Death Topic in Children’s Literature—Take Three Picture Books as Example

Wenjie Zhao

Civil Aviation Flight University of China, Guanganh, Sichuan, China

Abstract: Death is a common topic in the mortal world, while it has been a controversial topic in Children’s literature. This essay discovers the death topic in children’s literature both in Western and Asia, and explores ways to process death topic to young readers.

Keywords: Death, Children’s literature, Untaooing, Death-themed picture books.

1. Introduction

For individuals, a confrontation of death is an inevitable part of living. Human beings have never stopped to explore the myth of death and use artistic creation to express death. Death-related works are very common in adults’ literature while it is controversial in children’s literature. Some people question the appropriateness of the topic for young audience and find it dark and negative for them. While others believe it is educational for kids. In this essay, the writer will explore the relationships among death, literature and children. Firstly, it will examine the appropriateness of death-themed children’s literatures; then, present some famous works around the world throughout history to prove its existence and popularity; finally, analysis three extraordinary death-themed picture books in details.

2. The Relationships Among Death, Literature and Children

Death is an inevitable topic for human beings. Everyone will face the death sooner or later, naturally or accidentally, since they were born. People know their bodies will be buried and rotted, but have no idea where their souls would rest. In western countries, the Christian believe kind people will go to the heaven and the bad guy will go directly to the hell, which is similar to traditional Chinese culture. Evidence can be found in one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature, Journey to the West, which is either a children literature or adult literature. Yuhuang Dadi (the Jade Emperor), who is the most powerful authority, is living in the heaven with other gods. And the evils are living underneath at the hell. Ordinary people have to spend thousands of years’ self-training to become one of the members of gods who can be immortal. However, it is just a literary work like the Greek Myth. In modern Chinese society, there is no common believes about heaven, hell and death among the public. Everyone has their own believes.

Death is a philosophical proposition without concrete answers. It is also an eternal and classic theme of literature. Many philosophers, novelists, poets, and essayists have discussed death in their works from ancient to modern times. The definition of death and the attitudes towards it is different from person to person, some are pessimistic, while others are free and easy; some are abstruse, while others are simple and direct. Montaigne, one of the greatest psychologists and philosophers in the world, has said that before understanding the life, the very art of living, one should understand death. He even wants to compile a book including various death of men, for the reason that teaching men to die would at the same time teach them to live (Screech, 1993). Throughout the history of literature, tragedies involving death has been occupied an important position. From Homeric Hymns to contemporary works, those masterpieces have taken death as a powerful artistic expression. In a practical sense, death is the end of natural aging and no one can escape from it. Since death is a part of human life, the writer who wants to explore the meaning of life will inevitably face the death, think about the death and write the death.

Children literature does not have a single or widely used definition, but can broadly refer to anything that children can read, including fiction, poetry, drama, fairy tales and so on (Hunt, 1996; Nodelman, 2008; Chevalier, 1989). Since the target readers are children, ‘death’ is hardly to be the theme of literary works (Liu, 2009). It is accepted that children's literature should be cheerful and bright, full of happiness and laughter. While sorrows and pains, especially the death, should be excluded from this field. Kenneth Grahame, a children’s novelist who has written The Wind in the Willows, insisted the theme of death is unsuitable for kids, since the description of death would bring them negative influences. Therefore, when compiling the poems collection for children, he excluded all the poems in relation with death. It is understandable that he wants to present a wonderful and carefree world to the children. Nevertheless, the dead parents, sisters and brothers, the dead cats, dogs and flowers are often appearing in the works (Smith, 1953). Even in everyday life, children are not totally isolated from the death. Lovely goldfish’s, loyal dogs’, and even grandparents’ death happen around them and have effect on their psychological development. Even though they cannot understand and treat the death as mature as the adults, they can still feel it with their innate sense. In other words, the concept of death has been developed over their early and middle childhood (Nguyen and Gelman, 2002; Poling and Evans, 2004; Slaughter and Lyons, 2003). Therefore, untabooing death for children is possible and necessary.

Children, like all other people, are willing to understand themselves, the world they live in and the purpose of their existence. Almost from the moment they can speak, they will ask parents some questions, like “where do I come from?” “Why do people and animals die?” “Where would they live after they die?” “Will they come back thus I can see them
again?” It is found in a survey that 39 percent of the young people (age 14-18) have never talked about death openly with their parents; and 26 percent said they only talk about it when necessary but with a sense of mysterious and uncomfortable. This situation is similar and even worse in Chinese families. In most cases, the conversation will be immediately stopped as long as the parents hear their children talking about death, since they regard it as an unlucky word. If children put a white paper on their head or around their arms, parents will tear the paper out and even blame them for doing that since the color of white is a color of death. In ancient China, the bereaved families usually wear a white suit to stand beside the coffin for 49 days and decorate the whole mourning hall with white flowers to show their respect and grieves. Even though the custom has been simplified nowadays, the specific meaning of white has never been changed in Chinese society.

Usually, parents transfer their own anxieties to the questioning children. For example, when a 6-year-old little boy comes to his mother, who is doing housework without preparation for that kind of question, “Mummy, do I have to die?” It can be imagined that this mother might be in panic and shocked in this unprepared circumstance. Her first verbal reaction would probably like this: “Oh, no, sweetheart, you won’t die, don’t think about that.” In fact, the mother is passing her anxiety more directly and dramatically to the kid. Maybe they just want to shield their children from the harsh reality of death, but the truth is, not answering does not make the questions away. Children may not ask parents again, but their curiosity and fear are still there (Siegel and Gorey, 1994). Some mothers will stop kids irritably and angrily, which would make the child feel guilty and depressed.

3. Death in Children’s Literature

It seems that death is an unavoidable question for children, just as Elzieta, a famous French author of children literature, said that miseries and grievances have never passed away from kids. They still have to face the issue of illness, poverty, desertion, even sexual assault, war and death like adults. Avoiding those death questions, on the one hand shows the over-protection towards children, on the other hand, just shows their ignorance of the essence of life (Lin, 2005). Therefore, instead of escaping, the adult should guide the children to correctly recognize death with their rich experience and mature thoughts. If parents cannot explain the issue appropriately, extra assistance and guidance could be consulted from children literature since its special value of shaping the characteristic and worldview of children.

In fact, when people are still arguing for the appropriateness of death in children’s literature, lots of classic works have proved its value and defended its status through impressive publishing volumes and popularities among readers. For example, in some folk tale’s collections, like the Grimm Brothers and Mother Goose, many stories have directly described death. In Beauty and the Beast, the uninvited witch curses the princess to die; in Snow White, the vicious step-mother has tried to kill the princess many times; in Blue Beard, it depicts a wealthy but cruel killer; in Three Little Pigs, the wolf ate three pigs first and finally was eaten by them. If you say above stories are collected from the folk without writers’ creating consciousness, then the works from Andersen, the father of fairy tales, can prove that death is a popular and common manner in authors’ creations. It is roughly counted that there are fifty stories subjecting on death or ending with death. In Red Shoes, because of her inanity of owing a pair of red ballet shoes, the little girl has to cut off her foot, and death becomes the only way of release. In the Rose-Elf, through the eye of spirit, people see a bloody killing and revenge story, and ultimately feel the cruelty behind love. After Anderson, many other authors have devoted themselves to the creation of children’s literature, adding new content and forms to the death topic. In Oscar Wilde’s works, almost all the stories, except the Tong King, are ended with the death of leading characters. In the Nightingale and the Rose, the nightingale sacrifice herself, using her blood to dying the rose. In the Star-child and the Fresherman and his soul, the protagonists are died after they realized the meaning of life. George McDonald regard death as the best way to sublimate one’s soul, which might be influenced by his Christian religious belief. In the Light Princess, only through the death of prince, princess Light can learn to cry understand the truth of love. C.S. Lewis built his Narnia kingdom at a fantasy land where full of adventure, evil and death. Charlotte White use the death of the spider to sublimate friendship and increase the artistic value of Charlotte’s Web. The Little prince, written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, is ended in an atmosphere of death, bringing readers a sense of regret, but truly reflecting the cruelness and imperfection of life. J.K. Rowling fires conflicts between good and evil, beauty and ugliness through the different attitudes towards death among (witch and wizard) parents, Dumbledore, Voldemort, and Betrayers.

Not only in western countries, but also in Asia, there are many excellent children literatures, especially Japan. Actually, Japanese have a special insight towards death, and those ideas can be found both in adults’ and children’s literature. Children’s writers, like Mimei Ogawa (小川未明), Kenji Miyazawa (宮沢賢治), and Naoko Awa (安房直子), have never deliberately avoided death in their works. However, different from adults’, writers are likely to create a happy afterlife world to rest the souls in children’s literature, in which the character can feel the warmth that he did not feel in the real world. In China, the number of children literatures relating to death is relatively small. Influenced by the traditional old-fashioned culture, death is a taboo representing bad luck, which people are not willing to talk about it in public, let alone to describe it in children’s literature. However, with the development of social cognition, death is gradually untabooing in Children’s literature. One of the cornerstones of Chinese children literature, the Scarecrow, written by Ye shentao, is a death-themed work. Through the eyes of the scarecrow, people will see the miserable life of the working class in Chinese society: paddy fields are destroyed by the plague of inserts; kids are tortured by the illness; old ladies are bullied by the males. At the end, the fall of the scarecrow indicates the ruin of hope. The whole story is clouded by desperation. After that, more and more works are throwing light on the death topic, however, the breadth and depth of thinking, the types and forms of literature are fall behind Japan and other western counties.

In fact, children’s books which help them understand death has not been a commonplace until the end of 1970s (Johnson, 2004). While, today, more and more books are widely
accepted and win a reputation, as well as awards (Corr, 2000). Furthermore, it is recommended by grief counselors for its special role of helping children walk through the experience of loss and educating children about the basic facts of life and death (Johnson, 1999; Polak, 2007; Bailis, 1978; Davis, 1986). Besides, researchers have found that those literatures also work on adults, influencing their concepts of death and healing their psychological and emotional wound. Sometimes, it is even more effective than adults’ literature (Schiaappa, Gregg and Hewes, 2004).

4. The Analysis of Three Death-themed Picture Books

As for the presented form of death information, Poling and Hupp (2008) has made an investigation and gives a conclusion that it presents differently between books. Picture books are more suitable for younger children, which requires the engagement of both children and parents (Fletcher and Reese, 2005), whereas storybooks are mainly targeted at older children, who can read independently without collaboratively communicating with adults. In the following part, three death-themed picture books will be analyzed in details to see how does the picture book deal with the subject of death, as well as the similarities and differences among those three books.

The first picture book is Duck, Death and the Tulip written by German author and illustrator Wolf Erlbruch in the year of 2007. It tells a story between a duck and one who has been following her all her life, named Death. One day, she finds the death are creeping behind her. Without panic, she welcomes it as a friend. They play together, going for a walk, swimming in the pond, climbing a tree, and they discuss life, death and what the afterlife would be like. The duck reports some views he has heard from other ducks that they will become angles and sit on clouds, looking down on earth. Death replies him, saying it is possible since he already has wings. Then, he asks: is there a place deep in the earth to exclusively roast bad guys. But Death says he does not know. In the end, the duck dies due to an illness, and Death carries her to the great river, placing the duck gently on the water and laying a tulip on her chest. He stands by the riverside for a long time until the duck is lost to sight. He is even moved by her passing. But that is life.

The second book is from Susan Varley, a native of Blackpool, England. Actually, Badger’s Parting Gifts is the first book she has written and illustrated for children. This story happens in the forest between the badger and his friends. Badger is very old, and he knows he would be died soon. But he is not afraid of death but worrying that his friends would feel sad when he’s not around them. One day, he sits on his chair, dreaming that he is running towards a long tunnel, fast but with no pain. He feels free and happy. The following day, his friends discover that he has died and left them forever. Then they find the note that he has left for them, which only says, “Go on the long tunnel, bye bye, Badger”. His friends are desperately unhappy since they love Badger so much. When spring comes, the white snow covers the countryside but does not conceal the grief of Badger’s death. When spring comes, all the animals gather together and talk about the happy times they spent with Badger. He taught a mole to paper-cut, taught a frog to skate, taught a fox to knot the tie and taught a rabbit to make delicious gingerbread. Everyone had a good memory with him, and they realized those happy memories are the best gift Badger left for them.

The last one is also a Germany picture book, named Is Grandpa Wearing a Suit?, text by Amelie Fried, illustration by Jacky Gleich. The story is about a little boy named Bruno, who experienced the death of his grandfather. The writer starts to tell from the funeral, at which Bruno see his grandpa wearing a suit and lying in the coffin with eyes closed. He even does not know his grandpa is just sleeping or has really died. When he asks the adults where is his grandpa, they say he has gone to the heaven/hell, which makes him more confused. After the funeral, the mourners gather together and have a meal, sharing lots of funny stories about his grandpa. Bruno just can’t understand why there was never a celebration like this while grandpa was alive. Then he back to grandpa’s room, which looks the same but tidier. “Has grandpa back?” Bruno thought himself. As times pass by, his feelings change. Firstly, he is angry with his grandfather for not teaching him fishing. When he realizes grandpa would never back, he cries for the first time. Time moves on, the life backs to normal and a new baby joins the big family. Bruno does not feel hurt when thinking of grandpa, but smile happily just like grandpa smiles in the photo.

All of three picture books are fictions, dealing with death, but in different ways. The first two stories are telling through animals, like the duck and the badger, while the last one is framed through human’s perspective. Animal story is a very common and popular storytelling device in almost every culture throughout the history. Writers like to assign animals with human traits, emotions and personalities, which is called anthropomorphism. One of the reasons is that they do not have to rationalize their behaviors that are fixed in human societies. What is more, they can transcend and keep a distance from dangerous and powerful forces or situations that are afraid in real life (Burke, Copenhaver and Carpenter, 2004). In other words, they talk about a harsh topic, like the death issue, in a more acceptable and gender way for not scaring the children but comforting and inspiring them. The duck’s and the badger’ death is far from children’s real life. Even though kids are still feeling sad, but they may not be terribly scared. Human’s story has a strong sense of reality. All the circumstance and figures in story are the prototype in real life. Therefore, younger readers may have an illusion that the character do exist in the real life. What happens to him may also happen to them one day. Therefore, Amelie has taken advantage of this to describe what is Bruno’s life be, and how does his emotion change after his grandpa’s death, on the purpose of providing a reference or guidance to readers who have experienced the death of relatives. To sum up, both the animal and the human are appropriate medium to convey the death theme. What really matters are the plots between characters.

Even though they are all related to the issue of death, the tackling ways are various. In Duck, Death and the Tulip, the author attempts to make death accessible and open to children and tell them death is a natural and normal thing for everyone. It follows you all your life since you were born. And there is no need to panic when death comes. When the duck realizes...
the death is after him, he stays calm and even makes friends with him. When the day comes, the duck just lay quiet and stop breathing. That’s life! Everyone would die. The writer has done so well to soften the harsh reality of death to a natural thing. However, it still might be hard for young kids who are not old enough to accept the truth that they will die someday. So, this book might be more suitable for older children or adults, who have already had some knowledge about death. Badger’s parting gifts is a warm story, which not focusing on the truth of death but the meaning of life. Badger has been so good when he is alive, so all the friends are missing him after he die. On the one hand, it tells the reader to be kind with friends and families when they alive, just like the badger. On the other hand, it teaches the reader that when they really miss the deceased, they can try to recall the good memories with him/her, thus they will not be overwhelmed by grief. And their beloved one will live on through the warm and lovely memories. Is Grandpa Wearing a Suit? is a story that closest to real life. The death of grandparents is the most common and possibly the first death-related experiences that children might encounter (Corr, 2004). Out of the deep love between grandparents and grand-son/daughter and the lack of experience, child would be too hard to accept both from cognition and emotion. Therefore, some external help are of great importance. Those help can come from parents, children’s literature, or both. This story presents death and grieving in an honest and upfront way: the wake with an open coffin, the funeral procession and service, and the burial as well as the emotions the family experiences in the months after Grandpa’s death. There is no dramatic creation but nearly real scene to make the reader feels Bruno is like a friend of him/her who lives in a corner of the world like themselves. Next time when they encounter beloved’s death, they know they will be fine like Bruno.

Since those three are picture books, which are different from story books decorated with only one or two pictures, images are as equal as the text to carry important information (Nodelman, 1998). Color, typeface, artistic style, and the size and placements of illustrations will give the reader clues about mood, setting, character, and pacing (Schwartz, 1982). Also, the pictorial language conveys meaning of the culture in which the artist lives and works (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). The following part will shed light on illustrations to see how does them accord with the death theme.

In Duck, Death and the Tulip, generally speaking, the illustration does not deliver a strong sense of scare but a sense of tranquility since the color in this book is in a mild tune. The background is white without border, on which the duck is in the color of cream similar to the color of a real duck’s feather. The use of color in picture books can take the place of adjectives in the text. The quality of the line, which is soft and smooth, also establishes a tone of peace. Death, the other main character in this story, has been conceptualized to the image of skeleton. Possibly considering that a whole set of skeletons might be horrible for children, the illustrator gives him a smock as well as slippers, in order to release the fear, at the same time, to personalize Death as someone who can communicate with the duck. To some extent, the illustration has neutralized the terrible atmosphere of death. In Badger’s Parting Gifts, the illustrator is aquarelle painting with bright and abundant colors, which creates a cheerful and comfortable atmosphere. Also, all the animals are wearing human clothes, which looks interesting and shortens the distance between figures and the reader. When talking about badger’s death, the writer just said he went to a very long channel. This channel has been painted as normal as any other underground passage and the badge run towards the other side of the channel, leaving his walking stick behind. Even the death page is not scaring at all. The painting and writing are coincident with each other, presenting a beautiful and meaningful story about death. By contrast, the illustrations of Is Grandpa Wearing a Suit? are quite unusual, which full of browns, ocre’s and golds, with the odd splash of red, as well as hatching and cross hatching. The pictures are somber and textured and somewhat old-European in style, adding a depressing atmosphere to the story. People in the story are painted in unusual perspective, for example, the boy Bruno is in a very small size, which implies the vulnerable and sensitive heart of kids. By contrast, adults are painted very tall and big, with exaggerated facial expressions, which shows their sophistication and their indifference of others’ death. Grandpa, who has already died, is wearing a suit and a pair of black leather shoes, lying in the coffin. And the coffin is placed at a graveyard, waiting to be buried. This is the real scene happens in a funeral. Instead of hiding, the illustrator presents them in a real state. They unveil the mystery of the death in order to relieve children from their own guess and self-frightening.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the death theme does exist in children’s literature with a tremendous amount. And most of them are proved to have an educational function. They may provide important models for young readers concerning how to cope with death. However, when dealing with the death topic for young audience, the writer should refer to children’s psychological and emotional conditions and process the death topic in an acceptable and inspiring form.

References

[47] Ye Shengtao, 1922, the Scarecrow, Children’s world.