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Ester Vidović

CONCEPTUALISATION OF DEATH IN OSCAR WILDE'S MODERN FANCIFUL TALE *THE SELFISH GIANT*: A COGNITIVIST APPROACH

The paper addresses the controversial nature of presenting the concept of death in children's literature. Young children seem to understand death at a relatively young age. However, there have been controversies related to how this topic should be addressed in children's literature. While some take a stand that children should be shielded as much as possible, others believe we have to present a true and honest image of death in literature. Oscar Wilde's modern fanciful tales provide a fertile ground for studying the concept of death. His fairy tales often do not have a happy ending, and in many of his stories, protagonists die unjustly, which gives children a more realistic picture of death. The concept of death in the story *The Selfish Giant* has been analysed via the Theory of Conceptual Metaphors, as proposed by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff and other scientists from a cognitivist background. The proposed metaphors are founded on spatial image schemas as well as primary metaphors, as elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson. Death in Wilde's stories is portrayed in subtle tones and in accordance with the philosophy of life cycles, as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, Wilde's poetic language makes the fairy tale a worthy and enjoyable read for young children.

Key words: death; modern fanciful tales; Oscar Wilde; conceptual metaphors

1. INTRODUCTION

Death has always been a delicate subject to tackle, especially when considering ways of explaining it to children. Many of us have certainly found ourselves in a situation where we considered the best and most considerate manner to communicate to a child that a family member, a neighbour or an acquaintance has passed away. Due to the delicacy of the issue and a reluctance to obtain feedback from children, their parents, and teachers on how children conceptualise death, there has been a scarcity of articles addressing this topic.

One hundred years ago, death was a quotidian component of people's lives. It was common for extended families to live together. Mortality rates were high, especially among infants and children, as well as adults in the prime of their lives, whose deaths were the consequences of a brief illness or a workplace accident (Longbottom and Slaughter 2018). In such large families, death was a common occurrence, as the body was usually exposed at home to allow for traditional rituals before burial or cremation (Ibidem). In this manner, children witnessed death almost on an everyday basis. Due to recent increases in geographical mobility and changes to family structures, contact between members of extended families has been reduced, leading to a decline in mourning rites and, consequently, to children's reduced exposure to death (Ibidem). Simultaneously, attitudes toward children's upbringing and children's exposure to death have changed dramatically in recent years. Adults predominantly believe that children do not have affective or cognitive resources to cope with death and the rituals and representations we usually associate death with (Gutiérrez et al. 2014). In Western countries, death is no longer perceived as an integral part of life but rather as an event children should be shielded from (Longbottom and Slaughter 2018).

Studies in children's understanding of death have a long history, dating back to the 1930s (Speece and Brent 1984). According to Longbottom and Slaughter (2018), the key components of death that have been most thoroughly studied in relation to an adult understanding of its concept include *irreversibility* (understanding that death is permanent and that there is no return to life), *inevitability* (understanding that all living things die), *cessation* (understanding that death causes a cessation of all life functions) and *causation* (understanding that death is the result of a breakdown of bodily functions). While earlier research from the 1970s (Brent 1978; Kastenbaum and Aisenberg 1972; Speece 1983) indicates that children as young as 18 months acquire some concept of death, it also shows that achieving a mature understanding of death is a lengthy process (Speece and Brent 1984). Some components of death are

quite difficult for children to “digest”. Speece and Brent (1984) outline that some children see death as a form of sleep or sickness and fail to recognise its irreversible nature (the concept of irreversibility), while some of them fail to see the cessation of certain bodily functions which occur with the onset of death (the concept of non-functionality). Moreover, many children believe death happens to others rather than themselves, their family members, or children in general, suggesting a limited understanding of the concept of universality.

Recent research has shown that the component that children acquire first, as early as the age of 3, seems to be irreversibility, while causation is mastered last, usually at the age of 8 (Curtis Mills 1979; Longbottom and Slaughter 2018). This is understandable since parents, who are typically the primary sources of information about death, introduce the concepts of life and life cycles early in their children's lives (Rosengren et al. 2014; Slaughter et al. 1999). In contrast to the concept of irreversibility, the concept of causality can pose a problem for children as parents' explanations may be insufficient, overly complex, or may lead to confusion due to parents' emotional reassurances (Longbottom and Slaughter 2018).

Besides parents, children learn about death from other adults or from the media, including literature (Ibidem). Children's literature has long conveyed messages about the world we live in. Despite the fact that literary portrayals of death are often children's initial exposure to the topic, it seems that the majority of books beloved by children do not address death (Gutiérrez et al. 2014).

2. THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

Literature for children has always treated death and sex as taboo subjects (Hunt 1994). There has been a tendency to soften sad moments related to the death of a fictional character. Hunt (1994) discusses the pressure exerted by manipulators of children's literature on the illustrator Richard Ardizzone to change the plot in the 1970 revised edition of his picture book *Lucy and Mr Grimes*. He was asked to keep a family friend alive, while the original version from 1937 featured the character's death. Ardizzone was not particularly pleased with this alteration because he believed children should not be sheltered too much from the hard and unpleasant facts of life.

Similar issues occurred with other media: E. B. White was asked to alter the ending of his book *Charlotte's Web*, namely the part in which the main character, the spider Charlotte, dies. In a similar vein, film critics criticized the death of Mufasa in *The*

Lion King. Both the writer and the film director refused to make alterations, leading to the book and the film being praised for their realistic portrayals of death. It seems that many books and films for children portray death by providing confusing, unrealistic, and potentially harmful information, which can in turn affect children's understanding of the concept of death, as well as attitudes towards it (Longbottom and Slaughter 2018).

Bruno Bettelheim (2000) argues that fairy tales not only help children understand life as a cycle but also help them overcome the fear of death. Thus, the typical ending *And they lived happily ever after* does not mislead young readers into believing in eternal life. Rather, it helps them understand that a lasting, mature love makes it easier for us to face the reality of the transient nature of life. In other words, finding true love diminishes the need for eternal life (Ibidem). The role of fairy tales in conceptualising death, as well as understanding a literary text with the help of conceptual metaphors, will be elaborated further in this article. It will address the writer's perspective and, to a lesser extent, the reader's viewpoint while also providing a historical and cultural context to the literature.

2.1. Modern Fanciful Tales

According to Herrero Ruiz (2007) fairy tales can be studied from many diverse theoretical angles including psychoanalytical, feminist, structuralist, anthropological and others. Before a cognitivist approach to the analysis of Wilde's fairy tales is applied, it is important to emphasise the author's contribution to the development of *modern fairy tales* or *modern fanciful tales*. These tales are authors' own creations and are characterised by advanced narrative techniques, detailed descriptions of characters, use of personification, setting, and time, stronger character motivation, revised principles of reward and punishment, and a move away from simplistic black-and-white characterisation (Pintarić 2008). According to Pintarić, the Danish author H. C. Andersen is considered to be the founder of the genre, while the British author Oscar Wilde perfected it (2008). Wilde's stories contain many of the characteristics of modern fanciful tales, in particular personification, which makes them convenient for the study of conceptual metaphors, in which abstract concepts such as death are frequently personified.

2.1.1. Oscar Wilde's Modern Fanciful Tales

Oscar Wilde's most productive years were during *the second* Victorian period (Chapman 1970), also referred to as the *post-Darwinian period*, which lasted from 1867 to 1901 (Newsome 1998). The initial enthusiasm and hectic pace of life in the first Victorian period, spanning from 1837 to the late 1860s (Chapman 1970), gave way to indifference and decadence during the final decades of the 19th century (Jackson 1950). Some interpretations suggest that people started feeling the consequences of the rapid developments in technology and transport that occurred during the previous period. Moreover, the working class struggled with poor living conditions in big cities, where diseases such as cholera, diphtheria, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, and many more flourished (Best 1971). These diseases affected everybody, particularly the youngest. Contemporary writers could not ignore the pervasive presence of death and Wilde was one of them.

The analysed fairy tale, *The Selfish Giant*, comes from Wilde's first collection of fairy tales, namely from the collection *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* from 1888. In his introduction to the collection, Wilde wrote that the stories were "meant partly for children and partly for those who have kept childlike faculties of wonder and joy" (Hodgkiss in Wilde 1994: XVI). Wilde would read these fairy tales to his sons, Cyril and Vyvyan, at bedtime. Abandoning the stereotypical happy ending, Wilde often concluded many of his fairy tales with the (often unjust) death of his protagonist. For example, some of his stories end with protagonists dying for love (*The Nightingale and the Rose*), friendship (*The Happy Prince*, *The Devoted Friend*), or a broken heart (*The Birthday of the Infanta*). In *The Selfish Giant*, death is portrayed as a natural consequence of old age, making the story accessible to young children who are familiar with the concept of life cycles.

3. CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS

Life cycles can be nicely understood with the help of conceptual metaphors. In order to illustrate how metaphor can be grasped through the concept of life cycles, it is necessary to explain how the metaphors function as a figure of thought, not only speech.

3.1. Cognitivist Approach to Metaphors

A significant shift in our understanding of metaphors dates back to the 1970s, spurred by breakthroughs across disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, psychology,

literary theory, computer science, and neuroscience. These advancements cast a new light on our understanding of the diverse cognitive mechanisms we resort to when experiencing the world around us. Research in the aforementioned disciplines addresses the millennia-old dichotomies between mind and body, cognition and perception, and rationality and sensation (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Advocates of this new cognitivist approach emphasize the role of experience, perception, culture, and society in cognition. While traditionalist schools propose “objective theories” of knowledge, which maintain a strict separation between body and mind, proponents of the cognitive approach support the experiential perspective. Cognitive linguist Raymond Gibbs pays tribute to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a predecessor of cognitivism who, as early as 1962, emphasized that we do not perceive a river as unrelated to our existence but as something enabling bodily interaction (Gibbs 2005). According to Lakoff and Johnson, leading figures in cognitivist thought, we are often not aware of these mental processes because the knowledge gained through experience and embodiment resides in our *cognitive unconscious*, that is “the totality of those cognitive mechanisms above the neural level that we have sufficient evidence for, but that we do not have conscious access to” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 17 number).

Lakoff and Johnson are the founders of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which stipulates that metaphors as mental processes are the basis of human conceptual mechanisms. Metaphors involve *mappings* between two domains: the *source domain* and the *target domain* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The target domain, being more abstract, is understood in terms of the more concrete source domain. This is a unidirectional process since mapping only occurs from the source domain to the target domain, allowing us to draw metaphorical conclusions about the target domain on the basis of the source domain (Stanojević 2009). Zoltán Kövecses emphasises that mappings are in fact a set of systematic correspondences between the source domain and the target domain (Kövecses 2002). In the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY, continues Kövecses, following mappings take place between the two domains (Kövecses 2002: 7):

Source domain: JOURNEY	Target domain: LOVE
the travellers	→ the lovers
the vehicle	→ the love relationship itself
the journey	→ events in the relationship
the distance covered	→ the progress made
the obstacles encountered	→ the difficulties experienced
the destination of the journey	→ the goal(s) of the relationship

Kövecses warns that the target domain did not encompass the above stated elements before it was structured by the source domain, i.e. journey. In other words, the concept of journey “designed” the concept of love. He elaborates his stand with the explanation that we cannot envisage the concept of love without using the elements such as the goal, choice, difficulty and others from the domain of journey (2002: 7). According to the cognitivist approach to the study of metaphors, abstract domains are structured with the help of concrete domains. The following sections explore conceptual metaphors related to another abstract concept, namely the concept of death.

3.2. The Role of Image Schemas in the Formation of Conceptual Metaphors

In order to understand the concept of conceptual metaphor, it is essential to explain the concept of *image schemas*, as they play a crucial role in the formation of these metaphors. Johnson (1987: 44) defines image schemas as a type of Gestalt structures or “coherent, meaningful, unified wholes within our experiences of cognition”. They are dynamic, recurring perceptual structures that aid us in experiencing the world and act as templates that provide a generic character to our experience (ibid). They consist of elements bound to definite structures, but are at the same time flexible since they can adapt to similar but different situations and in that way indicate a recurring structure (Johnson 1987).

Johnson provides a list of the most important image schemas, which include (written in small capitals as is a convention in cognitive linguistics): CONTAINER; BALANCE; COMPULSION; BLOCKAGE; COUNTERFORCE; RESTRAINT; REMOVAL; ENABLEMENT; ATTRACTION; MASS-COUNT; PATH; LINK; CENTER-PERIPHERY; CYCLE; NEAR-FAR; SCALE; PART-WHOLE; MERGING; SPLITTING; FULL-EMPTY; MATCHING; SUPERIMPOSITION; ITERATION; CONTACT; PROCESS; SURFACE; OBJECT; COLLECTION (Johnson 1987: 126). The author explains the omnipresence of the PATH schema which can, due to its repeating structure, be realised in various situations including “a) walking from one place to another, b) throwing a baseball to your sister, c) punching your brother, d) giving your mother a present, e) the melting of ice into water.” (Johnson, 1987: 28). The PATH image schema plays a significant role in the formation of the conceptual metaphors related to life and death, which will be illustrated in further text.

3.3. *Conceptual Metaphors of Life and Death*

Lakoff and Turner point at the complex character of the concepts of life and death, saying that they “are all-encompassing matters that there can be no single conceptual metaphor that will enable us to comprehend them” (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 2). We conceive of these two concepts in accordance with our understanding of time as linear and irreversible. According to Mark Turner, the conceptual metaphors we use when conceptualising life are the primary metaphor *PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS* and the conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY* (Turner 1996: 27). J. E. Grady, who introduced the concept of primary metaphors, perceives them as the constituent parts of complex metaphors and states that they appear unconsciously, automatically and naturally through the process of conflation, thereby resulting in cross-domain associations (Grady 1997). A lifetime is often conceptualised in terms of a year.

3.3.2. *A LIFETIME IS A YEAR*

In this manner, the target domain of a lifecycle is understood in terms of the source domain comprising four seasons in a year. Thus, spring, summer, autumn, and winter are mapped onto youth, maturity, old age, and death, respectively (Lakoff and Turner 1987). The authors emphasize that it is natural to conceive of life and death in this manner: while spring marks the emergence of new animal and plant life, winter heralds the dormancy/hibernation of both animals and plants (Ibidem).

Such an understanding of a lifecycle can be derived from the analysed fairy tale. In spring, the Giant's garden celebrates the arrival of flowers, blossoms on trees, fresh grass, and the chirping of birds. What it also celebrates is the arrival of schoolchildren to the garden, i.e. young people come to play in the garden in spring. In this manner, each spring in the garden marks the birth of animal and plant life and the arrival of children, while each winter announces the state of inactivity of both plants and animals, but also humans.

3.3.3. *DEATH IS WINTER*

The Giant's last winter maps onto his death. Wilde portrays death in his story in terms of a natural course of events. The slowness and inactivity of winter corresponds to the Giant's weakening and aging: as he grew old, he could not play with children any more and all he did was sit in his armchair and watch them play. Another primary

metaphor is functional in this context, namely LIFE IS UP, DEATH IS DOWN. The metaphor interprets life and good health as being associated with an upright position, full of energy and strength. On the other hand, death is conceptualized as a state of confinement to bed or a loss of uprightness, accompanied by diminished energy and strength. Thus the Giant sits in his armchair as he gets old, and his dead body is found in a lying position.

The arrival of what turns out to be the Giant's last winter maps onto the end of the Giant's life. It was his time to rest as well, since he was old and feeble, like everybody and everything rests during winter. The Giant "did not hate the Winter now, for he knew it was merely Spring asleep, and that the flowers were resting" (Wilde 1994: 38). While winter is the final season in a year, the old age is the final stage of the Giant's life. He was ready to die, knowing that he had reached the ultimate stage of his life.

3.3.4. DEATH IS DEPARTURE

This is a universal metaphor of death and originates from ancient times when, according to Javier Herrero Ruiz, people realised that organic corpses decomposed in nature, which made them think they were departing on a one-way journey (Herrero Ruiz 2007). One of the primary metaphors with the help of which we conceptualise death is EVENTS ARE ACTIONS (Turner 1996). We project an action in the source domain onto a state in the target domain. In the case of metaphors related to death an event with a nonactor (death) is conceived in terms of an action which includes an agent, i.e. a causal actor (Turner 1996). The causal actor becomes a metaphorical actor and is often personified (Ibidem). While there is principally no movement in death as a target story, in the source story there is an agent who goes on a one-way journey. This conceptualisation of death is marked in language in expressions such as *He's gone* or *He's left us*. (Ibidem)

Projecting from a source domain of action onto the target domain of state would not be possible if there was no similarity in the structure of image schemas between a source and a target: in the source space someone who has been present departs for good, while in the target space someone/something that has existed goes out of existence for good (Turner 1996).

The conceptual metaphor DEATH IS DEPARTURE, as elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson (1999) is conceived via the PATH image schema, where a trajectory moves along the ground. Thus a traveller departs on a voyage, while a dead person embarks on a one-way journey to a new destination.

The Giant leaves this world and continues to exist in some form in heaven. In this process, he is helped by a little boy whom he originally meets when he welcomes schoolchildren back to his garden. The little boy never reappears in the garden to play with other children, and the only other time he does is at the very end, when he assists the Giant in his transition to the other world. This metaphorical journey to a “better place” or Heaven is universally understood since, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the deceased goes either to paradise or hell, with purgatory as a temporary spot on the way to paradise. In this way the metaphor is culturally and socially determined.

The conceptual metaphor DEATH IS DEPARTURE conceptualises death in terms of a one-way journey, with the dying person being the traveller, the starting point corresponding to the life on earth that the dying person is abandoning, while the final point of the journey maps onto the arrival of the soul into the Kingdom of Heaven. The boy, who is the Giant’s companion to heaven, takes him to another beautiful garden, namely the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is a difference between the Grim Reaper, who is the most ubiquitous personified character that symbolises death and takes lives in any part of the life cycle, and the figure of the companion, who gently accompanies the dying person to another world (Turner 1996). Portraying death in subtler tones can soften the experience young readers undergo when facing the concept of death in literature.

3.3.5. *DEATH IS A MOVER AND MANIPULATOR*

Through this metaphor we perceive death as an agent who comes up to you and manipulates you in “your hour of death” (Turner 1996: 47). In this way the figure of the little boy can also be seen as a mover and manipulator, as the agent who seizes the Giant’s soul and takes it to his “garden”. Besides the little boy, time as well can be understood as a mover and a manipulator. According to Turner, time “catches up with you, wears you down, races against you, stops you, takes your youth away, your beauty away, your friends away, and your family away” (Turner 1996: 46). In Wilde’s story his main character, the Giant, “grew very old and feeble” (Wilde 1994: 38). He eventually loses his battle with life as a result of the natural changes that time has imposed on his body.

5. CONCLUSION

In his modern fanciful tale *The Selfish Giant* Wilde portrays death in terms of a journey to a “better place”, the Paradise. Wilde’s self-admitted conversion to Christianity at the end of his life may have been announced in this fairy tale. The agent that accompanies the main character, the Giant, to another world is portrayed in the form of a Christ-like figure with wounds on the palms of his hands. Such a depiction of death is based on Judeo-Christian belief in a “life after life” and on the conceptual metaphors through which we conceive of death in terms of a journey, passing time or a season (winter).

The conceptual metaphors were addressed from the perspective of the principles of the Theory of Conceptual Metaphors as advocated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, but also via the principles of some other theories proposed by scientists of a cognitivist provenance. The concept of death in children’s literature has been a contradictory topic. Tendencies to apply a frank and direct approach to addressing death in children’s literature seem to prevail in recent times, and thus authors who refuse to change the sad ending in their stories or films are now praised by both professionals and children’s parents. However, the historical and cultural momentum of the creation of a literary work has to be taken into consideration as well.

Oscar Wilde’s modern fanciful tales were created during a period when children were faced with death almost on a daily basis. Modern fanciful tales by Oscar Wilde provide a fertile ground for an analysis of the concept of death with the help of conceptual metaphors. Being a figure of thought, as well as a figure of speech, metaphors are a powerful tool to help children understand the realities of life. Wilde’s story *The Selfish Giant* gives children an opportunity to perceive death as a universal phenomenon which does not affect only plants and animals, but also humans. Since children also acquire the principle of causation at a young age, they are able to comprehend that the main character dies of natural causes, the consequence of which is a cessation of bodily functions. The principle of irreversibility is challenged, though, since Wilde allows a possibility of life after death. The story is a worthy read which gently portrays death as part of life cycle.

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KONCEPTUALIZACIJA SMRTI U SUVREMENOJ FANTASTIČNOJ PRIČI OSCARA WILDEA *SEBIČNI DIV*: KOGNITIVISTIČKI PRISTUP

Sažetak:

Rad se bavi problematikom kontroverzne prirode prikazivanja koncepta smrti u dječjoj književnosti. Čini se da mala djeca posjeduju razumijevanje smrti u relativno ranoj dobi. Međutim, postoje kontroverze vezane uz način na koji bi ova tema trebala biti obrađena u dječjoj književnosti. Dok neki smatraju da djecu treba što više zaštititi, drugi vjeruju da im treba predstaviti istinitu i realnu sliku smrti kroz dječju književnost. Moderne bajke Oscara Wildea pružaju plodno tlo za proučavanje koncepta smrti. Njegove bajke često nemaju sretan završetak, a u mnogim njegovim pričama protagonisti umiru nepravedno, čime se djeci daje realističnija slika smrti. Koncept smrti u analiziranoj priči *Sebični div* analiziran je putem teorije konceptualnih metafora koju su razvili Mark Johnson i George Lakoff te drugi znanstvenici kognitivističke orijentacije. Predložene metafore temelje se na prostornim slikovnim shemama kao i primarnim metaforama, kako ih elaboriraju Lakoff i Johnson. Smrt u Wildeovim pričama prikazana je u suptilnim tonovima i u skladu s filozofijom životnih ciklusa, kao i judeo-kršćanskom misli. Uz to, Wildeov poetski jezik čini bajku vrijednim i ugodnim štivom za malu djecu.

Ključne riječi: smrt; moderne bajke; Oscar Wilde; konceptualne metafore

Author's address

Adresa autorice

Ester Vidović

University of Rijeka

Faculty of Teacher Education

ester.vidovic@ufri.uniri.hr