfly that refers to virtual representations of human soul. According to Marina Warner, the identification of psyche and butterfly “operates at a deeper level within the syntax of metaphor, in models of a generative process, which figures the emergent butterfly as the vital essence which is inherent within the cocoon and other metamorphic stages” (Warner, 2007: p. 90). Furthermore, the sensation of body’s separation from the psyche is enhanced by an angel’s faint presence in the “real” life of the story.



Ο γιος της σελήης τον ήλιου, γέρνει, τον σπρώχνει στα θάρματα. Ο βαλάνος αυθόρμητα φύλλο του σπυρίδι του κεντρώει. Μην πεις ποτέ σπυρίδι σου, σπυρίδι σου σπυρίδι σου. Μην πεις ποτέ σπυρίδι σου, σπυρίδι σου σπυρίδι σου.



according to ancient and religious conceptions about the transition of soul into heaven.

Sigrid Laube and Maria Blazejovsky, through words and colors, describe in an imaginative way the end of the life cycle of an elderly, who preserves a particularly valuable relationship with his grandchild. The story that concludes with the grandfather’s death without any reference to a later grandson’s grief

The textual narrative delineates the grandfather’s death in an allusive way, while the pictorial narrative continues even after the end of the story, transcending the limits of the book in the inside cover. The young hero, standing on a chair, salutes his grandfather who sits on a star with closed eyes and wearing his pajamas. Grandfather’s sleep indicates the eternity of death and the transfiguration of beloved persons to stars-protectors,

reaction or to a burial process is located into a natural environment entirely familiar to the children. The little child and consequently the young reader have experienced death through an imaginable voyage in both microcosm and macrocosm of nature where everything can happen. This way of experiencing death is totally closed to the “Other World” children create while they play. In other words, the world of “make-believe” where everything can happen or be transformed into something else facilitates children to experience everyday life in both a fantastic and a mimetic way. The imaginative and playful travel in space and time is totally based on grandfather and grandchild’s real world. Real objects seem to solidify the “airy nothing” (Shakespeare, 1595/2005: p. 419), for example, the flying voyage with an umbrella. This fantastic story constitutes a symbolic construction of everyday life that assays heroes and reader’s personal and social experience. The creators challenge the reader to participate in the imaginative world of the work, to believe in all these skillfully made idle fantasies. The Other World of fantasy enables the reader to keep a distance from the real world and his conventions, in order to better understand reality and the unutterable loss of beloved persons (Swinfen, 1984).

Foteini Fragouli’s intention in writing the illustrated story *Το μισό πιθάρι* (*The half jar*, 2000) originates from her wish to describe the country life of her native Aegean island, Lesvos. She employs the style of fairytale in order to give a lyrical tone to everyday life. This very usage creates a world of fairy story, magic, and supernaturalism belonging to marvellous narrative overlaying the real world. The indiscernible limits between “real” and “unreal” are accentuated by Evi Tsaknia’s impressionist illustration.



The Greek painter and illustrator uses muted and faded colors, mainly the brownish and the light blue tone, in order to portray Helen’s childhood summers with her grandfather. Warm colors—reds, oranges, yellows—and cool ones—blues and blue-greens—are in absolute harmony with reds to highlight objects and the blue-green for backgrounds (Nodelman, 1988).

Nevertheless, Fragouli’s work is based on a historical and social framework, as particular references reveal. The Greek island of Lesvos of the 1950s or 1960s functions as the background of significant historical events, namely the surge of refugees after the destruction of Asia Minor in 1922, and emigration of Greeks to countries such as America or other foreign lands. The historical elements are highlighted through the relationship of a grandfather with his granddaughter. Especially, the story recounts the young protagonist’s childhood memories of her grandfather; games, fairytales and secrets that the two heroes share with each other.



The young protagonist, Helen, enjoys her grandfather’s story-tellings about the objects that the sea transfers from the seaside of Asia Minor to their island such as infant toys, ornate slippers or fragments from ancient vases. Every summer Helen collects such “treasures” from the seashore as they convey



refugees' memories. Additionally, the heroine's memories of her childhood are complemented by her grandfather's fairytales that constitute a fairytale world where both the grandchild and the reader can discover hidden desires such as the restoration to the lost homelands of Asia Minor. Helen, even after her grandfather's death, feels his presence both in everyday life and her

dreams.

Many years after, the grandfather's advice to Helen, through



a dream, "to love and to remember" the lost homelands (*To mió piθáρι*: p. 29), motivates the heroine to find in the cellar of her house the punnets full of broken ancient vases which she was collecting as a child from the beach every summer. The granddaughter's reinterpretation of the past helps her to better understand her relationship with her grandfather as much as his inevitable loss. The heroine returns to external life, rich from experiences and treasures which she derived from the initiation travel with her grandfather. The preservation of the deceased grandfather's memory signifies the symbolic triumph of life over death, according to Petrarch's idea of "fama" (Hardie, 2012).

Dreams and traditional stories combined will enable the heroine to understand herself and realize that the half jar from pieces—fragments of experiences and memories, songs and stories—represents the water memory both of the other seashore, the ancestral hearth of Asia Minor, and of her childhood. Literature relying on that combination "can remind us of this loophole in our rationality, and challenge our casual assurance, particularly if the dream world asserts its own substantiality. That dream may have as much validity as real life" (Hume, 1984: p. 127).

Foteini Fragouli's authorial pen and Evi Tsaknia's color palette create a dreamlike story in and out of time and space. Past and present time are tied metaphorically with the "water chain", which is the Aegean Sea, and elucidate the meaning of incomprehensible words, such as the word "river", that the grandfather used to say every time he was narrating fairytales and parables to his grandchild.



The seawater that both grandfather and granddaughter are viewing invites them to an imaginative voyage in a natural environment. The heroes' gaze activates memories, facts, historical periods, individual experiences, love, pain, etc. The eyes, actually, do not function as a mirror of nature, but as a mirror of mind. The eye itself is the vehicle of imaginative thought if we consider Aristotle's decla-

ration in *De Anima* (III, vii. 15: pp. 176-177) that "The soul never thinks without a mental image". The young heroine will never stop "communicating" with her grandfather as the reverie of the birthplace of Asia Minor will connect the two of them forever. The maritime birthplace has the power to give life even to the lifeless and to make articulate even the mute, as Gaston Bachelard has declared (1981).

Some Conclusions

The two picturebooks analyzed in this paper do not reenact the figure of grandparent in a stereotypical way as a "set of shared expectations focused upon a particular position" (Scott, 1970: p. 25; see also Beland & Mills, 2001; McElhoe, 1999). These expectations, which include beliefs about what goals or values the grandparent represents, are complemented by the grandfather's dreamlike representation. The imaginative delineation of grandfather's relationship with his grandchildren in picturebooks and/or illustrated books attains a better result when it provokes the young reader to stand back, take a second look, doubt, and reflect (Zipes, 2009). It seems clear that dealing with the meaning of death through fantasy or imagination is beneficial for young people, because fantasy is considered as the most valuable attribute of the human mind (Chukovsky, 1963). The imaginative approach of death has also therapeutic value in the sense that it defuses children's anxieties and facilitates the resolution of emotional conflicts (Bettelheim, 1976/1995).

Furthermore, death comes to be viewed as simply a stage toward reunion with eternal nature in the hereafter. The idea that life is an eternal course which is never suspended, as the beloved persons, even after their death, "exist" as psychological presences, abolishes the sense of an ending. Instead, it subjects the idea of continuity and equilibrium of nature which consists a vivifying power, perfect and complete ("Yet nature is made by no mean/but nature makes that mean", as William Shakespeare [1609-1610/2005: p. 1129] wrote). Text and pictures invite young readers to incorporate themselves in the physical universe and to synchronize their biological rhythm with the imperturbable rhythm of the physical environment. In such a context, the grandparent's death is pictured as a "justifiable" event, integrated in the life cycle. Bereavement and grief seem to rely on the principal motifs of nature-as-space and nature-as-knowledge, which eventually manage to negate the dominion of death upon life.

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