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Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of death in children's literature from three different perspectives. Firstly, it explores how authors approached the topic during the Victorian era when death was an everyday reality due to rampant diseases. Secondly, it analyzes how authors depict death in different ways, including involuntary death, the pursuit of the sublime, and the nature of life cycle. Thirdly, it explores how authors address children's psychological states when dealing with death, including reducing pre-death pain, using poetic expression, promoting healing from grief, and associating memory loss with death. Finally, the author creates a children's book that confronts the author's own fear of death and the loss of loved ones.

In conclusion, this thesis highlights the evolution of the portrayal of death in children's literature, from avoiding the topic altogether to acknowledging it as an inevitable reality. The contemporary approach focuses on alleviating children's fear of death and guiding them through the grieving process with healing words and images, emphasizing love, resilience, and memory.

FROM AVOIDANCE TO HEALING: THE PORTRAYAL OF DEATH
IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By
Jiayun Xu

B.F.A., School of Visual Arts, 2020

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

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I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my family, friends, and loved ones for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my academic journey. Their emotional support has been instrumental in keeping me motivated, especially during the challenging times.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge myself for my perseverance and resilience during the difficult times of the pandemic. I relied on the memories of my grandparents and drew inspiration from their love to keep moving forward.

There were countless moments where I shed tears, but giving up was never an option. I want to share a quote from Rabindranath Tagore's work *Stray Birds*, "If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars." This quote has inspired me to stay focused on the beauty around me, even during the darkest moments.

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Introduction

I recall the first time I faced death when I was five. I saw a small orange fish in a fishbowl, wiggling its tail and struggling to stay afloat in the water. I was puzzled as to why the goldfish was not swimming normally and my mother explained that it had died due to a lack of oxygen in the water. This experience made me understand that all living things need oxygen to survive. After that, I did not have another pet until I was thirteen. I took great care of the rabbit, which I loved so much, and it would hop and skip after me. However, one day I found the rabbit lying still in its cage. When I touched its body, it was no longer soft and pliable but had become stiff. My mother informed me that it had died without any further explanation. This sudden and unforeseen loss of life caused me to feel fear and worry about death. My grandmother tried to console me by saying that if I cried loudly when she (my grandma) passed away, I might be able to bring her back. The thought of losing her still haunts me and I fear the day when I might forget the good memories of spending time with her, including her voice, scent, and possessions. My biggest fear is not death itself, but the loss of memories that it brings.

Death is a universal experience that we all must face at some point. It can be a confusing and thought-provoking topic for people of all ages, but especially for children who may be facing the loss of loved ones or pets for the first time. The fear of death and psychological avoidance are common human reactions, and adults often believe that children have a heightened fear of death due to their developmental stage and lack of understanding. As a result, discussing death with children is often seen as a sensitive topic that needs to be handled with care to protect their mental health. However, it is essential to recognize that children have exposure to and experience death earlier than adults thought. It is crucial to provide children with the proper guidance and support to help them understand and cope with their experiences with death.

This thesis will explore how death is depicted in children's literature from three perspectives, using works from the 19th to 21st centuries and from various periods, approaches, and age groups. The first perspective will focus on the Victorian era, when diseases like scarlet fever, diphtheria, and cholera were rampant, and death was a daily reality for children and adults. Victorian writers approached death in children's literature by creating stories where good children never died or describing the afterlife as a detached world free from earthly problems. As science and medical treatment improved, the death rate declined in the 20th century, but death remained an important theme in children's literature. The second perspective of the thesis will examine how authors handle death in different ways, such as involuntary death, the pursuit of the sublime, and the nature of life cycle. The third perspective will explore how authors address children's psychological states when dealing with death, including reducing pre-death pain, using poetic expression, promoting healing from grief, and associating memory loss with death. By examining and exploring different viewpoints on the topic, I intend to apply the findings of my research to the creation of a children's book that will assist me in confronting my personal apprehension about the end of life and losing those who are dear to me. This book will focus on how to overcome grief after a loved one's death and offer a meaningful way for me to process my emotions and experiences while also assisting young readers in understanding and coping with similar challenges. Through the creation of this book, I hope to not only confront my fears but also inspire others to do the same.

Different ways of dealing with death in Western children's literature in different periods

Chinese children's literature emerged later in the 1990s and had a slower development compared to Western children's literature. As a result, this paper focuses only on Western children's literature. However, the concept of childhood is similar in both Western and Eastern cultures.

Neil Postman's book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, published in 1982, argues that childhood is a social artifact, not a biological category (Postman 13). Prior to the invention of the printing press, children and adults shared the same cultural world, and there was no separate concept of childhood. With the spread of literacy and the dominance of words, a cultural gap emerged between adults and children, resulting in the creation of a separate category for children. Children were seen as "half man" or halfway between being a child and an adult, leading to the development of the concept of childhood.

In the 18th century, during the Romantic era, there was a growing emphasis on the idea that children are pure and innocent and need to be nurtured and protected. This concept was popularized by the Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who referred to the idea of "Romantic children." This idea of childhood quickly spread from the western world to other parts of the globe and became a widely accepted cultural ideal. As a result, society began to prioritize the protection of children from dangers that were thought to exist only in the adult world. This was particularly evident in children's literature, which served as a vehicle for promoting positive values and attitudes towards children. The theme of children's literature is often defined by the audience, and therefore, the social attitudes toward children and their experiences play a crucial role in shaping the literature that is produced.

One of the critical aspects of this protectionist attitude towards children is the desire to shield them from the idea of death, which is seen as a particularly adult concern. This phenomenon is evident in children's literature, where themes of adventure and fantasy are often employed to help children deal with difficult or scary situations without exposing them to the harsh realities of the adult world. Overall, the Romantic era's emphasis on childhood innocence

and purity had a significant impact on the way society views and treats children, and this influence is still evident in contemporary children's literature.

Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, published in 1976, explores the psychological significance of fairy tales. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales use symbolism as a primary technique to help children cope with their inner emotional conflicts during their early stages of psychological development (Bettelheim 12). These stories guide children's growth and help them learn to control their emotions and reasoning capabilities in the future. Furthermore, fairy tales teach children how to deal with the relationship between their inner thoughts and the real world, helping them develop a healthy and well-rounded personality (Bettelheim 25).

In the 19th century, many writers avoided portraying the death of children in literature, possibly in response to the harsh realities of the Victorian era. The difficult social environment of the time meant that numerous families struggled to maintain a steady income. Low wages forced many children to work. During the British Industrial Revolution, they were often employed in hazardous and long-term jobs due to their small bodies, which could fit into narrow spaces that adults could not access. For instance, children were tasked with collecting debris from heavy machinery, and cleaning soot from narrow chimneys. Other children worked by running errands such as shining shoes, selling matches, flowers, and other cheap goods. In addition to child labor, poor healthcare and sanitation contributed to the rapid spread of disease. Death from disease was an unavoidable reality for both adults and children. As author Pamela Horn notes in her book *The Victorian Town Child*, "In 1848, Lord Ashley referred to more than thirty thousand 'naked, filthy, roaming lawless and deserted children, in and around the metropolis!'"

The harsh realities of the 19th century, including child labor, poor healthcare, and disease outbreaks, led writers to create fictional worlds where child protagonists could survive in

dangerous circumstances or experience death in a glorified way. Neil Postman argued that childhood was an invention of the modern world, and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen exemplified this idea. Although both books were published in the 19th century, the Brothers Grimm reflected old-fashioned notions of childhood, while Hans Christian Andersen promoted new ones. The Grimm's fairy tales often featured stories with a happy ending, where virtue was rewarded and evil was punished, and magic was used to ensure the child protagonist's eternal happiness. In contrast, many of the main characters in Andersen's fairy tales die at the end, leaving a sense of regret. Andersen darkly implied that such happiness was unattainable in the real world. To illustrate this point, this paper will compare *Hansel and Gretel* (1812) in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* with *The Little Match Girl* (1845) in *Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales*.

Due to their family's low income, Hansel and Gretel were abandoned by their stepmother and left to fend for themselves in the forest. Despite the numerous obstacles they faced, the siblings relied on each other for support and managed to overcome each challenge. Hansel and Gretel defeated the old witch who lived in a house made of candy and cookies, and who entrapped and threatened them. They were always met with unexpected miracles that aided them along the way: snow-white birds that guided them to the house made of sweets and kind animals that helped them cross the river. Finally, the story concludes with the children returning home with their jewels, their wicked stepmother no longer a threat, and a happy life waiting for them with their father, who missed them dearly. Overall, the clever children were rewarded with happy endings while the villains were punished with death.

The Little Match Girl (1845) takes place in a similar setting to *Hansel and Gretel* (1812), with the little girl coming from a poor and hungry family. The little girl's mother was sick, her

father abused her, and she was bullied by the other children who kicked her shoes around. Additionally, the little girl's grandmother, the only person who loved her, had already passed away. Unlike Hansel and Gretel, there was no magical intervention or the company of animal friends to help the little girl. Tragically, she died alone on New Year's Eve, as she burned one match after another for warmth. Overall, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* tend to present a more idealized and optimistic view of death, while *Andersen's Fairy Tales* often explore the darker, more realistic aspects of mortality.

When children's literature developed into the 20th and 21st centuries, writers began to show that death is an inescapable subject of life for children. Usually, the protagonists reach the end of their lifespan calmly. For example, E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) portrays Charlotte the spider passing away peacefully and alone after fulfilling her promise to befriend and save the pig Wilbur. Charlotte's death is part of the inevitable cycle of life, as she completed her task of conceiving the next generation. The author narrates her death in a calm tone, neither evading nor exaggerating, providing rational answers and emotional comfort: " 'Good-bye!' she whispered. Then she summoned all her strength and waved one of her front legs at him. She never moved again ... Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a gray spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died."

(White 226)

The aforementioned examples illustrate that the representation of death in children's literature has undergone significant transformations influenced by various social environments and temporal changes. In the early fairy tales, Grimms' fairy tales created a fictional world of magic to protect children's innocence and avoid confronting death, which was mainly depicted as a form of punishment for the villain. Although Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales allowed

children to face death, he blended reality with Christian religious beliefs, presenting death as a peaceful relief and an elevation of personal values rather than a sinful act. In modern children's literature, death is often portrayed as a natural and peaceful process that is an integral part of life. This shift in perspective may reflect changing societal attitudes and values towards death, as well as a greater awareness of children's mental health. Contemporary children's literature focuses more on conveying the significance of family, friendship, and life amidst the theme of death, emphasizing the importance of human empathy and emotional bonds. In the next section, this thesis will examine how the theme of death has been progressively portrayed in Western children's literature since Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales.

Different types of death in Western children's literature

The description of "Death" in children's literature is not uncommon. It can be broadly divided into four categories.

The first and most common type of death portrayed in children's literature is involuntary, such as in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*, which depicts death resulting from poverty, illness, hunger, and cold. The story follows a seven-year-old girl who froze to death on a cold New Year's Eve while wandering through the streets barefoot and bareheaded. Andersen's detailed and straightforward narration portrays the suffering of the little girl in a poignant manner: "In the cold and gloom, a poor little girl, bareheaded and barefoot, was walking through the streets... Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along, a picture of misery, poor little girl!" (Andersen 354)

The little girl's business was poor on that day, and she had not eaten for a day. Despite her dire situation, she dared not return home as she feared her father's beatings. She also felt guilty for not selling enough matches to pay for her mother's medical expenses. Seeking warmth, she lit

the matches one by one, which revealed visions of exquisite cutlery, steaming food, and a lovely Christmas tree, reminding her of the class differences in society.

Knowing that she was going to die, the little girl felt no fear as her grandmother had told her that "when a star falls, a soul ascends to God." (Andersen 355) She lit all the matches at once and saw her grandmother's spirit, who embraced her, and they flew away "in brightness and joy above the earth, very, very high, and up there was neither cold, nor hunger, nor care—they were with God!" Andersen portrays death as a beautiful moment to be reunited with loved ones and a release from the suffering of society, which can be interpreted as a Christian message that the suffering and sacrifice in life can lead to a better afterlife. Though she was "quite red and blue with the cold" at the beginning of the story, the little girl died with rosy cheeks and a smile on her face (Andersen 356).

The second type of death portrayed in literature is when life is willingly given up for a noble cause. In Hans Christian Andersen's original version of *The Little Mermaid* (1837), the little mermaid was different from other mermaids. She was not satisfied with the status quo under the sea and yearned for life on land. She often floated out of the sea to observe the land, and the more she saw, the more miraculous it seemed. The little mermaid wanted to become human, not only because the world of humans was much grander than the world of mermaids, but also because humans have an immortal soul that mermaids cannot possess. She understood that she was a "lower creature" and wanted to pursue a higher spiritual realm. However, the little mermaid's grandmother told her that mermaids have a lifespan of three hundred years, but they do not have an immortal soul. The only way for her to obtain an immortal soul was to get a human's whole love and faithfulness. Therefore, the little mermaid made a deal with the witch to

give up her beautiful voice and endure every step like the cut of a knife, to come to land in order to win the love of the prince and thus obtain an immortal soul.

However, the story was not as smooth as the little mermaid had hoped for. The prince would soon marry another, and then, the little mermaid would become foam on the water. The little mermaid's sisters used their beautiful hair to exchange for a knife with the witch. They told the little mermaid that as long as she killed the prince, she could resume her original form and return to the bottom of the sea and her family. Out of the little mermaid's love for the prince, but also out of her pursuit of an immortal soul, she chose to give up her life and turned into a bubble in the sea. Despite this, Andersen provides an afterlife for the little mermaid, where her suffering and loyalty allow her to become a daughter of the air.

"The daughters of the air have likewise no immortal soul, but they can make themselves one through good deeds... You, poor little mermaid, have striven with your whole heart after the goal we pursue, you have suffered and endured: you have by good works raised yourself to the world of spirits, and can gain an immortal soul after three hundred years."

The Little Mermaid gave her life for her faith and pursuit of human love, and at the moment she made her choice, her spiritual world already had a self-awareness. The Little Mermaid understood what she really wanted and completed her self-realization at the moment of turning into bubbles.



Fig.1 Francis D. Bedford, *To Die will be an awfully big adventure*, ink, 1911 Edition Of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

The third type of death imagines death as another big adventure. *Peter Pan* (1911) written by J. M. Barrie, was published in England. It tells the tale of a child who refuses to grow up and represents childhood that never fades. However, the story has a darker side related to death. The first sentence of the book states, "All children, except one, grow up," a characteristic that is thought to have arisen from Barrie's personal experience of losing his brother David, which had a profound impact on him. He created Peter, a fairytale character, to honor his brother and preserve him in childhood forever. Peter Pan is depicted as a character who appears when children pass

away; he goes with them a part of the way so that they are not scared (Barrie 7). The author often refers to the element of death in various ways throughout the book. The lost boys are the children who fall from their baby carriages when the nanny is not paying attention (Barrie 29). If they are not claimed in seven days, they are taken far away to Neverland to cover the expenses. The description of the children falling from their carriages suggests that they might have faced death. The pirates and Captain Hook appear as adults, forming oppositional relationships with the children in the story, whom they fight and chase. During the chase, there is often a ticking crocodile. As long as the ticking sound is heard, it makes Captain Hook afraid.

"Not of crocodiles," Hook corrected him, "but of that one crocodile." He lowered his voice. "It liked my arm so much, Smee, that it has followed me ever since, from sea to sea and from land to land, licking its lips for the rest of me." ... "Some day," said Smee, "the clock will run down, and then he'll get you." (Barrie 59)

Captain Hook's fear of crocodiles is a fear of death, while the alarm clock ticking represents time. Thus, based on the original description, the ticking crocodile was a combination of death and time, and Hook believed that the crocodile was his inevitable fate. Peter can fly, fight, and speak the mermaid's language. When he faces death, he finally seems afraid, but he says, "To die will be an awfully big adventure."

The last type of death is death as the cycle of life. As mentioned in the first few chapters of this thesis paper, the book *Charlotte's Web* (1952) by E.B. White is a classic masterpiece on friendship, love and death in the realm of children's literature. The story centers around two unlikely friends: a naturally skinny piglet and a subtle gray spider. The most apparent theme of the book is their unwavering, loyal friendship, willing to make sacrifices for each other. Charlotte was the perfect friend that everyone desires. Additionally, the story explores the theme

of death and accepting it. In the beginning chapters, Fern rescues the premature spring pig, Wilbur, which marked his first escape from death.

Later, Wilbur faces his second encounter with death when he is sold to Fern's uncle's farm. It's at this point that Charlotte weaves a web to promise Wilbur her friendship. As the story unfolds, Charlotte spins a word on her web, making Wilbur a unique pig. Charlotte stays with Wilbur until her death and saves his life many times. Although Charlotte helps rescue Wilbur from death, she couldn't avoid her own. She spent her life spinning webs and told Wilbur that, without him, her life would have been meaningless, and she would have lived it as an ordinary spider, following a routine and weaving webs to catch mosquitoes. Through her friendship with Wilbur, Charlotte recognized her unique value.

"You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that." (White 164)

With the help of the rat Templeton, Wilbur was able to do something on his own in the end - saving Charlotte's children. When Charlotte finally died alone in the empty market, Wilbur left with a group of new lives. The continuation of these new lives represents the continuation of the bond between Wilbur and Charlotte. In *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White uses pithy and powerful language to show how Wilbur gradually accepts and faces his fears of death, change, and loneliness.

Contemporary ways of describing death in children's books for age group 3-8 in the 20th-21st centuries

According to the article *A Child's Concept of Death* published on *stanfordchildrens.org*, it is clear that preschoolers, school-age children, and teens have different perceptions of death as different age groups. Preschool children think of "death" as sleeping or going to a distant place to play and that the person who dies is only temporarily gone, not completely disappeared. Dying is like sleeping, a break in life rather than an end. Death is also viewed as reversible to preschool children, as in cartoons. School-age children already know that death means the end of life. They are concerned about someone else's death; where did he go? What else can become of him? Why does he have to die? Because of the death of others, they are fearful and upset. Teenagers already know that death is inevitable throughout life, that it happens to everyone, and that it naturally includes the fact that they will die one day. They have begun to see death not as an external force but as an inevitable phenomenon inherent in life. Focusing on the preschool and early school age group of 3 to 8 years old, this paper examines the different techniques authors use to deal with the theme of death in children's books written for this age group.

As one of the greatest creative innovations in the 20th century ("Why Did so Many Mid-Century Designers Make Children's Books?" n.p.), children's picture books have become an important part of the children's literature market. Children's books are invaluable because they aid in the development of a child's personality and social skills. Children at every stage should read good literature appropriate to their age. In the article *What Makes a Children's Book Good?* published in *The New Yorker*, a good book for children is educational or nutritive, socially conscious, timely and relevant (Gidwitz, n.p.). For Bruno Bettelheim, a good children's book should have psychological value,

"promote [the child's] ability to find meaning in life. . . . It must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him." (Bettelheim 5)

Children's books on death-related topics have educational significance, psychological counseling value, and a social aspect. Different children's books deal with death with different descriptions.



Fig.2 Christian Robinson, *The Dead Bird*, traditional media and Photoshop, By Margaret Wise Brown, HAPPER, Newly Illustrated Edition, 2016

The Dead Bird by Margaret Wise Brown is for children at 4-7 years. The story began with such descriptions "it was still warm and its eyes were closed... but there was no heart beating." It was a dead bird, that was how children knew it was dead. And then, the bird got cold and the body grew stiff. This description is consistent with the perception of death for children of that age, but then the author makes a game out of "death." The children bury the dead bird in the

earth, cover its body with leaves and flowers, make a tombstone out of rocks and begin to sing around it with a smile (e.g. fig.2).

Oh bird you're dead

You'll never fly again

Way up high

With other birds on the sky

We sing to you because you're dead

Feather bird

And we buried you

In the ground

With ferns and flowers

Because you will never fly

Again in the sky

Way up high

Little dead bird.

They began to cry, and they replaced the bird's gravestone with new flowers and grass every day until they gradually forgot about the bird's death. In the story, Margaret Wise Brown tells about the children's awareness of death. The children know that death is the end of life because the heart stops, the body is cold and stiff, and they cry because they feel sorry that the bird can no longer fly. The author alleviates the pain and fear of death by transforming the entire process of a funeral into an imitation game. This approach also reveals children's respect for life and sensitivity to death, even though it might appear playful since little children often struggle to comprehend the realities of death.

An adult's feelings and fears about death are often transferred to his or her children. One such story is told in Charlotte Moundlic's storybook *The Scar*, which is about a child who is experiencing death and needs proper guidance and reassurance to avoid wrong ways of responding. The author uses the first person to tell the story of the young boy's emotional changes and experiences after the death of his mother (e.g. fig.3). The logic of the story is based on the description by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, which divides the process of accepting "grief" into five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

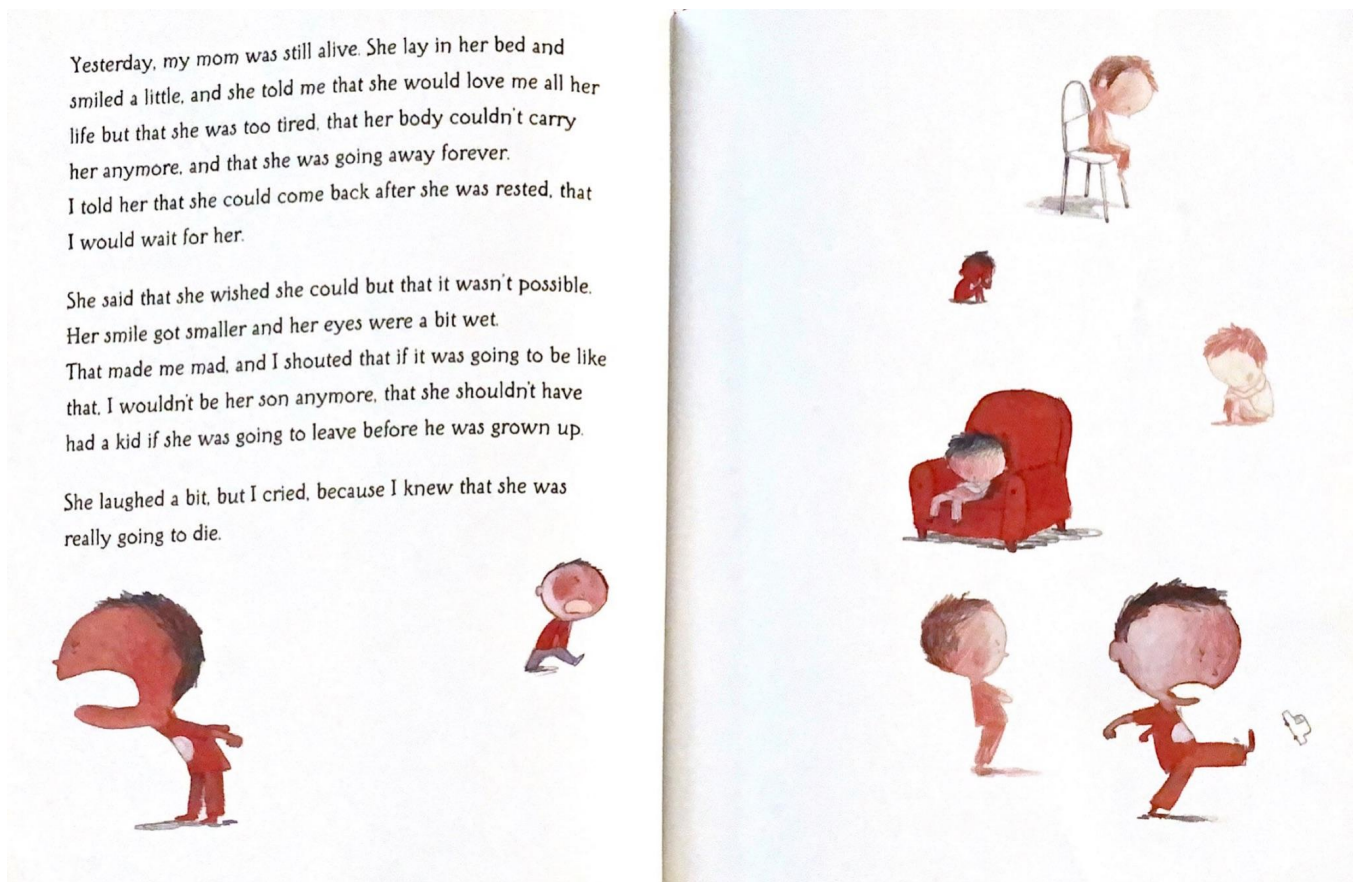


Fig.3 Olivier Tallec, *The Scar*, acrylic and pencil, By Charlotte Moundlic, CANDLEWICK PRESS, Edition 2011

The boy first felt angry because his mother had left him alone, but when he realized that his father had cried "looked like a washcloth, all crumpled and wet", he began to try various

ways to accept the fact that his mother had died. However, the process was not easy. The little boy was afraid that he would forget his mother, so he tried to retain her voice, smell, and appearance by closing the windows, closing his eyes, and covering his ears. When the young boy heard his mother's voice comforting him as usual in a daze of pain after his injury, he tried to remember her words by preventing the wound from healing. As the author narrates, the reader follows the boy's experiences and emotional ebb and flow to deeply relate to the pain of a child who has lost his mother and the fear of forgetting. It seems that death is not the worst thing for a child, but forgetting the person they loved is. The author links memory and death together. At the end of the story, the little boy learns that his mother is not gone but hidden deep in his heart. Whenever he wants to feel his mother, he lies quietly in bed and experiences his heartbeat. Charlotte Moundlic turns the entire story into a therapeutic journey, teaching children how to embrace the unbearable grief that comes with the death of a loved one.

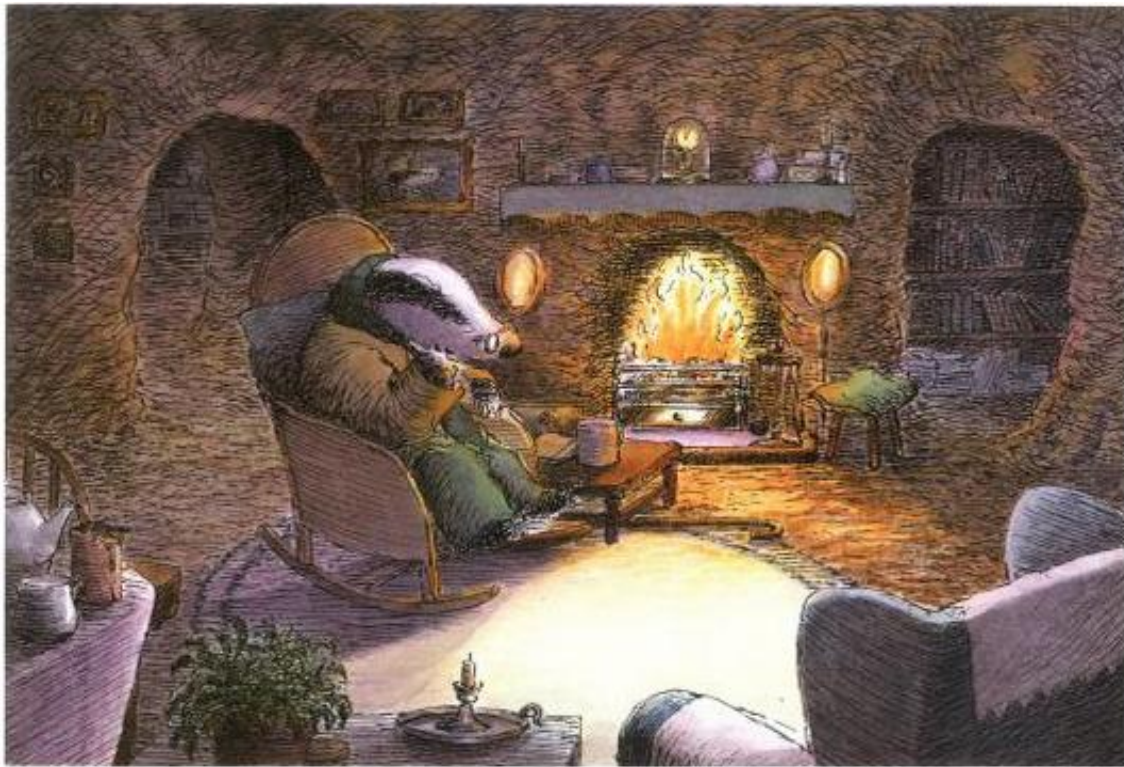


Fig.4 Susan Varley, *Badger's Parting Gifts*, pen and watercolor, published by ANDERSEN PRESS LTD. 1984

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley, begins the story with "Badger was so old that he knew he must soon die. Badger wasn't afraid of death. Dying meant only that he would leave his body behind and, as his body didn't work as well as it had on days gone by." The reader is informed that the badger was too old to dash down the hill like the Mole and the Frog, and he knew he was going to die. The badger was not afraid of death and kept an open-minded attitude toward it, but he was only worried about how his friends would feel after he left. So the badger told his friends that he would be leaving them to a long underground tunnel far away and would not appear again. The author compares death to "going down the Long Tunnel", poetically explaining the fear and unknown of death.

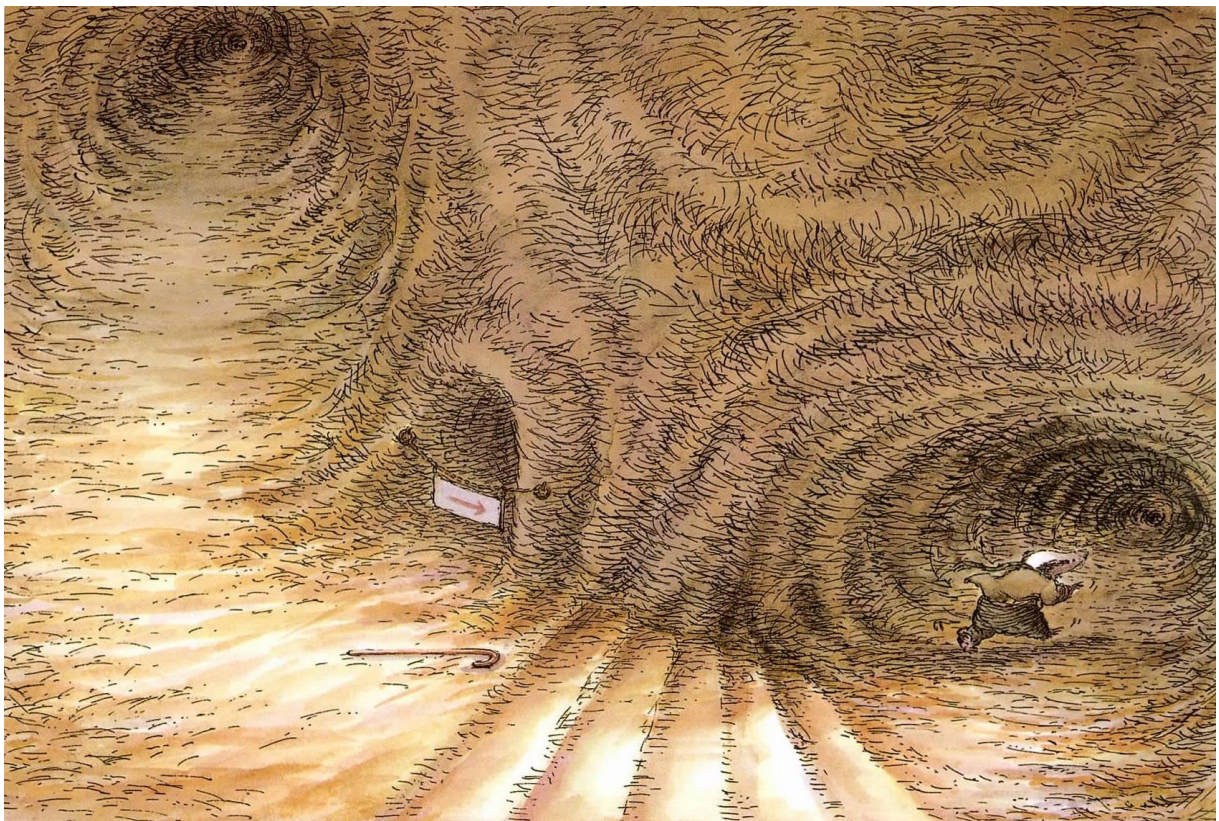


Fig.5 Susan Varley, *Badger's Parting Gifts*, pen and watercolor, published by ANDERSEN PRESS LTD. 1984

"He gently rocked himself to and fro and soon was fast asleep having a strange yet wonderful dream like none he'd ever had before." One night, the badger said good night to the

moon and drew the curtains. He leaned over the fire and fell asleep in his rocking chair. The badger had a beautiful dream that he had never had before, and he left this world with ease in his sleep. The author portrayed the badger's death to the child as if he was "fast asleep" and depicted it in a gentle way. In this way, death was peaceful, warm, and silent, like an unprecedented dream. The author's interpretation of death in this way comforted the child's mind and saved them from the fear and panic of facing death. Moreover, the author continued by describing the dream of the badger's death, as if illustrating how the soul feels when it leaves the body. Death is not a complete disappearance or a terrible struggle, but a relief and freedom. The badger's walking stick lies on the ground, his fluttering green scarf indicates the speed of his running, and the spiral-shaped hole seems to lead to another world.(e.g. fig.5).

The badger's departure left the other animals in deep sorrow, and as winter arrived, that sorrow was buried even deeper in their hearts. The badger had always been there for them, and now they felt lost without him. When spring finally arrived, the animals gathered together and began to miss the techniques and teachings the badger had shared with them. As the snow melted away, their sadness slowly turned into warm memories. Whenever the badger was mentioned, his friends would smile, grateful for the time they had shared together.

Throughout the story, the changing seasons serve as a reminder of the passage of time. Autumn marked the countdown of the badger's life, while winter brought dark days and sadness. But with the arrival of spring, the animals found a new beginning and a way to remember their beloved friend. The changing moods of the animals reflect the healing process of their psychological scars, as they slowly come to terms with the badger's passing. Although the badger is no longer with them, his love lives on in their hearts, as they treasure the precious and

beautiful memories he left behind. The animals will always remember him with eternal respect, gratitude, and love.

Conclusion

The first chapter of this thesis explores how the portrayal of death in literature for children has evolved over time. In the eighteenth century, authors avoided confronting children with the topic of death by incorporating magical elements into their stories. However, in the nineteenth century, social circumstances changed, and authors began to acknowledge death as a reality that could not be avoided. As a result, they portrayed death as a form of release from suffering. In the twentieth century, as child mortality rates decreased, writers started to include the topic of death in various literary works and children's books. It became necessary for adults to discuss death with children and help them understand how to cope with it. Modern society no longer shies away from discussing death, but it remains a sensitive topic. Authors now focus on how to alleviate children's fear of death and guide them through the grieving process with healing words and images. Death is an inevitable part of life, and losing a loved one can be painful and unsettling. To cope with this anxiety, more content is being created that shows how the death of a person does not mean the end of the relationship with them. Love, resilience, and memory are emphasized as important ways to keep the spirit of a loved one alive. Rather than avoiding the topic of death altogether, contemporary society aims to teach children how to handle grief and express their emotions in healthy ways.

Visual Representation

The theme of death in children's books is often closely related to memory nowadays, and the stories often end with a fond memory that will always be remembered. In addition to Badger's *Parting Gifts* (1984), *The Scar* (2011) mentioned earlier, other artworks such as *Missing Mommy* (2013), *Ida, Always* (2016) and *Finn's Feather* (2018), all show readers how precious memories are. Death is no longer the end of life in these stories, and the loss of good memories takes its place as another layer of true death.

For my visual thesis, I chose to create a children's book that was inspired by my grandmother. As I've mentioned previously, I always had a fear that one day death would take her away from me, and I would gradually forget the cherished moments we shared. With this children's book, I wanted to use my art to honor her love and memories. At the beginning, while I developed the concept for the book, I thought about the sweaters, scarves, gloves, woolen socks and hats that my grandmother had knitted for me all this time. In my most vivid childhood memories, I remember my grandmother selecting wool in the summer, learning new patterns, and preparing new garments for the upcoming winter. Her knitting was not just a handwork, but also a way to express her love and dedication to me. The sweater, in particular, became a symbol of my grandmother. Whenever I started to be anxious and afraid of losing my grandmother, I would think about who would prepare warm sweaters for me every winter in the future.

When designing the main characters, I chose to use animal characters. Animal characters are very common in children's literature and picture books for reasons other than the fact that cute animals attract children's attention. According to the article "Little Darlings: Should Your Picture Book Characters Be Animals or Children?" (Heather, n.p.), the advantages of using

animals as characters include the fact that animals don't have ages, don't need guardians, have wonderful features, and create a safe emotional distance.

First, because animals do not have a specific gender or age appearance, when I created the character of Bunny, her age would change as the reader imagined. When the reader is five years old, they will think the main character is also a five-year-old bunny, and similarly, when the reader is eight years old, the bunny will also become eight years old. Second, using animals as protagonists eliminates the need for guardians or parents to be present. In my story, the bunny who loses her grandmother needs to go through a growth process of self-discovery and healing, so the presence of parents or other guardians is not necessary. I wanted the story to proceed in a self-healing way, rather than forcing the use of other adults' strengths or skills to solve the problem.



Fig.6 Jiayun Xu, *Grandma's Gift*, digital work. 2023

In addition, animal characters have interesting or exaggerated characteristics. For example, when small animals feel emotional or scared, their fur becomes fluffy, and when they feel nervous, their ears straighten or droop. So when the bunny's emotions start to fluctuate in the

story, the shape of her ears changes and becomes curved (e.g. fig.6) to show sadness or worry. The last important point is that when my theme is related to death, animal characters can ease the anxiety that young readers feel. In order to show that the bunny's love and fond memories of her grandmother are beginning to blur with the passage of time, I used a sweater that was fraying at the seams (e.g. fig.7). From the moment the little Bunny noticed a loose thread on her sweater, she knew she was in for a big problem.



Fig.7 Jiayun Xu, *Grandma's Gift*, digital work. 2023

As a sensitive individual, I have always had a keen eye for detail and an innate ability to capture the intricacies of everyday life. I infuse my illustrations with stories and memories that have shaped my life. My hope is that they connect with readers on an emotional level and have the power to heal. This is why I chose to create a wordless picture book, which was a challenge for me to convey a complete story solely through the images and atmosphere. To guide the plot, I used the Kübler-Ross model, which I learned from *The Scar* (Moundlic). The main character, little Bunny, initially denies that her sweater is unraveling, reflecting the denial stage of grief. As

she becomes more aware of the fraying threads, she experiences a range of emotions, including anger and loneliness. My ultimate goal is to convey the emotional power of art through my work, not only to children but also to adults.



Fig.8 Jiayun Xu, *Grandma's Gift*, digital work. 2023

I used white backgrounds in the first half of the story to convey this sense of isolation (e.g. fig.8), which gradually changes as little Bunny's emotions become more intense. While the story explores themes of death and forgetfulness, I wanted to convey hope and healing through the use of soft color tones and warm hues.

In the story, the bunny is going through a period of grief and is preoccupied with the thought of losing her beloved sweater. As a result, she fails to notice other small items in her surroundings that were left behind by her grandmother, such as the beaded tissue box that reappears multiple times throughout the story (e.g. fig.9), socks, scarves, and bunny-shaped slippers. To hint that these items were also made by the grandmother, I have used the same colors as the sweater.



Fig.9 Jiayun Xu, *Grandma's Gift*, digital work. 2023

The story takes a positive turn when little Bunny discovers a closet full of brand new sweaters that her grandmother had lovingly prepared for her. At the end of the story, little Bunny begins to learn how to knit herself and finds comfort in the thought of passing on her grandmother's legacy. Through little Bunny's realization and acceptance, the story conveys the idea that memories and love can live on through our actions and the things we create. Grandma's love is passed on, and the time and skill injected into the sweater itself is what makes the sweater the most precious thing. As the author, the story holds great personal and emotional significance for me as I also fear death and the loss of cherished memories that comes with death. Creating this work allowed me to come to terms with my emotions and find healing. Through exploring children's literature, I have learned to accept the sadness of death and the inevitability of it, while also finding comfort in the beauty around me. The little Bunny finds a way to overcome her grief and becomes brave with the help of her grandmother's love, in the same way that I am strengthened by my Grandma's love.

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