THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

THE PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IN CHILDREN'S

LITERATURE SINCE 1930

by

ELEANOR LOUISE SMITH

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THE PORTRAYAL OF DEATH IN CHILDREN'S
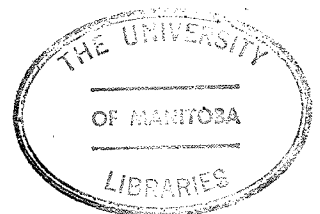
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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to systematically
examine death portrayal in children's literature. The
sample consisted of 40 books listed under the heading
death/fiction in three current children's book catalogues.
The independent variables were date of publication and
the reading level of the books. The dependent variables
were frequency and types of death words used in the books
examined. Five categories of circumstances associated with
death were also specified. A method of content analysis
was adapted from previously established procedures used in
the study of children's literature. The 40 sample books
were independently coded by three trained coders. The
expected change from early to late published books was
obtained only in the grief reaction category. Early books
portrayed more protest reactions of grief, later published
books showed more of the acceptance stage. Examination of
the reading level of the sample books indicated a signifi-
cant increase in the middle years books in both frequency
and types of death words used and significant differences
were observed in the causality of death. In the primary
books 57% of the deaths were due to illness accompanied by
old age and 33% did not state a cause. On the other hand,
all but one of the middle years books gave the cause of

death and 50% of the deaths were attributed to external

causes such as accidents. The limitations of the data,

namely, the impact of pictorial media, the confounds of

word count data, and the availability of early published

books were discussed.

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CHAPTER 1

Death has a definite place in the world of the young
child. He encounters death on television, he finds dead
bugs on the street, and may even experience a pet's
death. As he ponders this inevitable fact of life his
curiosity is aroused. Thus, the question of how to help
a child understand death and the feelings it evokes becomes
an important issue.

In the past, our society has been death-avoiding and
death-denying, an attitude which could be observed in
adults' evasive responses to children's questions regarding
death. How might adults overcome this conspiracy of silence
in their interactions with children on the topic of death?
Books may provide one avenue of both increasing adult
cognizance and of leading the child to an awareness of
varied attitudes towards life and death.

The concern of this study was to examine how death
is portrayed in children's literature. As McClelland
(1961) points out, children's stories are "projective and
tend to reflect the motives and values of the culture in
the way they are told in their themes or plots" (p. 77).
Hence, through an examination of how death has been por-
trayed in children's books over the past two hundred years,
changes in societal attitudes toward death were expected

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to become apparent. The review of literature begins with
an examination of Early American attitudes towards death
and of critics' interpretations of how death has been por-
trayed in American society. The child's ability to compre-
hend the concept of death and dying through increasing
levels of cognitive development is then reviewed.

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Changes in Portrayal

of Death in Children's Literature

Over the Past Three Centuries

</div>

Eighteenth Century Attitudes Towards Death

Aries (1973) describes how children in eighteenth
century Western culture would freely enter a dying person's
bedchamber. It was customary for parents, friends, neigh-
bours, and children to be present to listen to the dying
person's advice or wishes and to pay final respects.
Adults did not think of escaping or glorifying death, and
children were not sheltered from its inevitability. It
was accepted "as an important threshold which everyone had
to cross" (Aries, 1973, p. 28).

Death, then, was familiar to the child and appeared
as a common theme in literature. A young child experi-
enced literature as it was spoken to him through nursery
rhymes and folktales. The famous Mother Goose Rhymes,

which in America date from 1785, presented various concepts of death and dying. For example, in "Solomon Grundy," death is portrayed as simply a part of the cyclical nature of life:

> Solomon Grundy,
> Born on a Monday,
> Christened on Tuesday,
> Married on Wednesday,
> Took ill on Thursday,
> Worse on Friday,
> Died on Saturday,
> Buried on Sunday,
> This is the end
> Of Solomon Grundy.

Just as "Solomon Grundy" clearly and matter of factly raises the issue of death, so too does "The Bird Scarer." The poetic justice in this poem implies that death is a deserved consequence for disobedience.

> Away, birds, away!
> Take a little and leave a little,
> And do not come again;
> For if you do,
> I will shoot you through,
> And there will be an end of you.

Nineteenth Century Attitudes Towards Death

In contrast to the eighteenth century's accepting attitude, the nineteenth century was an era of exaggerated mourning. Aries (1973) refers to the romantic cult of the dead--an attitude reflected in Thomas Grey's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." It became customary to cry, pray, and use grand gesticulations during the burial rituals. The deathbed visitation still occurred, but unlike their

eighteenth century counterparts, the survivors openly expressed their sorrow at the severance of a meaningful relationship and thus showed less acceptance of death. Implied in this changed attitude in those present at a death is a personal recognition of an irrevocable loss and a "new intolerance of separation."

Such mourning of irretrievable loss is echoed in each stanza of "Who Killed Cock Robin?" (1805), as different aspects of the then current death ritual are recited. After the murderer and a witness are found, the various animals are assigned funeral tasks.

> Who'll sing a psalm?
> "I," said the thrush,
> "As I sit in a bush.
> I'll sing a psalm."
>
> Who'll carry the coffin?
> "I," said the kite,
> "If it's not in the night,
> I'll carry the coffin."
>
> And who'll toll the bell?
> "I," said the bull,
> "Because I can pull:
> And so, Cock Robin, farewell!"
>
> All the birds in the air,
> Fell to sighing and sobbing,
> When they heard the bell toll
> For poor Cock Robin!

During this Puritan era death was also used to teach the good life to children. "Damning threats" commonly served to instill the importance of good behaviour on earth to ensure future salvation. This poem from the 1834 edition of the New England Primer (cited in Meigs,

1969), reminds the child to be always ready.

> I in the burying place may see
> Graves shorter than I.
> From death's arrest no age is free
> Young children too may die.
>
> My God, may such an awful sight
> Awakening be to me.
> O that by early grace I might
> For death prepared to be.

Another example of the use of death for teaching values is found in Horwood's <u>Little Emma and her Father:</u> <u>A lesson for proud children</u> (cited in Rosenbach, 1966).

> Little Emma's father lost all his
> money, and Emma had then to work for her
> bread, a just retribution for her treatment
> of her father's servants during the days of
> affluence, for she had treated them <u>with</u>
> <u>disdain</u>, ignoring her father's teaching
> <u>that it</u> was God who made them poor, and
> forced to work for bread.
> Emma became a milk maid, but even-
> tually joined a gypsy band, and after
> much ill treatment, was left to a repen-
> tant death:
> And soon young Emma on the ground
>   All cold and stiffen'd lay;
> But may the awful words she spake,
>   On that her dying day,
>
> A warning prove to ev'ry child,
>   Who is too proud to mind
> The counsels of their eldest friends,
>   And of their parents kind. (p. 245)

Twentieth Century Attitudes Towards Death

Aries (1973) describes the twentieth century as producing a "brutal revolution . . . Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear." Several factors are responsible for society's

changed manner of handling death. In this twentieth century, dying people are often denied the knowledge that they have a terminal disease and are removed to hospitals where every effort is made to prolong life. When death occurs, the immediate family may be absent. The decisions which follow a death, such as how to look after the body, are made by "experts" in the hospital or professional services are hired through a mortuary. Thus, death and dying take place in a designated institution and are kept from intruding upon society. The elderly are a reminder of death and our tendency to segregate them in homes for the aged lessens our encounters with the aged, the dying, and death itself. Consequently, it is easy for us to ignore the end of the life cycle. In Aries' view, the series of gradual changes over the centuries, starting with the period when death was a public spectacle from which no one thought of hiding, to today, when we are isolated from death, and the dying are obligated to suffer alone, had made death a socially taboo subject.

To Rabbi Grollman (1974) twentieth century man, who has made great strides in the mastery of his environment, is trying to remove death in the belief that it may no longer be inevitable. In other words, our technological age, which has been so successful in prolonging life with cures, miracle drugs, and transplants, seems to offer the possibility that death itself will eventually be conquered.

Kastenbaum (1972) cites another reason for evading the subject of death with children. "In a society such as ours that has laboured so diligently to put mortality out of sight and out of mind, most of the questions children ask about death make parents uncomfortable" (p. 33). This discomfort may be due to a feeling that death is a subject which should not arouse one's curiosity. No one understands the complete meaning of death, for what happens after death is ultimately a mystery. However, a number of facts, such as the causes, the process, and the irrevocability and inevitability of death, are known, and children should not be ignorant of this information. Lack of communication between adult and child is apt to cause the child more confusion and anxiety than the attempt to share knowledge and experiences; communication, in fact, may enable the child to realize that death is an inevitable fact of life.

The silence and protection from the dying that occurs in our society is compounded by the euphemisms adults adopt to convey the fact of death to today's child (Grollman, 1967, 1974; Nelson and Peterson, 1975). Such phrases as "He's gone," "Mommy has gone to live with the angels," "Grandad passed away," and "She's gone to sleep forever" avoid the direct references to death and may even present a distorted perspective of death. The protection such euphemisms appear to provide may, in fact, be harmful to

children. A child may develop the delusion that someday
Mother will return or he may assume unconsciously that
"Mummy didn't really care about me so she went away."
Euphemisms and screening children from dying persons only
shelter them and make their acceptance of death more
difficult.

Furman (1974), Koocher (1975), and Peterson and Sar-
tore (1975) each present case studies of children's mis-
conceptions about death. Peterson and Sartore provide
information about a five-year-old child.

> The motive was protection; the outcome
> was a recurring nightmare. At five, Dick
> was deemed too young to attend the funeral
> of a grandmotherly next door neighbour.
> Periodically in his dreams, he made the
> familiar trek to her door, touched it with
> a gentle knock, and it swung open. There
> she was folded up in a basket--naked and
> dead. His scream always broke the night-
> mare. Only years later did the dream
> stop after he reasoned that the body in
> the basket was his conception of his
> neighbour laid out in a casket. The
> protection he had received and the unwill-
> ingness of those about him to discuss
> death had made him vulnerable to the
> terrors of his own imagination. (p. 226)

This is only one of many case studies which find that
children's concerns stem from unasked or unanswered
questions. Nelson and Peterson (1975) recommend direct
statements with honest terminology (such as "die," "dead,"
"casket," "buried") emphasize the observable and under-
standable facts about death.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Canadian

children were familiar with death; people died in homes that usually housed several generations. Miscarriages, premature births, and deaths from illnesses such as viral pneumonia, diptheria, tuberculosis, and poliomyelitis were common. Old people died at home surrounded by loved ones; everyone shared in the process of dying, death, grief, and bereavement.

During this period, children's literature reflected this familiarity with death. In the novels of Dickens and Louisa May Alcott, which were favourites in North American children's literature for many years, death was depicted as a fact of life which one has feelings about but manages and recognizes as a reality. In Alcott's Little Women (1868), the family watches Beth's slow death. Each member is intimately involved with the activities and emotions which surround her death.

In contrast, books written and published between 1900 and 1970, in keeping with the death taboo, infrequently addressed or included death. With reference to North America, Kubler-Ross (1974) comments, "It is difficult to accept death in this society because it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact it happens all the time, we never see it" (p. 5). She suggests that if we could reintroduce an awareness of death into our lives, it would not be a "dreaded stranger," but an "expected companion." If this advice were taken, the conspiracy of

silence surrounding death would likely disappear.

Development of Children's
Concepts of Death

In children's literature, whether or not the reality of death is portrayed, it is expected that the authors were aware of the cognitive level of the child reader. To write for children's conceptual levels, particularly as they relate to their concepts of death, the changes in the development of these concepts need to be known. Three studies, conducted in different countries at different times over the past four decades, describe the developmental stages of children's concepts of death.

Two classic studies on the development of children's attitudes toward death are Anthony's (1940), conducted in pre-war Britain, and Nagy's (1936), conducted in Budapest. The findings of the latter, however, did not appear in English journals until 1948.

Anthony's data was collected from 128 children from the ages of three through thirteen. The findings were based on data obtained from a story completion test, an intelligence test which had the definition of the word "dead" carefully inserted into the vocabulary scale, and written parental accounts. Her findings were presented and discussed from a psychoanalytic point of view and

support the notion that the idea of death occurs readily in children's fantasies. The children's definitions of death range from apparent ignorance of the term's meaning to a clear statement in biological terms. Anthony described the following five stages based on responses to the word "dead":

> Stage One: Children below five <u>fail to make a response to the word "dead"</u> in the vocabulary list. There is a lack of concern and a lack of interest in situations involving death. Even when a child is told his dog has died the child indicates a complete lack of comprehension. (p. 50)

> Stage Two: The characteristic feature of behaviour at the five and six year level <u>is an interest in the word</u> but usually this is combined <u>with an erroneous limited concept.</u> Examples of definitions are: "It don't go on;" "To go asleep;" "Hadn't had no dinner;" and "Send it in the hospital." (p. 52)

> Stage Three: The six through nine year old is <u>interested in the rituals surrounding the idea of death</u> and thinks in terms of human experience <u>without biological generality</u>. Above the age of seven "dead" is defined as the negation of living. The child is preoccupied with the

social and cultural customs and enjoys ceremonial

burying of dead animals. (p. 53)

Stage Four: Nine and ten year olds <u>understand</u>

<u>the word and event</u> and show an <u>increased under-</u>

<u>standing of its logical and biological dimen-</u>

<u>sions</u>. Examples of definitions include: "When

you're dead, you can't come alive again;"

"When a person doesn't live anymore." (p. 54)

Stage Five: By eleven and twelve, <u>definitions</u>

<u>include logical and biological essentials</u>. For

example: "When you have no pulse and no tempera-

ture and can't breathe." (p. 54)

Anthony's findings are strengthened by her use of

subjects from varied backgrounds; they came from different

socioeconomic groups and were of normal and subnormal

intelligence. The majority of her subjects lived in

London, but some were from rural areas. They were inter-

viewed both at school and at home, and one-fifth of them

were interviewed in child guidance clinics.

In her study, Nagy (1948) examined the drawings,

writings, and recorded conversations of her 378 subjects

in order to assess the development of children's "theories"

about the nature of death. The children's ages ranged

from three to ten. Their responses to the question "What

is death?" were categorized into three developmental stages:

Stage One: The three to five year old <u>did not</u>

<u>recognize death as an irreversible fact</u>. Death

was departure or temporary sleep. "The dead

close their eyes because sand gets in them."

(p. 81) In this stage the child attributes

life and consciousness to the dead: "It can eat

and drink;" "It will be older then, it will be

older and older;" "He would like to come out,

but the coffin is nailed down." (pp. 81-83)

A number of children in this study had seen a

dead person and could connect death with absence

and funerals. From the perspective of the

children, however, even a dead person in a

coffin was still capable of living.

Stage Two: Among the five to nine year olds,

<u>death</u> was often <u>personified as a spirit or</u>

<u>entity, or thought to be an aggressive event</u>

<u>related to the behaviour of others</u>. Death is

described as a skeletal-man who comes and

carries people off: " . . . comes with a scythe,

cuts him down, and takes him away;" " . . . car-

ries off bad children;" "Death is very dangerous.

You never know what minute he is going to carry

you off with him;" "The death man is invisible

and comes in secret, usually at night." (pp. 88-

96)

Stage Three: At age nine and later, death was
recognized as a process which was defined in
biological terms. Death and its effect on
individuals is determined by certain laws.
The child at this stage expresses the univer-
sality and inevitability of death and frequently
adds a moral or philosphical explanation: "It
means the passing of the body. Death is a great
squaring of accounts in our lives;" "Death is the
end of life on earth;" "If somebody dies they
bury him and he crumbles to dust in the earth
. . . The body dies, the soul lives on." (p. 96)

The findings of Anthony and Nagy showed that children
of different ages similarly described death even though
the studies were conducted in relatively different cultures.
Such similarities would be expected to be associated with
cognitive development and not completely on the societies'
modes of presenting the concept to the child or to the
manner in which death was handled.

Kane's (1975) sample consisted of 122 white, middle-
class North American children aged three to twelve. There
were at least five male and five female subjects at each
age. She used open-ended interviews with a pre-arranged
coding scheme based on Piaget's theory of cognitive stages.
Nine pictures of rabbits, painted by an artist according
to the researcher's specifications, were used for the

interviews. The rabbits were depicted in various poses, including quiet, active, and "dead." Some questions used to stimulate discussion during the interviews were: "What is death?" "What does death look like?" "Have you ever had a dream about death?" (p. 36). Data analysis indicated that children's thinking about death develops through stages similar to those described by Piaget's theory. (See Table 1.)

The similarities of Kane's stages of the developmental process in children's thinking about death to the descriptions of death obtained by Anthony and Nagy from their children are notable. The first stages in all studies illustrated a very limited understanding, the next stages showed some biological knowledge, and finally there was a complete awareness of the components of the death concept.

In addition to stages, Kane defined components of the death concept. The ten components of death synthesized from her study and prior works are: Realization, Separation, Immobility, Irrevocability, Causality, Dysfunctionality, Universality, Insensitivity, Appearance, and Personification. Personification was later eliminated since it was seldom discussed in research literature. Kane's definitions of these components are:

> Realization is the awareness of death.
> It is any understanding of death, of the
> state of being deceased, or of an event
> which happens. . .
>
> Separation deals with the location of the

Table 1

Developmental Process in Children's Thinking About Death

Stage	Thinking	Death
Pre-operational	--is immediate	--is a description
	--organized structurally in terms of position, immobility, and separation	--a person is dead if he doesn't move
Concrete Operations	--is specific and concrete	--is an explanation and cause
	--organized in terms of function	
Formal Operations	--is logical, abstract and speculative--organized by the abstraction of a common element	--is a definition
		--the body's dysfunction is what makes it dead

dead and involves a spatial dimension.
The concern is with the child's ideas
of where the dead are . . .

Immobility has to do with the child's
notions concerning the dead and move-
ment . . .

Irrevocability has to do with the child's
ideas regarding death as permanent and
reversible, or temporary and reversible.
Irrevocability exists on three dimensions:
spatial, the location of the dead; func-
tional, the physical condition of the
dead; and temporal, for how long a time
does the condition prevail . . .

Causality is a belief about what caused
the state of death. Here, the concern
is with the child's ideas of how or by
what death was caused.

Dysfunctionality deals with ideas about
the bodily functions other than those
of the senses of the dead. The child
may believe that the dead are completely
dysfunctional, internally and externally.
He may believe the dead are partially
or completely functional . . .

Universality deals with the child's ideas
concerning mortality. The child may believe
that there are no exceptions and that every-
one dies, or he may believe that there are
exceptions, or he may believe that nobody
dies . . .

Insensitivity concerns ideas about the
sensory functions of the dead, such as
dreaming, feeling, thinking, and smelling.
A child may think that the dead are
completely or partially insensate or
completely sensate. . .

Appearance concerns a child's notions of
the appearance of the dead. It includes
the factor of change or of no change after
death . . . (pp. 20-24)

Kane's data suggested that children acquire components

of the death concept in clusters. A summary of her

findings are shown in Table 2. For example, the three-
year-old shows an awareness of death that by age five
grows into an awareness of immobility and separation.
To the six-year-old, death is a cause and an explantion
for dysfunction; the components of irreversibility and
universality develop concurrently. Experience with death
is a factor in death concept formation up to six years
of age, but after that the children show the same concepts
as their peers, regardless of experience. The sequence
of emergence is the same for all subjects. One stage
slowly evolves or develops out of the one before it.
Responses of children indicate that they initially have
no concept of the components of death. When their ideas
of death's components are unlike those of adults, they
develop a partial concept. Finally, the child completely
understands death's components when his ideas about them
are the same as those commonly held by adults. The sample
comments for "appearance" illustrate this development.
"They look the same," "There's no difference," and "You
can't tell just by looking" indicate incomplete under-
standing of death's components. Complete understanding
is indicated by "They look limp" and "They look stiff"
(p. 24).

In her summary statement Kane concludes:

> Children's death concepts are a product
> of their total development, related to

Table 2

Summary of Kane's Findings Regarding the

Acquisition of Components of Death Concept

Concepts	Age
Realization	3
Immobility	5
Separation	5
Irreversibility	6
Causality	6
Dysfunction	6
Universality	6
Insensitivity	8
Appearance	12

> their other concepts, the experiences
> that they had, what they recall and
> generalize and their view of internal
> and external reality, and their ability
> to form logical relationships. Children's
> concepts of death are not apart from
> their thinking, but rather a part and
> product of their total cognitive be-
> haviour. (p. 104)

Kane's research is a valuable contribution to the

understanding of children's thinking about death. Her

data analysis was restricted to the variables of children's

ages, experiences, and conceptualizations of death. The

results support the theory that the principles of development, as described by Piaget, are applicable to the development of children's ideas about death.

In summary, these studies show that a child's concept of death develops in stages and that he is aware of death before he enters school. If in today's society the child is protected from the fact of death while cognitively he is increasingly capable of understanding the concept of death, then one may ask how the child can be helped to cope with death and the natural emotional reactions to death when it occurs in his experience.

Helping the Child

Cope With the Fact of

Death

Programs have been developed in an attempt to provide help for children in coping with the fact of death. Some of these approaches include proactive programs, immunizing measures, preventive health measures, and guidelines for dialogues on death between parent and child.

Proactive Programs

Proactive programs can be effectively used in a school setting. A classroom discussion in the elementary school about death is usually instigated by the death of

either a class pet (often a gerbil, rabbit, or goldfish) or a pupil's pet. Peterson and Sartore (1975) describe such a discussion as reactive, since it is started by individuals who are reacting to a specific death. These authors point out that a more effective approach is a proactive guidance program in which children are helped to understand death prior to the time that they have to face it. Children want to talk about death if they are given the opportunity.

Children, in fact, think about death. They act out their fears and anxieties in various forms of play and they frequently see distorted views of death presented on the television screen, for example, the cartoon character who dies only to live again in the next episode. An open environment in which children can find answers to some of their questions about death helps them in their continuous search for meaning. Kliman(1968), who is the director of the Center for Preventive Psychiatry at White Plains, New York, strongly advises this approach, though he uses the term "immunizing measures." He recommends that adults seize any opportunity to discuss and expose a child to the effect of death on animals. From an early age the child can be helped to understand "that animals stop breathing, eating, defecating, die, and are buried. This will give him an opportunity to ask and have his questions answered and in an area of relatively low

emotional investment" (p. 90).

Furman (1974) collected the observations and experiences of nursery school teachers and child psychologists while they were working with twenty-three children who had suffered the loss of a parent through death. Regular meetings were held by the analysts and teachers of these children to discuss observations and experiences, and to decide on methods of helping individual children cope with their loss. They recognized that no single procedure or method would help all children. Furman's book describes this study and gives detailed case studies of each child, including the child's reactions at the time of the death and during the period which followed it. Responses to death are diverse--guilt, denial, hostility, idealization, adopting mannerisms of the deceased, replacement, panic, and bodily distress. Furman uses the term "preventive health measure" to describe techniques which have helped children cope with death. Emphasis is placed on helping the child through the mourning process, understanding the child's responses, and letting him know he is loved. A number of case studies demonstrate the value of prior experiences with death and the way this has helped the children grasp the reality of death.

General guidelines for dialogues on death between parent and child are provided by Grollman (1971, 1975). The mental health of both children and adults depends upon

the "frank acknowlegement of painful separation." He
proposes that:

> The child should be able to discuss death
> with his family before crisis strikes.
> Talk in a quiet, honest, straightforward
> way so as to encourage further dialogue.
> The learning process should be in gradual
> stages according to the youngster's intell-
> ectual and emotional capabilities. Begin
> at the offspring's level and remember that
> attitude is more important than words. Never
> tell the child what he will later need to un-
> learn. Avoid fairy tales, half truths, and
> circumlocutions. Imaginative fancy only gets
> in the youngster's way when he is having
> enough trouble separating the real from the
> make-believe. (p. 77)

Grollman's excellent advice is based on years of special-
ized experience as a rabbi and as an outstanding thanatol-
ogist. The guidelines provide answers to adults who are
concerned with the complex and sensitive issues which are
involved in discussing death with children.

In summary, whatever term is used--immunizing measures,
proactive programs, preventive health measures, dialogues
between parent and child--each focuses on strengthening
the child's ability to deal with death. A background of
knowledge is built up by providing the child with oppor-
tunities to discuss death and to think of it as a natural
part of life.

Judeo-Christian tradition recognizes the need to
grieve in a prescribed manner for a certain length of
time. The "shivah" practised by Orthodox Jews seems to
provide ritual support for grief. The family is drawn

together and for seven days the mourners are encouraged
to express overtly their grief. This is followed by a
period of thirty days during which the mourners resume
normal activity but avoid places of entertainment. Judaism
strictly limits mourning to the stated periods, which means
there is a prescribed end to the mourning. This seems to
help the mourners face reality and the necessity of living
(Grollman, 1974, pp. 120-124).

The works of Bowlby (1961) and Parkes (1970, 1976) on
bereavement describe the developmental stages of the grief
process:

1. A phase of numbness that usually lasts from
    a few hours to a week and may be interrupted
    by outbursts of extremely intense distress
    or anger.

2. A phase of yearning and searching for the
    lost figure, lasting some months and often
    for years.

3. A phase of disorganization and despair.

4. A phase of greater or lesser reorganization.

With reference to grief and mourning in childhood,
Bowlby and Parkes (1973) showed that there are certain
differences between the way a child responds to loss and
the way an adult responds, but there are also basic
similarities. It is more difficult for a child to grasp
fully that someone close to him is dead and will not

return. Long-persisting expectations that the dead person will return are both overtly and covertly retained. When analysts, or others, help the child gradually realize that a parent will not return, the child responds (as did the widows in Parkes' 1970 study) with panic and anger. The child, like the adult, needs help if he is to accept the loss as permanent (pp. 206-207). Help provided to the bereaved may include understanding both his anger and the means he uses to express this anger. Adults demonstrate grief more visibly than children, but in each case there is deep emotional strain due to feelings of complete abandonment, loneliness, and emptiness. All of the studies reviewed here emphasize the importance of providing a trusted person to help the bereaved person recover from his loss. For a child, the importance of providing a single permanent substitute to whom he can gradually become attached cannot be overemphasized. Failure to do this usually leads to the child's refusal to accept his loss (Bowlby and Parkes, 1973, p. 207). The extensive and detailed research of both Bowlby and Parkes over the past seventeen years has greatly increased our understanding of grief and grieving and the ways children and adults react to bereavement.

A multi-disciplinary study (Wolfenstein and Kliman, 1966) was conducted on children's reactions to the death of President Kennedy. The researchers included a sample

of 1349 school children ranging from the fourth grade
to senior high. As well as normal school children, the
study included patients seen in treatment privately
or in child guidance clinics. Methods included observations,
interviews, questionnaires, and essays written at school.

The assassination, an exceptional event which resulted
in the inclusion of millions of people in the mourning
process and funeral ceremonies, confronted children with
the unaccustomed sight of parents and other adults immobi-
lized, depressed, and openly grieving. Young children,
too, reacted with emotion when they heard the news, but
they did not tolerate stress for long and showed impati-
ence when their usual television programs were unavail-
able that weekend. Wolfenstein calls this the "short
sadness span" of children (p. 77). Parents' impressions
that children are unfeeling may be related to this short
sadness span. Also, adults tend to underestimate children's
reactions because distress in children is frequently
muted and disguised. The findings of this study support
the developmental pattern in mourning response and also
the similarities and discrepancies in the reactions of
children and adults.

A factor which this study might have considered was
the way in which children conceptualized President Kennedy.
Was he more than a person they recognized from television?
Was their grief mainly a reflection of what adults close

to them expressed? In her comments on this study, Furman
(1974) asks:

>Do they react similarly to the daily
>media reports of "ordinary" murders
>at certain stages? Have the children
>identified with the inconsistent
>attitude of our social milieu which
>allows us to grieve loudly for a
>president but shrug off the deaths of
>thousands? (p. 277)

Kliman (1968) says guilt, anger, and anxiety are each
a part of grieving. Children often feel intense guilt and
imagine that they may in some way be responsible for a death.
Parents should give children ample opportunity to cry, but
they should not urge them to display unfelt sorrow. There
are many outlets for grief and children often vent their
feelings in rigorous physical activities. Adults should
empathize with children's feelings and help them to under-
stand their emotions. Kliman's views concur with those of
Parkes (1973), who emphasizes that grief is a process, not
a state, and that human beings vary greatly in their
expressions of aggression during bereavement (p. 87).

A primary objective of recent studies of grief
(Feinberg, 1969; Furman, 1974; Parness, 1975) is to
identify potentially pathogenic or healing features of
the process and to find if there is a relationship between
children's early experiences of loss and their emotional
development.

Feinberg (1969) worked with two sisters, aged seven
and nine, whose six-year-old brother, Charles, was dying

of leukemia. The sisters felt anger and resentment because so much attention was being given to Charles. The therapist used a "reality orientation" technique to make the sisters aware of the course of the illness and to clarify their misconceptions of the disease. When Charles died, the therapist helped them to express their grief. He encouraged them to cry and to express their guilt at having played aggressively with Charles. They were asked to bring pictures of Charles, which helped to recall times the three children had spent together. Feinberg states that children are definitely helped by adult facilitation of mourning.

Case studies are presented by Furman (1973) to illustrate the difficult tasks which face those who are helping a bereaved child to mourn:

> Specifically, I am referring to the need
> to present death realistically, meet a
> bereaved child's need consistently, accept
> his feelings, support his reality testing,
> judiciously interpret his defenses, and
> assist him with mastering the inevitably
> terrifying reality which caused his pre-
> mature loss . . . success is possible
> and its rewards very great indeed.
> (pp. 229-230)

Furman and Feinberg, as psychiatrists, have worked with people whose adult problems are the consequences of a childhood failure to complete mourning. In some cases, the adult difficulties centered on their inability to experience or express feelings. This resulted in a

blockage of communication with people who were important in their lives. Therapeutic work helped them realize that the blockage of communication was due to a repression of grief from a previous loss. Unmastered grief stays active, even though a person is unaware of this, and influences many emotions, especially when these emotions are involved in the formation of a lasting relationship (Furman, 1973, p. 230). Assistance, then, is most effective when it occurs at the time of bereavement or shortly after.

Parness (1975) conducted her research on the effects of death on preschool children. She states that anger and protest, however irrational they appear, are normal adaptive processes. Children should be allowed to vent and verbalize their feelings and phobias. "Regressive" tendencies, such as bedwetting and thumbsucking, are not pathological, but frequently temporary and adaptive responses to the loss. When such behaviour is recognized as adaptive, adults can provide the child with the care and sensitivity given during the period before the loss. Most children will gradually return to age-appropriate activities.

In summary, the four phases of mourning need to be recognized by parents and adults who deal with children. Guilt, anger, fear of separation, and withdrawal are common reactions to grief. Adults could take cues from

the children and help them participate in actions and
activities which are a part of a child's way of expressing
himself and resolving his situation.

Statement of the Problem

This study was designed to examine children's books
which deal with death. During the 1970s there has been
a dramatic increase in children's books which incorporate
death as a central theme. There also has been an increase
in openness in the discussion of death. These facts lead
to the question: has the mode of presentation of death in
children's literature correspondingly changed over the
years?

The research reviewed has shown that the level of
the child's concept of death corresponds to his level of
cognitive development. Thus, a second question is asked:
is death presented differently for various grade levels?

The independent variables in this study were the date
of publication (pre-1971 or 1971-1976) and the reading
level of the books (primary years and middle years). The
dependent variables were frequency and types of death
words used in the books examined. The types of death
words considered included factual, euphemistic, and
violent words.

The two specific null hypotheses were:

1. There is no difference in the portrayal of death

in children's literature published prior to 1971 and the portrayal of death in children's literature published during 1971 and later.

2. There is no difference in the portrayal of death in literature written for the primary level child and the portrayal of death in literature written for the middle years child.

In addition, the cause of death, the physical aspects of death, the relationship between the deceased and the protagonist, the changes which take place as a result of the death, and the grief reactions were examined.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

The Sample of Children's Books

The sample consisted of 18 of the 20 books listed
under the heading Death/Fiction in the Subject Guide to
Children's Books in Print, 1975. This guide is published
biannually and is based on information supplied to the
compilers by publishers of juvenile literature. Two books
from the originally selected sample were not available
even when ordered directly from the publishers.[1]

The sample also included available titles listed
under Death/Fiction from:

(1) 1971, 1973 editions of the Subject Guide to
     Children's Books in Print,

(2) Children's Catalogue, 1976, Thirteenth Edition,

(3) Children's Card Catalogue to Dec. 1976, Winnipeg
     Public Library.

The final sample consisted of the 40 books available
of the possible 47, or 85% of the known population. The
sample list by author and publisher is found in Appendix

_____

[1]It is worth noting that there was difficulty obtain-
ing children's books which were printed even two years
prior to the date of a book order.

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A, p. 68.

Independent Measures

Independent measures included publication date and
readibility level. For the publication date the year of
the first printing was noted. Fourteen of the books were
published prior to 1971 and the remaining 26 were published
later.

Readibility level was assessed on the basis of size
of vocabulary and level of concept represented in the
written word. Because these two factors vary with age,
published norms appropriate to grade levels were adopted
from Spache (in Gilleland, 1972, pp. 201-204) for grades
1-3, Dale-Chall (1948) for grades 4-6, and Fry (in Waite,
1968, pp. 33-35) for grades 7 and up.

For each book three 100-word samples were selected;
one from the first third, one from the middle, and one
from the last third of each book. Reliability tests
reported by Clymer (1959) demonstrated that three samples
provided a reliable estimate of readibility. Sampling
from the beginning and the end of each chapter was avoided.
With this sampling procedure and these norms estimated,
readibility scores were derived and expressed as grade
levels in decimals, for example, 2.1 and 3.4 (grade 2 plus
one month and grade 3 plus four months). Twenty-one books
of the sample were classified as primary level (grades

1-4.4 inclusive). Nineteen of the sample were classified as middle years (grades 4.5-8 inclusive). For the list of books by reading levels, primary/middle category, and total word count, see Appendix B, p. 71.

Dependent Measures

Dependent measures included total word count of each book, the different types of death words, and the frequency of death words. To obtain an estimate of the total number of words in each book, the average number of words on three pages independently selected with the use of the table of random numbers was multiplied by the total number of printed pages (Appendix B). These estimated totals were used to derive the ratio of death words to the total words in each book and the ratio of different types of death words to the total words.

Death words were coded according to the three types defined in the categories below.

Death word - a word or set of words pertaining to the cessation of life on earth, such as "dead," "funeral," and "cancer of the blood." The violent death words within the overall category of death words were identified and coded as a sub-category of death words.

Violent death word - a death word or set of words characterized by a destructive force, such as "slaughter" or "shoot to kill."

Euphemism- an indirect or vague expression substituted for a death word, for example, "to pass away" is an euphemism for "to die."

The frequency of each one of the above categories was obtained by coding and counting each time a death word occurred. The various circumstances associated with death were also noted and coded in terms of the categories below which were derived from Bowlby and Parkes (1973) and Green (1975).

Cause of death - the agent or action which produced death. These were classified as: internal (illness, old age, childbirth), external (suicide, accident, tidal wave), or not stated.

Physical aspects of death - any description of the appearance of the body of the deceased. These descriptions were classified as factual (based on known facts about death), non-factual (ideas or suggestions which are speculative), and not stated.

Relationship between the deceased and the protagonist- the particular connection between the deceased and the main character was classified as: self (main character dies), family (any kinsman or relative dies), and other (death of non-family person, animal, or tree).

Changes which take place as the result of the death - alterations or differences in the lifestyle of the protagonist which could be either short or long term.

Short term changes included visiting relatives and adjustments in routines, whereas long term changes included moving to live with grandparents, a replacement pet, and even an adopted brother. If no alteration in lifestyle was indicated, then the not stated classification was used.

Grief reactions - evidence of any or all of the three stages of the grief process described by Bowlby and Parkes (1973), namely, protest expressed through anger, guilt, denial of death; distress-disturbance inferred from crying, loneliness, withdrawal, questioning; and reorganization-acceptance expressed in remembering, making adjustments.

Procedure

The data form adapted for use in this study (Appendix C_1) was first pre-tested with a group of graduate students. This pre-test indicated, on the one hand, that more specific definitions of grief reactions were required and, on the other hand, that the locale of the story was generally too vaguely described in children's books to permit judgements. In addition, four items (was the main character prepared for the death, who informs the main character of the death, reference to theological beliefs, and psychological effects) were considered too subjective for consensus judgement. On the basis of this pre-test,

these five items were eliminated. With these revisions
and the addition of written coder instructions (Appendix
C_2), the instrument was re-tested for reliability with
four grade 12 students. An intercoder reliability of
92.5% agreement was obtained.

For the data collection three independent coders
were used. The first coder was both a graduate student
and an elementary school librarian, the second coder was
also a university graduate, and the third coder was the
researcher. A meeting with the three coders was first
held. At this time the written instructions were given
and explained. To pretrain the coders, each independently
coded Sara Stein's About Dying. Intercoder reliability
on Stein's book was 96.4%.

The entire sample of 40 books was then coded inde-
pendently by each of the three coders. To ensure that the
same edition of the books was coded, the researcher cir-
culated a single copy of each book from coder to coder.
Upon completion of coding all 40 books, discrepancies in
coding were discussed until consensus was reached among
all three judges. At this time, coders identified and
reached consensus on the violent words within the overall
category of death words (see category definitions, p. 34).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The difference in frequency and types of death words
in the early published (pre-1971) and late published (1971-
1976) children's books are shown in Table 3. The mean
frequency and types of death words do not differ between
early and late published books. Of the types of death
words there is an indication, though not significant, for
a greater ratio of different types of euphemisms, t (38) =
$p < .10$, and more different types of violent words, t (38) =
1.39, $p < .10$, to be used among the early than the late
published books.

Examination of death words written in books at the
primary and middle years reading level (Table 4) in general
indicates an increase in the mean frequencies and mean
number of death words. Death words occurred more frequently
in the middle years books than in the primary years books
in respect to both number of different death words, t (38) =
6.10, $p < .05$, and the total number of death words, t (38) =
5.24, $p < .05$. However, when the ratios of death words to
the total number of words in the book are considered, the
proportion of different death words are equivalent for
primary and middle years books, whereas the proportion of

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Table 3

Mean Frequencies, Ratios, and Standard Deviation

Of Death Words and Euphemisms in Children's Books

Published Early and Late

Variable	Early (Pre-1971)		Late (1971-1976)		t ratio
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
A. Frequency	(N = 14)		(N = 26)		
Diff. death words	10.60	5.56	8.40	6.46	1.16
Ratio of diff. death words [a]	.0024	.0049	.0035	.0060	.60
Total death words	38.40	28.81	39.70	41.31	.10
Ratio of total death words [b]	.0066	.0134	.0085	.0129	.44
B. Types					
Diff. euph.	2.80	2.41	2.80	2.79	.06
Ratio of diff. euph. [a]	.0003	.0007	.0096	.0096	1.98[+]
Total euph.	5.60	5.29	4.10	4.39	.90
Ratio of total euph. [b]	.0007	.0007	.0009	.0019	.33
Diff. violent	1.70	1.27	1.10	1.57	1.39[+]
Ratio of diff. violent [a]	.0001	.0003	.0002	.0004	.11
Total violent	5.40	6.63	5.10	9.47	.12
Ratio of total violent [b]	.0002	.0005	.0004	.0007	1.11

[+]p $<$ .10

[a]Ratio of different death=$\dfrac{\text{Number of different death}}{\text{Total words in book}}$

[b]Ratio of total death=$\dfrac{\text{Total death}}{\text{Total words in book}}$

Table 4

Mean Frequencies and Ratio with Standard Deviation of

Death Words and Euphemisms

In Children's Books for Primary Years and Middle Years

Variable	Primary (N = 21)		Middle (N = 19)		
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	t ratio
A. Frequency					
Diff. death words	1.0	3.51	13.7	5.22	6.10*
Ratio diff. death words[a]	.11	.46	.0051	.0070	.96
Total death words	16.4	14.68	64.5	37.5	5.24*
Ratio of total death words[a]	.0124	.0162	.0029	.0023	2.21*
B. Types					
Diff. euph.	1.4	1.43	4.4	2.75	4.31*
Ratio of diff. euph.[a]	.0008	.0030	.0001	.0023	.09
Total euph.	2.1	2.59	7.3	5.08	3.99*
Ratio of total euph.[b]	.0010	.0020	.0004	.0006	.60
Diff. violent	.33	.79	2.4	1.34	5.76*
Ratio of diff. violent[a]	.0003	.0002	.0001	.0001	.01
Total violent	1.2	4.01	9.6	9.97	3.42*
Ratio total violent[b]	.0001	.0002	.0005	.0005	2.85*

*$p < .05$

[a]Ratio of different death=Number different death
                          Total words in book
[b]Ratio of total death=Total death
                        Total words in book
a,b Ratio of diff. and total euphemisms were calculated
    similarly

total death words are greater among the primary than the
middle years books, $\underline{t}$ (38) = 2.21, $\underline{p} < .05$.

The frequencies of all types of death words (Table 4)
increase significantly in the middle years books: different
euphemisms, $\underline{t}$ (38) = 4.31, $\underline{p} < .05$, total euphemisms, $\underline{t}$ (38)
= 3.99, $\underline{p} < .05$, different violent words, $\underline{t}$ (38) = 5.76,
$\underline{p} < .05$, and total violent words, $\underline{t}$ (38) = 3.42, $\underline{p} < .05$.
However, the ratios of different types of death words
remain statistically equivalent for primary and middle
years books except for the ratio of total violent words
which show a significant increase, $\underline{t}$ (38) = 2.85, $\underline{p} < .05$.

For the analysis of frequency of occurrence of
circumstances associated with death, the chi statistic was
used. Analyses of early and late published books (Table 5)
indicate a significant difference only in respect to grief
reactions, χ^2 (3) = 8.25, $\underline{p} < .05$. This difference is seen
primarily in the later books among which there is a
decrease in the frequency of protest reactions and an
increase in the number of acceptance reactions to death.

Similar chi-square analyses of grade level indicate
that books written for children in the primary grades
state significantly fewer causes for death, χ^2 (2) = 13.4,
$\underline{p} < .01$, and a tendency to omit physical descriptions of the
deceased, χ^2 (2) = 4.93, $\underline{p} < .10$. The relationship of the
protagonist to the deceased and changes in lifestyle re-
sulting from the death do not differ for either date of

Table 5

Frequency of Occurrence of Circumstances

Associated with Death

Variable	Sub-Category	Date Pub.		Reading Levels	
		Early	Late	Primary	Middle
Causes of death	Internal	8	18	12	14
	External	7	10	2	15
	Not Stated	2	6	7	1
		$X^2 = .81$		$X^2 - 13.4**$	
Physical aspects	Factual	11	20	12	19
	Not Factual	0	2	2	0
	Not Stated	2	5	5	2
		$X^2 = 1.48$		$X^2 = 4.93^+$	
Relation: deceased/ protagonist	Self	1	5	2	4
	Family	10	14	10	14
	Others	6	15	10	11
		$X^2 = 3.21$		$X^2 = 0.43$	
Changes	Short Term	5	19	12	11
	Long Term	8	12	15	8
	Not Stated	3	4	2	3
		$X^2 = 2.3$		$X^2 = 4.46$	
Grief reaction	Protest	9	2	3	8
	Distress	9	4	7	6
	Acceptance	11	19	15	15
	Nil	1	1	1	1
		$X^2 = 8.25*$		$X^2 = 2.03$	

$^+\underline{p}$ .10

$*\underline{p}$ .05

$**\underline{p}$ .01
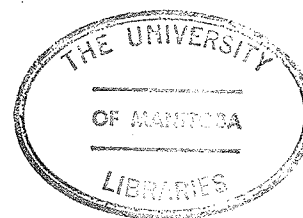
publication or grade level.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The 1970s produced a dramatic increase in the number
of children's books which incorporate death as a central
theme. This was during an era when society was fostering
a movement towards an openness in the discussion of death.
It was therefore expected that this societal trend would
be reflected in children's literature. However, the
results of the present study indicated grief reactions to
be the only one of the seven categories to show change
from the early to the late published books. Earlier books
showed a greater number of protest reactions, whereas the
later books showed more of the bereaved working through
their grief to the acceptance phase. The tendency
toward an increased ratio of different types of euphemisms
among the later books was also consistent with silence and
protection trends that characterize the twentieth century.

However, several extraneous factors may have contri-
buted to these results. One of these factors was the
availability of books published before 1971. Publishers
tend to reprint successful books, for example, the thir-
teenth printing of Buck's The Big Wave occurred in August
1972. E. B. White's superb book Charlotte's Web has been

a continuous favourite since 1950. The two Robert
Service poems were re-issued in an illustrated book in
1969 titled <u>The Shooting of Dan McGrew and the Cremation
of Sam McGee</u>. These facts raise the suggestion that death
portrayal, in the books which remained in print, was
treated in a manner which was popular with the readers.
Other books portraying the death theme may not currently
be in print because their mode of presentation was not
found to be consistent with societal views of death.

A second influential factor could be the researcher's
choice of the year 1971. Leviton (1977) points out that
the first significant, widely-attended symposium on death
education was held in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1970 and
that the proceedings, which were published in 1971 (Green,
Irish, 1971), stimulated interest in this field. This
fact provided support for the choice of publication periods
used in this study, namely early (pre-1971) and late (1971-
1976). However, the trend toward breaking the taboo on
the topic of death may have been already established, and
books published in 1970 may have been influenced by this
movement.

Though the expected influence of the Zeitgeist was
not indicated in the books sampled, grade level was shown
to be a significant variable with respect to the use of
death words and death portrayal in children's literature.
There was a significant increase in the middle years books

in both the frequency and types of death words used. This increase was expected since the older children understand more of the concepts related to death (Kane, 1975) and they also have a more extensive vocabulary. However, with the exception of the higher ratios of total death words among the primary books and total violent words among middle year books, death expressions in the middle years books were proportionately similar to those used at the primary level.

The higher ratio of total death words among the primary books may not, however, adequately reflect the impact of the death theme upon the child reader. It was noted that primary books more frequently included pictorial illustrations, some of which depicted the death theme or circumstances of the death. Since primary books are written for children who are generally at the pre- to concrete operational cognitive levels (Piaget, 1971), the pictures are attuned to their modes of thinking. The affective response of children to pictures was not considered in this study. It is, therefore, suggested that the impact of pictorial media be considered in any future studies as a variable to be controlled or measured as a component of the dependent variable.

Judith Viorst's The tenth good thing about Barney, beautifully illustrated by Erik Bleguad, depicts this double portrayal of the death theme:

My cat Barney died last Friday.
I was very sad.

I cried, and I didn't watch television.
I cried, and I didn't eat my chicken or even
the chocolate pudding.
I went to bed, and I cried.

· *3* ·

In summary, societal trends showed only a limited effect on the portrayal of death in children's literature, while cognitive level was shown to be a significant variable with respect to both the frequency and types of death words used. In general, the ratio of death words to total words in the sample books was found to be proportionately similar at the primary and middle years levels.

Qualitative Aspects of the Portrayal of the Death Concept

In this study it was recognized that a subject such
as death may require not only a word count, but some measure
of the qualitative aspects, as for example, the connotation
of the euphemisms and the intensity of violent words, as
well as the context within which the fact of death is
described. In a discussion of the quantitative-qualitative
dilemma in fictional analysis, Kharti (1980) concluded
that the use of both approaches gave a "somewhat deeper
understanding and broader insight" to the study.

Euphemisms

There was a significant increase in the use of both
different euphemisms and total euphemisms at the middle
years level. However, inferences based on absolute counts
of euphemisms must be interpreted with caution. Two con-
founds of count data became apparent in this study. Among
the primary level books it was noted that euphemisms were
introduced by the author as a means of providing an
opportunity to define the concrete meaning of the death
concept. For example, in Warburg's Growing Time Jamie
grieves when his old dog King dies:

> "King is gone," says Jamie finally.
> "No," says Uncle John, "King's not
> gone. King's dead, little Jamie. And
> that's not the same thing at all. Tell
> me now, do you really know what dead
> means?" (p. 9)

The author continues the narrative by reiterating the

vagueness of the term "gone." In this way, Jamie is not left with a confused idea of death or the hope that King might return (Grollman, 1967, 1974).

Another type of confound was noted in the middle years books in which an older child who is not ready to face "non-being" uses euphemistic language as a means of coping with new realities. In Where the Lilies Bloom, fourteen-year-old Mary Call has to hide her dad's death from the townspeople in order to keep the sibling family together:

> It is so hard for me to write this next because it's about Roy Luther's leaving us.
> I don't know how it happened or at what hour. I only knew that when I went in to him first thing the next morning he had gone. There was a congealed redness in his wide-open eyes and he was already cold and a little stiff. (p. 63)

The authors describe how Mary Call gathers her strength later in the day and factually tells her young brother, "Romney, Roy Luther is dead" (p. 64).

In the first instance, in the author's attempt to clarify a vague or euphemistic reference to death, the count of death words increased while the net effect was to present a realistic concept of death. In the second instance, the euphemistic language was used as a short term coping response. Later the protagonist faces reality and uses only factual death words.

Violent Words

The results indicated a significant increase of
both total violent words and ratio of violent words in the
middle years books. In Moody's Mr. Death: Four Stories,
for example, violent words make up 20% of the total death
words:

> "Don't bring him in here! Don't
> bring him in here! He'll kill us, he'll
> kill us! Oh, please, pleee-ease don't
> bring him in here . . . Bobo! Bobo!," she
> continued to yell as she hit him in the
> head with all of her might, but Bobo kept
> slashing at her, ripping the meat complete-
> ly off her bone, eating her up. She
> continued screaming until she collapsed
> on the floor. (pp. 76-77)

It becomes apparent from these excerpts that the
violent death words alone do not create the fearful
situation, but rather such bizarre depiction of the events
leading to death conjure up more vivid portrayals.

While violent death words make up 12% of the total
death words in the book Where the Lilies Bloom, the
Cleavers' purpose is not to convey violence per se, but
to provide an outlet for violent feelings. The protag-
onist, Mary Call, takes charge of her three poverty-
stricken orphaned siblings. At one point, Mary admonishes
her brother for his violent ideas, yet she uses the same
words in her admonition:

> Romney picked up a rock and chunked
> it hard into a roadside stand of flowering
> thistle and a cloud of purple, silky down

> erupted into the warming air. "I could
> take Roy Luther's shotgun and blow Kiser's
> head off," he suggested.
> I said, "Romney, why are you always
> talking about twisting somebody's head
> off or blowing somebody's head off? That's
> what's earned people like us the reputa-
> tion we've got." (p. 103)

According to Bruno Bettelheim (1976), child psychology has revealed "just how violent, anxious, destructive, and even sadistic a child's imagination is" (p. 120). He suggests the use of fairy tales and stories which express destructive fantasies as a means of reassuring children that others have fantasies similar to theirs. Thus, the violent death expressions portrayed in the Cleaver book could be termed a means of ventilating violent fantasies and feelings.

In the present study, portrayal of both physical and verbal aggression in the sample books was identified. The results obtained were similar to those of Green (1975), in which she noted a "leaning towards the violent factor of death." However, it appears that societies have been concerned about children's exposure to violence for many centuries. At a 1975 CRTC (Canadian Radio-Television Commission) Symposium on Television Violence, some historical facts of violence were discussed. It was observed that Plato was undecided whether Greek children should be told bloody and gory stories of the gods; the violence in eighteenth century nursery rhymes was attacked

by moralists in the nineteenth century; crime and horror comic books were eased from U.S.A. markets in the 1950s to return in the late 1960s; and in 1972 the U.S. Surgeon General reported that the results of extensive field studies showed "the more television violence the child watched the more aggressive he or she was in his attitudes and behavior" (p. 89). One conclusion of the symposium was that violence is a "thematic staple" of all forms of popular media.

The inadequacies of word count were again apparent, since working through violence to resolution of conflict can be in the form of violent fantasies and/or verbal aggression, whereas violent words out of context tend to imply physical violence.

Causes of Death and Grief Reactions

In the results of this study, significant differences in the causality of death between primary and middle years books were observed. In the primary books 57% of the deaths were due to illness accompanied by old age and 33% did not state a cause. On the other hand, all but one of the middle years books gave the cause of death and 50% of the deaths were attributed to external factors.

It is interesting to note that these findings mirror the mortality figures of North American society. The greatest percentages of death occur late in the life cycle and the primary books portray this fact. The young child

views death as something distant and non-personal and death due to old age or to an unstated cause coincides with his views. Death then was introduced in the sample books "in an area of relatively low emotional involvement" as advocated by Kliman (1968).

The middle years books are also "projective" (McClelland, 1961), since vital statistics show the leading causes of deaths for young adults are accidents and suicide. Kastenbaum (1977) uses the term "behavioural-environmental interaction" to describe the hazards of this age group. Students of the middle years can relate to these "death risks" and the feelings evoked by an "untimely death." A twin brother was killed in a freak car accident, a brother died of leukemia, and a father died from cancer. The presentation of such painful, realistic deaths suggests that there has been a response to a need (Green, 1975) for books which are more representative of children's actual death experiences.

A book like The Summer Before explores a child's reactions to the reality of an untimely death. Sandy, the protagonist, has a recurring nightmare about the car accident which killed her best friend Bradley:

> I close my eyes. Traveling very fast
> across the ocean, I can feel the wind,
> hear the sound of the waves. Boom, the
> waves explode and the car blows up and
> Bradley disappears forever, not even
> his black bones remain.
>   Once again, a living part of me

> says Hurry Up.   Nobody is going to
> find you now.
>   You can vanish forever.   (p. 169)

While describing the cause of death, the passage also
illustrates the complex grief reactions of the middle
years child.   In contrast, a primary years book like
The Dead Bird, in keeping with the "short sadness span"
(Wolfenstein and Kliman, 1966) of young children, offers
a relatively matter-of-fact portrayal of grief reactions.
In the story, the children pick up a dead bird, feel no
heart beat, plan and conduct a funeral, make a stone mar-
ker, and carry flowers to the grave.   However, they soon
forget and continue with their play.

The importance of mourning was stressed in the review
of literature (Furman, 1973) and 97% of the sample books
depicted grief reactions.   Earlier books showed a greater
number of protest reactions, as shown in this excerpt
from Grover (1970):

> They said she killed herself with
> a gun.   They wouldn't let him look at
> her room or even go down the hallway
> past it to his own.
> His father was someone he had never
> seen before.   He shouted at Aunt Marty
> and called Uncle Ab and the doctor
> terrible names and slammed out of the
> house and ran around in senseless cir-
> cles in the yard until Uncle Ab went
> out and slapped him and forced him to
> stop.   (p. 75)

As noted earlier, books published in the late period
portrayed more of the acceptance stage of grief.   An
example from Annie and the Old One describes how ten-year-

old Annie gradually learns to understand and accept death as a part of life.

> The sun rose but it also set.
> She knew that she was a part of the
> earth and the things on it. She would
> always be a part of the earth, just as
> her grandmother had always been, just as
> her grandmother would always be, always
> and forever. And Annie was breathless
> with the wonder of it. (p. 41)

There is concern, not just with regard to children's literature, that a model of the grief process is only theoretical and, therefore, not prescriptive for all individuals. It is noteworthy, therefore, that the children's books examined in this study do illustrate a great variety of responses and reactions to grief.

Doris Smith's A Taste of Blackberries completely portrays the stages of grief as expressed by an eight-year-old boy whose best friend, Jamie, dies when he is stung by a bee. Chuck wonders if he could have prevented the death; he stops eating and cannot believe Jamie is really dead. It was "like it was really a dream and we would all wake up any minute and there would be Jamie clowning around and making us laugh" (p. 46).

At Jamie's funeral, Chuck feels guilty because he is unable to cry. He tries to make the tears come by pressing his face into his father's coat buttons. That night, when his mother tucks him in bed, Chuck begins to sob: "The strange thing is I wasn't crying for Jamie, I was crying for me" (p. 47).

Chuck realizes it would not be disloyal to resume
eating and the story concludes when he visits Jamie's
mother and brings her a basket of blackberries.

> In my relief I felt that Jamie, too, was
> glad the main sadness was over. I wondered
> how fast angels, or whatever he was now,
> could move. (p. 58)

The consequences of a childhood failure to complete
mourning, namely, mental health problems later in life,
have been well documented in research studies (Bowlby and
Parkes, 1973; Feinberg, 1967; Furman, 1974; and Parness,
1975). The fact that this present study found the late
published books have an increased portrayal of the protag-
onist reaching the acceptance stage could reflect the
authors' awareness of current research.

Statistically, the relationship of the protagonist to
the deceased did not vary significantly in the sample
books. However, just as adult readers have access to
autobiographies of people with terminal illness (Alsop,
1973; Smith, 1975; Friedman, 1974; Gunther, 1950; and Lund,
1974), so do primary and middle years children have access
to stories told by the terminally ill protagonist (Slote,
1973; Elliott, 1963; Beckman, 1971; Klein, 1971; and Dixon,
1975). What is of importance in the autobiographical
presentations is the fact that the emphasis in these books
is on the quality of life rather than on the quantitative
aspect. In Sunshine, for instance, a young mother riddled
with cancer wants to have lucid moments with her young

child:

> "If you go off the medication,
> you will die," Dr. Gillman says.
> "I'm going to die anyway."
> She hesitates. "Probably, yes."
> "So, don't you see, I'd much
> rather die peacefully with some
> semblance of sanity than take the
> drugs and die a bit later than I
> might have naturally with no mind
> at all . . . That's what's happening
> to me. I'm losing my mind." . . .
> "I think Jill is lucky to have
> a mother who cares that much about
> relating to her." (p. 130)

Lifestyle Changes and Physical Aspects of Death

The two remaining categories, changes in the lifestyle of the bereaved and the physical aspects of death, showed no difference from early to late nor between primary and middle years books. However, it is worth noting that two books, Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs and The Magic Moth, categorized as non-factual, used a supernatural happening to help explain death: a falling star in the former and a white moth bursting from a cocoon and flying away as a spirit in the latter. In addition, the act of death in The Magic Moth is referred to by the euphemisms "leaving" or "being asleep," both of which may lead to misconceptions, perhaps even fear (such as a fear of falling asleep).

The results of this study confirm that authors of children's literature do recognize the cognitive level of their reading audience in respect to the concept of death and circumstances associated with the fact of death. A further observation from this study concerns the word count, a method which isolates the referent from its context, and thus fails to capture the impact of the meaning of the reality of death.

Implications for Parents and Teachers

The belief that thoughts and feelings about death need not be avoided but can be discussed freely instigated this study. Because of the way society protects children from the fact of death, communication between parent and child or student and teacher is easier and more meaningful when the adult feels comfortable discussing the topic of death. In a classroom setting a teacher could read some of the books examined in this study to enrich inter-actions between the student, teacher, and the rest of the class. An age-appropriate book for children's reading or adult/child reading may also be used in familial settings to help bridge the gaps in communication between the parent and child.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to systematically examine how death is portrayed in children's literature. Since death was a taboo topic during most of the twentieth century, and since the 1970s fostered a movement towards an openness in the discussion of death, it was expected these societal trends would be reflected in children's literature. Hence, the question was raised: has the mode or presentation of death in children's literature correspondingly changed over the years?

Furthermore, research shows the child's concept of death develops in stages which correspond to his level of cognitive development. Thus, a second question was asked: is death presented differently for various grade levels?

A method of content analysis was adapted from previously established procedures used in the study of children's literature. The 40 sample books were independently coded by three trained coders. Consensus among the coders was obtained for coding discrepancies.

Societal trends showed only a limited effect on the portrayal of death in children's literature. The grief reaction category was the only one to show change from

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the early to late published books. Early books portrayed more protest reactions of grief, whereas the late books showed more of the bereaved working through to the acceptance stage.

On the other hand, cognitive level was shown to be a significant variable with respect to the use of death words and death portrayal in children's literature. There was a significant increase in the middle years books in both the frequency and types of death words used. However, with the exception of the higher ratio of total death words among the primary books and the total violent words among the middle years books, death expressions in the middle years were proportionately similar to those used at the primary level.

From the examination of the manner of portrayal of death in the early and late published books, it became evident that, in fact, death need not be a stranger but instead can be familiar to the contemporary child. The findings of this study provided evidence that authors of children's books recognize the cognitive level of their reading audience in respect to the development of the child's concept of death and a child's reactions to grief.

In conclusion, the author of this present study suggests that books can be used to help a child in his continuous search for meaning about life and death, as a

therapy against loss, as a supportive aid to grief, and
as a tool to promote understanding and acceptance of death.

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    <u>death of a president</u>. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN SAMPLE

Armstrong, W. H. Sounder. Toronto: Scholastic Books
Services, 1969.

Bartoli, J. Nonna. New York: Harvey House, 1975.

Beckman, G. Admission to the feast. London: MacMillan,
1971.

Brown, M. W. The dead bird. Mass.: Young Scott Books,
1958.

Buck, P. The big wave. Toronto: Scholastic Books, 1948.

Cleaver, Vera and Bill. Where the lilies bloom. New
York: J. B. Lippincott, 1969.

Cleaver, Vera and Bill. Grover. New York: J. B. Lippin-
cott, 1970.

Coatsworth, E. The cat who went to heaven. New York:
MacMillan, 1930.

Cunningham, J. Wings of the morning. San Carlos, Califor-
nia: Golden Gate Junior Books, 1971.

dePaola, T. Nana upstairs and nana downstairs. New York:
G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973.

De Regniers, B. S. Boy, the rat, and the butterfly. New
York: Atheneum, 1975.

Dixon, P. May I cross your golden river. New York:
Atheneum, 1975.

Elliott, L. A little girl's gift. New York: Holt,
Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

Farley, C. The garden is doing fine. New York: Atheneum, 1975.

Fassler, J. My grandpa died to-day. New York: Behavioral Publications, 1971.

Hood, F. Pink puppy. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961.

Hunter, M. The sound of chariots. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Knatrowitz, M. When Violet died. London: Bodley Head, 1973.

Klien, N. Sunshine. New York: Avon, 1971.

Lee, V. The magic moth. New York: The Seabury Press, 1972.

Little, J. Home from far. Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1965.

Mikolaycak, C., Kismaric, C. The boy who tried to cheat death. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971.

Miles, M. Annie and the old one. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press Book, 1971.

Moody, A. Mr. Death: four stories. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Orgel, D. The mulberry music. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

Peck, R. N. A day no pigs would die. Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1973.

Powell, M. Jareb. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1952.

Rock, G. The thanksgiving treasure. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

Rogers, F. Tell me Mister Rogers about . . . when pets die. New York: Platt and Munk, 1975.

Service, R. The Shooting of Dan McGrew and the cremation of Sam McGee. In The complete poems of Robert Service. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1948.

Slote, A. Hang tough Paul Mather. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1973.

Smith, D. B. A taste of blackberries. New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1973.

Stein, S. B. About dying an open family book for parent and children together. New York: Walker and Co., 1974.

Tressalt, A. The dead tree. New York, Parents Magazine Press, 1972.

Viorst, J. The tenth good thing about Barney. New York: Atheneum, 1973.

Warburg, S. S. Growing time. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969.

White, E. B. Charlotte's web. New York: Harper and Row, 1952.

Whitehead, R. The mother tree. New York: The Seabury Press, 1971.

Windsor, P. The summer before. New York: Dell, 1973.

Zolotov, C. My grandson, Lew. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

APPENDIX B

Sample List Indicating Readibility,

Primary and Middle Years Category

And Total Words of Books

Author	Title	Readibility	Total Words (Estimated)
1. Primary Years			
Kantrowitz	When Violet died	2.2	240
Viorst	The tenth good thing	2.2	800
Zolotov	My grandson Lew	2.2	637
Rogers	Tell me Mr. Rogers	2.3	299
de Paola	Nana upstairs	2.4	682
Stein	About dying	2.4	402
Fassler	My grandpa died	2.5	804
De Regniers	Boy, the rat	2.6	2038
Hood	Pink puppy	2.8	3760
Cunningham	Wings of the morning	3.0	274
Bartoli	Nonna	3.1	1444
Brown	Dead bird	3.1	382
Miles	Annie and the old	3.2	12496
Warburg	Growing time	3.2	4945
Lee	The magic moth	3.4	9832
Mikolaycak	The boy who tried	4.0	6370
Slote	Hang tough Paul	4.1	36504

APPENDIX B (cont.)

Author	Title	Readibility	Total Words (Estimated)
Smith	A taste of	4.2	8468
White	Charlotte's web	4.3	23920
Buck	The big wave	4.4	11342
Tressalt	The dead tree	4.4	588

2. Middle Years

Farley	The garden is	4.5	46927
Whitehead	The mother tree	4.5	35427
Peck	A day no pigs	4.6	22880
Powell	Jareb	4.6	52056
Little	Home from far	4.6	29145
Rock	The thanksgiving	4.6	20636
Elliott	A little girl's	4.7	18260
Orgel	Mulberry music	4.7	23808
Cleaver	Grover	4.8	23517
Coatsworth	The cat who went	4.8	8609
Armstrong	Sounder	4.9	22504
Moody	Mr. Death	5.3	16626
Service	The shooting	5.5	1442
Beckman	Admission to the	7	21037
Cleaver	Where the lilies	7	44312

APPENDIX B (cont.)

Author	Title	Readibility	Total Words (Estimated)
Klein	Sunshine	7	53961
Windsor	The summer before	7	62062
Dixon	May I cross your	8	64714
Hunter	The sound of	8	64152

APPENDIX C$_1$

Pre-Test Form

Check in the appropriate place. Fill in answer if one
is required.

Book Title ....

Locale

North America.........
Other (state).........

Urban.................
Rural.................

Who died?   Animal.........
                Human..........
                Adult..........
                Child.........
                Male..........
                Female........

What was the relationship to the main character?

                Parent.........
                Grandparent.........
                Sibling........
                Friend.........
                Other (state).......

What was the cause of the death?

                Age...........
                Accident......
                Illness.......
                Suicide.......
                Violence......
                Other (state)..........

Is there any description of the appearance of the deceased?

                                    ....

Was the main character prepared for the death? Yes......
                By whom............
                Positive results...........
                Negative results...........

APPENDIX C₁ (cont.)

Who informs the main character of the death?...............

   Under what circumstances?...............................

What is the immediate reaction of the main character?

     ....

List the ways grief is portrayed in the story..............

....

....

....

Is there any reference to theological beliefs? Yes...No...

   If yes, give an example...............................

Do you feel any passage is placed in the story for a
psychological effect on the reader?.....................

Death words used   CONCRETE.......Death......
                            die, dead, dying......
                            buried.....
                            funeral....
                            kill.......
                            ....
                            ....

                  EUPHEMISMS.....is with the angels....
                            has gone asleep.......
                            passed on............
                            laid to rest.........
                            loss.................
                            gone to live with the
                                  angels............

                            ....
                            ....

APPENDIX C$_2$: CODER INSTRUCTIONS

1. Use a separate data sheet for each book in the sample. Put page number of book for all codings. (Books with unnumbered pages have page numbers which have been pencilled in by researcher.)

2. Death Vocabulary - List every word of death vocabulary and notate each time word occurs by giving page number. For example,

    bury 14, 14, 39, 42
    die 9, 10
    dying 7, 11, 40, 73, 73
    cancer of the blood 50, 59

3. Euphemisms - (Words or phrases used to avoid speaking of death) List all such words and phrases and notate page number for each occurrence. For example,

    passed on 42, 93
    gone away 15
    his time has come 7, 50

4. Reactions to death

    Protest - anger, guilt, denial of death
    Distress, disturbance - crying, loneliness, expressing
        sorrow, withdrawal, anxious, questioning,
        fearful
    Acceptance - remembering, making adjustments

APPENDIX C

2. SAMPLE OF FINAL DATA FORM

Book Title:

Death Vocabulary:

Euphemisms:

Relationship between the main character and deceased (e.g.,
    son, student, teacher, etc.)

Cause of death:

Changes in main character's life because of the death:

Reactions of the main character to the death:

    1. Protest:

    2. Distress, disturbance:

    3. Reorganization, acceptance:

Physical aspects of death: