Death in children's literature against the background of selected child and childhood research approaches

SANDRA KWAŚNIEWSKA-PASZTA[1]

[1] University of Warsaw, Faculty of Education, ul. Mokotowska 16/20, 00-651 Warsaw., Poland. ORCID: 0000-0001-5164-5763, Email: sandrakwasniewska511@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The present publication deals with the sensitive topic of the social taboo of death with regard to the process of the child's education and development, with particular focus on the use of thanatological literature as a factor shaping the child's personality. The text presents the perception of the death by children, and the essence as well as functions of thanatological literature. Presented are also selected analytical categories of literary texts, among which an objective and a subjective approach to the child and childhood can be distinguished. The first approach is consistent with the perspective of the childhood sociology shown in the article and the post-colonial theory, while the second approach refers to mainstream developmental psychology and the colonial theory. The articles also shows the impact of child and childhood research approaches on four well-known literary works for children (at the kindergarten and pre-school age), dealing with the discussed topic. The selected research method consists in qualitative analysis of the content of the books. The works have been selected due to their popularity and presence in scientific publications on the topic of death in children's literature. Based on the analysis of content values of the four literary works, it can be concluded that respect for the child's subjectivity and the value of their voice supports development of the youngest, among others, in the aspect of dealing with the sensitive topic of death. In the modern world, dominated, among others, by worship of youthfulness and physical strength, which has a significant influence on the shape of the education, thanatological education becomes an important challenge which cannot be neglected.
KEYWORDS: thanatological literature, death, education, child, childhood studies, sensitive topic

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the need of de-tabooization of death in social space and to emphasize the importance of subjective approach to a child in the context of conversations with children about death, based on thanatological literature for the youngest. It is worth mentioning that the topic of death in children's literature is being explored internationally (including in Poland) by researchers such as, among others, Joanna Haynes, Karin Murris (2012), Martin Salisbury, Morag Styles (2012), Sandra L. Beckett (2012), Angela M. Wiseman, Katarzyna Slany (2016), Alicja Baluch (1994), Dorota Wojciechowska (2005), Krystyna Zabawa (2012), Maciej Skowera (2013) and Elżbieta Więckowska (2005), Anna Józefowicz (2017), Lesley D. Clement, Leyli Jamali (2016).

The article presents the process of understanding death by children. It also shows factors affecting the manner in which the youngest ones interpret death. Those reflections are supported by selected results of scientific research conducted, among others, by Birgitta Johansson and Gun-Britt Larsson, and concerning the way children perceive the topic of death. Thanatological literature is characterized and its functions are distinguished in the context of supporting the education process and child development. Also, conditions are presented which allow children and adults to be open to a dialogue about death. An analysis of contemporary research on childhood is presented, conducted from two perspectives of the sociology of childhood and the mainstream psychology, as well as the colonial and post-colonial theory in the context of childhood research. Those reflections help establish and describe categories of analysis of the four selected literary works for children with regard to the taboo of death. That analysis allows to draw specific conclusions, concerning, for example, the method of supporting development of children, among others, in the aspect of dealing with the sensitive topic of death.

For the purposes of the article, four popular literature works for children at a pre-school age were analysed in the context of the taboo of death. The works are: *Złota różdżka. Czytajcie dzieci, uczcie się, jak to niegrzecznym bywa źle* [Golden Wand. Children, read and learn how bad things happen to the naughty ones] by Heinrich Hoffman (1987), *Pinokio* [Pinocchio] by Carlo Collodi (2012), *Żaba i ptasi* śpiew [Frog and the Birdsong] by Max Velthuijs (2015) and *Czy tata płacze*? [Does Daddy cry?] by Hilde Ridden Kommendal (2008). The methodological framework of the study has been established as the qualitative method of analysis (Łuszczuk 2008). In the contents of those works, the author looked for dependencies between the way of talking about death, and the image of a child and childhood presented in the given work.

The topic of taboo in culture certainly bears numerous meanings. A taboo in art, in particular in children's literature, is a place full of complex and overlapping specific dependencies. De-tabooization of difficult topics in books for children is a violation of that what is *sacred*, since in the society, literature belongs to the sphere of sacrum. Nevertheless, it often presents both marginalized and de-tabooised contents and forms strictly related to humanity. In this sense, the society becomes democratic (Cackowska 2013:20), and the child is perceived as an active subject who creates their

social world (Ornacka 2011) and at the stage of childhood, participates in execution of the project of politicization thanks to the process of production, distribution, and reproduction of socially constructed knowledge (Cackowska 2013:20).

Reflections on the taboo in children's literature are strictly related to the meaning and understanding of the position of a child and childhood, since contents of the works, reflecting a specific social and cultural perspective, always disclose particular attitudes of adults towards childhood. According to William A. Corsaro, the interpretation of the term "childhood" depends mainly on the culture and the organization of the given society (Corsaro 2011:7). Still, according to Peter Hunt, the image of childhood as resulting from various discourse formations presented both by authors and publishers of children's literature is one of the strongest cultural influences (Hunt 2008:62).

One of important taboo topics discussed in books for the youngest readers is death. It has been proven that both parents and teachers are afraid to talk to children about illness, suffering and death (Królica 2012:193), which might result in anxieties in children, as well as create emotional distance between the child and the parent (Deręgowska 2015). The incapability to deal in the emotional sphere with such a difficult event as death of a close person may have far reaching consequences in from of, for example, emotional disorders (Deręgowska 2015). The reason for the observed phenomenon of excluding children from the uncomfortable but cognitively important topic of death (also in a situation of the process of the closest ones dying) could be the conviction of adults that such topics have a detrimental effect on children (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74; Kirwin & Hamrin 2005:62). According to Murray Bowen (2004), protecting children against mourning leads to a situation when they develop unrealistic phantasies related to life and death, which continue to accompany them also in their adult lives. According to the American psychiatry professor, adults should be open to every question asked by a child after a close person dies.

Already Janusz Korczak in his work *Magna Charta Libertatis* (Korczak 1929) wrote about excessive parental care, which in consequence limits the child and isolates it from life. The first item of that work was the right of a child to die (Męczkowska–Christiansen 2013:192). This right shows that "children are people, and not reservoirs of adult fears, plans and hopes" (Czernow 2018:28). According to Astrid Męczkowska-Christiansen (2013:192), this right established by Korczak is also the right of a child to live a full life through "active experiencing of the world and their own capabilities within it". Also as a lecturer, Janusz Korczak strongly emphasized the respect for the child as a person (Liebel & Markowska-Manista 2017), and pointed out the importance of subjectivity, equality and individuality of a child's experience (Ciesielska 2020). In particular in the context of the topic of death discussed in the present article, the above-mentioned key right in the pedagogics of Janusz Korczak becomes, in a way, a guideline to treat a child as a human, capable to discuss various issues, including difficult topics such as death. Perception of a child as a human of equal value and with equal rights is present also in thanatological literature, which becomes a safe tool to familiarize children (as active subjects) with death, as its language is adapted to their knowledge and abilities. Thanks to children's literature, which talks about death and

dying, and grieving, a young reader has to opportunity to observe and get to know those areas of human life, which due to specific cultural factors and psychological resistance of adults are being avoided or pushed into the background. Reflection of a child on that aspect of life definitely enriches their world and teaches them that death is an unavoidable part of every existence (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74-77).

According to Brendy Tofanenko, talking with children about difficult topics is important and requires from adults, among others, knowledge on how to deal with emotions and emotional problems of young people (Trofanenko 2009). Still, due the social taboo, difficult topics are often neglected (Machul-Telus & Markowska-Manista 2011:236; Machul-Telus & Markowska-Manista 2017). A dialogue on difficult topic is particularly important with regard to contemporary changes in the social and cultural life, strictly connected to elements of the global cultural ecumene (pop culture, modern information and communication technologies, consumerism, mediatisation, etc.) (Peret-Drążewska & Peret 2016:255). That culture is characterized by variability and superficiality, and, therefore, does not create an environment which would help children, among others, learn how to approach death (in mass media, death is often presented as funny, reversible, unreal, or scary) (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018:72).

UNDERSTANDING OF THE DEATH PHENOMENON BY CHILDREN

"Taboo topics are not known to children, they are introduced by adults" (Sehested 2012:19). Often the reason to create a taboo topic is the strong need of adults to protect children against unpleasant emotions. A situation is created when topics are avoided which are considered harmful by adults, give rise to strong feelings, or which cannot be understood by children because of their young age (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:72). Research of Maria Królica proved that kindergarten and pre-school teachers avoid responsibility for problems of their wards, "they abandon the attitude of a mature listener or mediator of the reading matter, instead choosing mechanisms of negation, denial, tabooization of death and children's experiences in that scope" (Slany 2018).

The neglect of death in social life, and the disappearance of rituals accompanying the funeral (Zakowicz 2011:60; Kruczkowska 1986:174; Stoiński 2001:164) as well as the aforementioned lack of readiness on part of parents and educators to talk with children about death definitely contribute to the fact that this topic is considered not only a taboo, but also to be harmful (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74). Undoubtedly, the failure to engage in conversations with children about life and death has a negative impact on shaping of their awareness in this area. According to Natali Ruman, adults often fear an open and honest discussion and emotions of the child in a situation of their real encounter with death. Therefore, they do not approach the child as a subject and a partner, and fail to acknowledge, among others, the child's competences, agency, and power. This results from the lack of knowledge of adults about the emotional development of children and their cognitive abilities (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74).

Meanwhile, it has been proven that even the youngest children already have spe-

cific knowledge on the topic of death and are naturally interested in it (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:71). One can refer, for example, to empirical studies of Birgitta Johansson and Gun-Britt Larsson (2018:148), which showed that children often think about death (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2018:148). Dorota Wojciechowska (2005:200) points out that children understand changes related to experiencing death and suffering, which is confirmed by the acceptance of those phenomena in fairy tales for the youngest recipients.

Expanding the awareness of this topic among teachers and parents would allow them both to support the child's development (without neglecting existential issues) and to react properly in a situation of actual experiencing of death by children (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:73).

Research of Virginia Slaughter and Maya Griffiths has shown that an open discussion with children about death and discussing its biological aspects do not give rise to fears in children, but rather diminish them (Slaughter & Griffiths 2007). According to Aleksandra Tobota and Beata Antoszewska (2017:212), the fear of death is necessary for correct development and shaping of attitudes towards death. Inadequate experiencing of death can result in a high level of fear in children, which may have a negative influence on them (Antoszewska & Tobota 2017:212). An example can be a situation of sudden death (or many losses) as a result of a random event, which might cause shock, trauma, pain, and violent emotional reactions (Frączek 2017:157). The range and force of damage related to such events pose a risk for the mental balance of the child (Ford 2010). It is also worth mentioning that children who experienced posttraumatic stress as a result of a loss of a person close to them are prone to additions and risky behaviours. Symptoms of posttraumatic stress include hyperactivity, tension, irritability, or nightmares (Dąbkowska 2002). On the other hand, a low level of fear or lack thereof is equally detrimental (Antoszewska & Tobota 2017:212).

A consequence of neglecting and denying death as a social phenomenon can be, among others, the inability to cope with emotions and the feeling of being left alone (Kielar-Turska 2008). One should emphasize also the role of the adult, whose task is to support the natural development of the child, taking into account the child's interest in various phenomena and processes which are present in the consciousness and the environment of the child, among them death. Thanatological education certainly cannot be ignored, however, it is important to maintain healthy proportions in that space. The topic of death should not obscure life but contribute to its affirmation, allow to meet one's goals and face of challenges as well as show respect towards other people and animals (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021).

The latest data on the perception of death by children more and more often include also the infant stage and are also supplemented by information how children grieve. According to Joanna Sztobryn-Bochomulska (2021:76), the child gradually starts to be perceived as a subject experiencing and participating in social and ritual life, just like adults do. In particular in this context, parents and teachers should be aware of how a child understands death at the given moment of their life. Presented below is the characteristic of a child's perception of death:

(i) Children from 4-5 months up to 3 years old:

- children react in a similar way to the lack of presence of their close ones caused by absence, travel, and death;

- when children experience separation from a close person for a longer period, they feel sad and reach a state close to mourning, as characteristic for adults (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:77);

- three-year-olds understand the notion of death in a primitive way, but have a limited ability to understand its consequences (Galende 2015:96);

(ii) Children aged 2-4 (pre-operative stadium of cognitive development):

- death is considered by children a separation and another form of life;

- children may identify death with travel or dream (Kielar-Turska 2008:325);

- children do not fear death and do not refer it to themselves;

- about four-year-olds become interested in the topic of death (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:77);

(iii) Children aged 5-10 (stage of operative thinking and concrete operations):

- five-year-olds understand death as separation; they are afraid they will be left alone and that their parents will feel alone after they die; some children worry that the dead cannot move and are unaware that the dead cannot see or feel anything;

- most children aged six understand the irreversibility of death, its causality (death always has a physical cause), as well as the fact that vital functions stop;

- children aged seven mostly understand the universality of death;

- for most children aged eight, the lack of feeling after death is understandable;

- about ten-year-olds begin to fully understand „constant attributes of death – its universality, unavoidability, and irreversibility" (Kielar-Turska 2008:326).

Just like an adult, a child is an active subject who "perceives death as a fact in a third person dimension, experiences emotions related to the loss of the close ones, and eventually, can also become its main participant. However, contrary to adults, children do not understand death in a mature way. They do not fully understand the totality and finality of the force which determines also their own lives. Due to their intellectual and emotional immaturity, children's perception of death develops gradually" (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:85). The understanding of death is, therefore, of a developmental nature and corresponds to stages of cognitive development by Jean Piaget (Kotowicz 2012:180)

According to Robert Kastenbaum (1977), the way children interpret death is strictly related to their cognitive development, personality, personal experience, the social and cultural context as well as communication and support from their environment.

It should also be noted that a child is being constantly subjected to the influence of modern culture, which often provides both false and distorted images of death (e.g., death as a spectacle for the viewer in the unreal reality of media or computer games) (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74; Kuligowski & Zwierzchowski 2004:9). In the canon of modern literature, death is depictured as funny, fascinating, and scary, unreal, reversible. Therefore, one could say that the manner of depicting death is inconsistent with the facts and inadequate for the age of the children (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:74).

The importance of parents' approaches in the process of creating the image of death for children was shown by research of Maria Królica (2009:135). The analysis of drawings made by six-year-olds proved that death depicted by their authors referred mainly to religious and funeral symbols. Based on that, it can be concluded that children's notions are affected by family traditions and not, as it could seem, modern pop culture (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:78).

To sum up the above reflections, it can be concluded that the awareness of the process of shaping the perception of death in children, as presented above, is significant for the process of education in terms of building relationships between the child and the adult (parent or teacher). Knowledge of the contents described in the above subchapter can be helpful in the context of understanding children's behaviour, as well as increasing the awareness of the importance of de-tabooization of death in contemporary world, which simultaneously supports the general development of the child. Furthermore, such knowledge could also be promoted, e.g., through kindergarten and pre-school educators at various workshops for parents, or online webinars.

THANATOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CHILD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TABOO OF DEATH

Before the 20th century, there was much more focus on the mortality of children, its causes, tombs, burials, and eschatological issues, rather than on emotions which accompany the parents and the siblings. It can be observed that in the case of a death of a child, the perspective of the adult dominates both in the material, social and psychical as well as aesthetical sphere (Waksmund 2018:61). According to Ryszard Waksmund, it is difficult to oppose the narrative of an adult with the viewpoint of a child who also witnesses dying, participates in the funeral, and assigns the same weight to the death of a close person as to the death of an animal, or even a toy (Waksmund 2018:61).

Thanatological literature created in the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century criticizes the model of a conservative adult (parent and teacher) (Slany 2018:38). Development of global thanatology was influenced by the hospice movement, referring to the aid for the ill and dying, represented by English-speaking researchers, such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Cicely Saunders. Furthermore, thanatological concepts were also shaped by the French movement providing philosophical and anthropological reflections on human life, represented, among others, by Philippe Ariès, Louis-Vincent Thomas, Edgar Morin, Michelle Vovell, Vladimir Jankélévitch (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:13).

The discussed literature has four functions—familiarizing, therapeutic, supportive, and normalizing (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018: 75).

The first of the listed functions of thanatological literature is to familiarize children with death and dying. Authors of the aforementioned literature use the principle of discursiveness of death, presenting it as a natural stage of existence of all living things, and a part of the perpetual cycle of nature (Czernow 2018:28). Modern authors reminding readers about the universality of death point out that the kindergarten and pre-school age is the so-called age of questions, when children express their curiosity about the world by asking numerous questions, also concerning difficult issues. Such talks usually are a challenge for the caretakers, who prefer to avoid them because they do not consider themselves competent interlocutors (Królica 2009:202). That is why many works dedicated to the youngest show concrete methods of dealing with death. In texts directed at children, various familiarizing strategies can be found. They include, among others:

- showing the cyclicality of life and death on example of plants and animals,

- presenting burial rituals, as well as making children aware that they have the right to grieve,

- talking to children about illness, including more and less serious diseases, and how it affects a person (Slany 2018:40-44).

Therefore, the discussed literature affirms formation of a partner dialogue with the child, consistent with the formula of the naturalistic approach to death and the practice of affirmation of life. According to authors of thanatological literature, such works could "neutralize fears and support openness for word/image also in other texts for children, whose target recipient is devoid of age, which means that the young ones and the older ones can offer each other a lot in terms of interpretation, as well as emotionally" (Salisbury & Styles 2012:78-79).

The second task of the researched literature is the therapeutic function, which consists in providing the reader with a substitute experience aimed at "working out a different assessment of the event, one's participation in it, or the coping strategy, which helps reduce negative emotional tension" (Molicka 2011:154). According to Joanna Papuzińska, texts about death, which belong also to the so-called literature of darkness, accompany the reader in their suffering and make them feel not alone in experiencing it (Papuzińska 1996).

Support is the third role assigned to children's literature dealing with death and dying. In this aspect, the themes of thanatological texts encourage the reader to reflect on the essence and sense of their own life. Death is inseparably connected to life, so its meaning in human life cannot be marginalized. The discussed literature allows to understand the essence of death and encourages to perceive life as a unique and unrepeatable event (Adamczykowa 2004:29). The world presented in the discussed literature is constructed in such a way as to, among others, show the importance of interpersonal ties, life values (love, friendship), and attitudes of the protagonists who experience difficult situations, such as suffering, illness, and death. That way, such

literature encourages the reader to reflect on the quality and meaning of life.

The last function of thanatological literature is the normalizing function, which aims to present the category of death in a different dimension than the one functioning in modern culture, which is not a natural one (Zamarian 2015). Thus, children's literature overcomes the social taboo, becoming a medium for an image of death which deepens the knowledge about the death itself and has a shaping impact on the child's personality (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018:81).

The four functions of thanatological literature, as described above, show that death is an inseparable part of human life, which should be talked about in order to familiarize the child with this difficult topic, which children will have to face at some point in their life. That way, such literature contributes to de-tabooization of the socially difficult topic of death.

According to Sandra L. Beckett, expert in children's literature dealing with the topic of death, the best way to explain those phenomena to children at kindergarten and pre-school age is to emphasize biological concepts of seasons of the year (Tychmanowicz 2018:108). All what happens in nature is a metaphorical version of vital processes of every organism. That way, nature becomes an example of the same processes people are subject to (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:13). In this sense, presentation of death as a change of the ontological status can be observed already in kindergarten education, in which the world is shown as dynamic and non-homogenous and children are provided with knowledge on the "cyclicality of passing of days and nights, months and seasons of the year" (Korczak 2018:208).

Certainly, work with a child in the context of the discussed literature both at school and at home depends also on the good will of the adult, their competences, and awareness (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:70), as well as upbringing and their cultural background. A factor which might impact the openness of children for dialogue on the topic of death is, among other, readiness of teachers "for thanatological education realized within the framework of the educational curriculum. This, however, requires their preparation already during their university studies" (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:70). According to A. Zamarian (2015:78), the new model of thanatological education, based on supporting the individual in the process of growing up to full humanity, as well as on dignified experiencing of life at its every stage (also in the perspective of death) should become the object of both theoretical and empirical studies, since development of scientific research conditions the aforementioned academic education. This seems an issue of particular importance due to the fact that, as observed by Artur Fabiś, actions taken in educational circles in the area of thanatological problematics, are of intuitive and spontaneous nature (Szewczyk 1998).

Contemporary texts employing strategies of familiarizing young audience with death certainly contribute to the so-called de-institutionalizing of death, which in the closest environment of the child, their family and school has the status of a topic which is not talked about, or even prohibited (Slany 2018:54). In the opinion of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in consistence with the psychological immunization as a process of full preparation of a child for life, which is strictly connected to the adequately early activation of their internal resistance, a child should be included by adults in the topic

of death, since thanks to that, the child is able to deal with this particularly difficult topic in a way in advance (Kübler-Ross 1996:69-71). Besides, thanatological literature requires from adults not only openness to talk about death, but also to approach the child as a subject who becomes a partner in socially significant discourses (Slany 2018:40). It also supports the shaping of an attitude preventing repression of feelings and allowing deepened reflection on human existence, which is also related to the ability to ask oneself and others non-standard and metaphysical questions, regardless of one's age (Zabawa 2012:271).

A CHILD IN SELECTED RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES—PRESENTATION OF SELECTED ANALYSIS CATEGORIES OF LITERARY TEXTS FOR CHILDREN

An exemplification of the changing understanding of a child and childhood shall be presentation of the transformation which took place in the image of childhood in modern age societies belonging to the European cultural circle. In the 19th century, a child was viewed as a project to complete, which manifested itself in giving the child specific tasks to fulfil. In the religious vision of a child, those tasks involved mainly ensuring continuance of the family and salvation of the individual (Slany 2018:40). The scientific movement rooted in the Enlightenment's project of reconstruction of the world depicted the child as the future citizen of the state (Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska 2012:27). Only in the 20th century, a child stops to be perceived as a project, and becomes value, a person who has the right to create themselves and the world around them. In the post-modern age, the child acquires the status of a partner in relationships with adults, and has the right to co-decide about matters important to them (Buliński 2007). Noteworthy are also educational practices of parents belonging to individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In an individualistic culture, a child is considered an independent, assertive, self-reliant, creative person, capable of intelligent action. In turn, in collectivistic cultures, children are considered persons dependent on adults and able to subordinate their individualist goals to social goals and standards (Matsumoto & Juang 2007). The example of socialization presented above, functioning in different types of cultures, shows that childhood is a social construct which emerges from tradition as well as different political, social, economic relations and technological progress. Based on the examples provided above, one must conclude that childhood is strictly related to factors such as, e.g., social class, gender, place of living, background culture, or health (Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska 2012:27).

Contemporary research on childhood is conducted, among others, from the perspective of assumptions of the mainstream developmental psychology and the new sociology of childhood. Differences between those two research approaches are shown by their constituting ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. In developmental psychology, ontological assumptions point out that a child is foreseeable developmentally, less important to adults, and in the centre of research, but outside the social and cultural context. Within the framework of epistemological assumptions concerning the knowledge of a child, the researcher's task is to collect objective findings on universal principles of a child's development. Furthermore, it is

assumed that the adults' knowledge of children is of much higher value than the children's knowledge. On the other hand, according to methodological assumptions of the research of a child, the social and cultural context is eliminated in the research process, and the child becomes the object of research, which is conducted in controlled conditions, using standardized tests. Therefore, quantitative methodology dominates in the discussed approach (Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska 2012:27-30) (Hogan 2005:25).
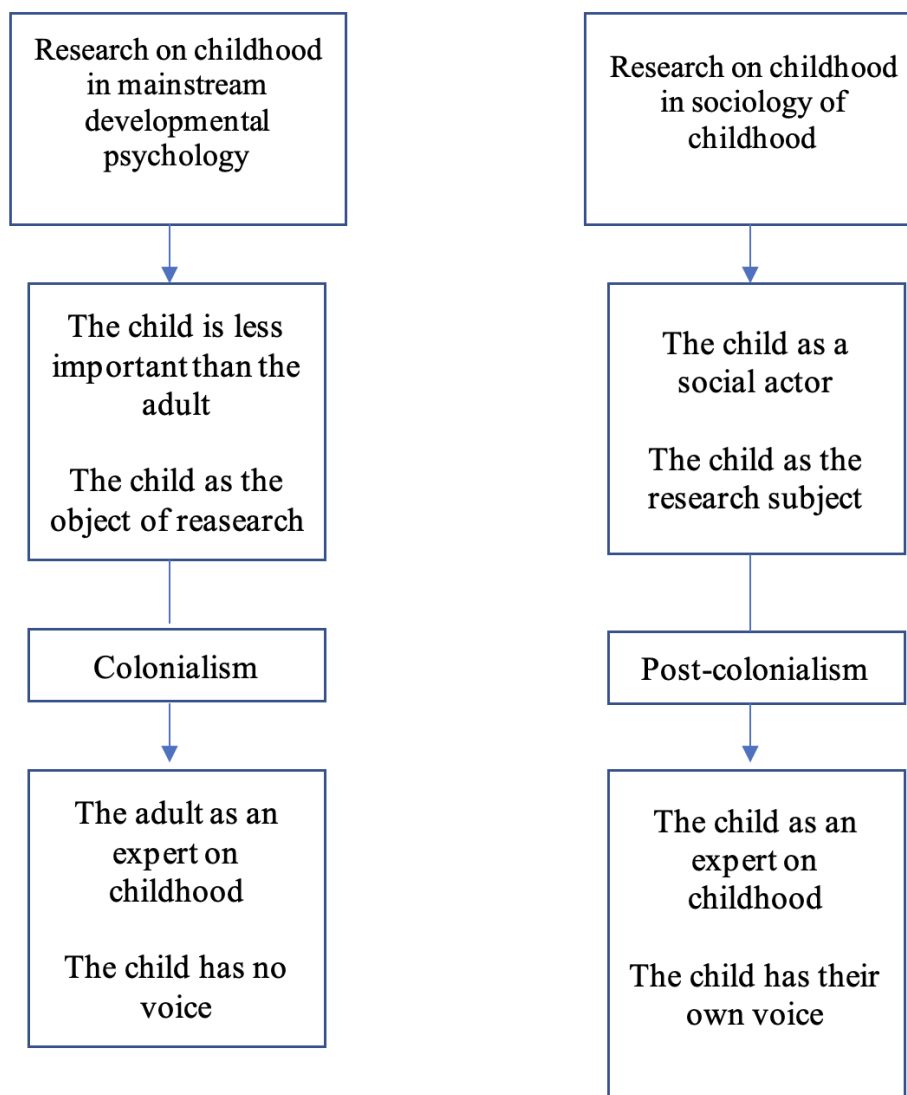
Research with children in the new sociology of childhood, in terms of ontological assumptions, presents life and development of children in a broad social and cultural context (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). That approach emphasises the basic thesis of the discussed research perspective, which is the multitude of ways of experiencing life and the surrounding world by children. Children are considered "subjects actively constructing and determining their social life, the life of people around them and the communities in which they live" (Jenks 2008:112). Children become co-authors of their own biography, and through actions in a group of peers, they also generate their own cultural world (Corsaro 2005). The discussed paradigm also formulates epistemological assumptions, which refer to the need of co-constructing by children and adults (as cognitive subjects) of knowledge concerning subjective childhood worlds. Furthermore, research assumptions within the framework of the new sociology of childhood, lead to the application of the qualitative methodology (Garbula & Kowalik-Olubińska 2012:30-31). Methodological assumptions of research with children indicate that the researcher must take into account the social and cultural context in which children are placed. It should be emphasized that children become active research subjects, who have the right to express themselves about their own experience, and that way, their perspective of perceiving childhood (Woodhead 2008:10).

Perception of children as social actors and active subjects (Jarosz 2020), as well as initiating and conducting of research "from the children's perspective" definitely contribute both to their emancipation (Ozkul 2020) and to actions directed against modern practices of childhood colonization (Markowska-Manista 2018:60). In this sense, Manfred Liebel postulates the so-called decolonization of childhood, understood as a multi-dimensional process regarding various aspects of social, political, cultural and economic inequalities, related to specific situations of children and adults, as well as imbalance of power between various age groups (Markowska-Manista 2020:16; Liebel 2020).

According to Urszula Markowska-Manista (2020:16), the past thirty years led to a change in the paradigm, and reflection on methods of researching and understanding children, their rights and childhoods in various areas of life, such as, among others, upbringing, education, care, or health. Thus, it is particularly important to draw attention to protection of children's rights in the context of marginalization, discrimination, as well as social, cultural and political exclusion of children, who in practice do not feel that children's rights help them in everyday life. Therefore, the postulate of decolonization of studies on childhood and children's rights can be considered important and socially useful (Budde & Markowska-Manista 2020). It indicates the need to change the way of thinking both about children's rights and children themselves, perceived as important experts and informants about their issues and situations, since

one cannot understand the perspective of a child, who is an expert on their childhood if one ignores the child's voice (Cheney 2018). Undoubtedly, research conducted within the framework of critical post-colonial studies on childhood, directed at rights of a child, their "de-colonisation", subjectivity, participation, could eliminate the negative phenomena described, and that way support children, who are neglected in the political, social and cultural majority discourse (Markowska-Manista 2020:17).

In this approach, the above-mentioned research on childhoods and children's rights should be not only the area of adult researchers, but should also provide a place for children as researchers (Alderson & Morrow 2020), who, if needed, can receive advice. The minors should be treated not as a passive object of the research, but as an active partner in the research process (Markowska-Manista 2021).

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│ important than the  │              │ social actor        │
│ adult               │              │                     │
│                     │              │ The child as the    │
│ The child as the    │              │ research subject    │
│ object of reasearch │              │                     │
└─────────┬───────────┘              └─────────┬───────────┘
          ▼                                    ▼
┌─────────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Colonialism         │              │ Post-colonialism    │
└─────────┬───────────┘              └─────────┬───────────┘
          ▼                                    ▼
┌─────────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────────┐
│ The adult as an     │              │ The child as an     │
│ expert on           │              │ expert on           │
│ childhood           │              │ childhood           │
│                     │              │                     │
│ The child has no    │              │ The child has their │
│ voice               │              │ own voice           │
└─────────────────────┘              └─────────────────────┘
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Source: Own work based on J. M. Garbula, M. Kowalik-Olubińska (2012) and U. Markowska-Manista (2018).

It should be noted that this approach comes close to the research perspective discussed above, as proposed by the sociology of childhood, simultaneously constituting

a discourse of the "new" childhood, in which the subjective perspective of the child is important with regard to assessment of their own situation (James & Prout 1997). According to Ben-Arieh and Tarshish, the changeability and evolution of discourses concerning children can be depicted as a shift from the category of the child's welfare and the child as the object of care to the category of the child' well-being, which should be understood as "subjective experiencing of the good quality of life and own well-being" (Ben Arieh & Tarshish 2017). Those two researchers define the discourse of research on childhood as a positive orientation, resulting from the fact that the weight was shifted to questions concerning possibilities of improvement, directions for strengthening and support, as well as the use of the individual and environmental potentials. The researchers also point out to the convergence of the discourse of the child's welfare with the discourse of children's rights (Jarosz 2017:70).

To compare the discussed discourses from the perspective of the mainstream developmental psychology (showing the child as the object of research and a being less important than adults) and from the perspective of the sociology of childhood (presenting the child as a social actor and research subject), as well as post-colonial research on childhood, one can use the figure to present their characteristic traits, similarities and differences.

The categories of the child and childhood in the perspective of the mainstream developmental psychology and the sociology of childhood, including influence of colonial and post-colonial theories in the context of research on childhood, as presented above, constitute analytical categories for the selected literary works for children, dealing with the topic of the taboo of death, which are discussed in the next chapter.

A CHILD AS AN OBJECT AND SUBJECT OF RESEARCH, AND THE TABOO OF DEATH IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Simultaneously to the increase of contemporary interest in difficult and sensitive topics, which are generally described as taboo topics, a new tendency can be observed in children's literature to talk directly about death (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:120). However, it should be noted that death functioning in children's literature also underwent changes. According to Małgorzata Gwadera, presentation of death in works directed at the youngest was and still is dependent on both cultural and social perspective (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:121). One must also keep in mind that each work for children also includes a specific vision held by the adult with regard to the child and the world in which they live (Cackowska 2013:21), and literature has unquestionable importance for the development of the human due to, among others, emotional, aesthetical, cognitive values, etc. (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:121).

In this sub-chapter, the author analyses four works for children at the kindergarten and pre-school age.

The research method was the qualitative content analysis. The author is interested how the selected works depict death and what image of the child and childhood emerges from the contents of the given text.

Analytical categories of texts include:

(a) Child as the subject (as proposed by the sociology of childhood), including the perspective of the colonial theory considering the adult to be an expert,

(b) Child as the object of research (as proposed by the mainstream developmental psychology) in the area of childhood, including the post-colonial theory considering the child to be an expert in their field (childhood).

Golden Wand. Children, read and learn how bad things happen to the naughty ones by Heinrich Hoffman, published in 1844, is the most representative example of a didactic story written as a warning. In the discussed work, child protagonists face drastic punishments, or even demise, which is grotesque and simultaneously cruel (Czernow 2018:22). The book had international and historically lasting success (Czernow 2018:23).

One of the stories told is a tale about a boy who did not want to eat. For being a fussy eater, he was punished by starving to death (Fati 2015:64).

On the fifth day, something chokes him in his chest and throat/The one that does not eat soup, must die./So it was with Michaś, who was healthy and fat,/For five days he was fussy, on the sixth day, he was dead. (Kozak 2016)

Death depicted as uncompromising and indisputable is supposed to raise fear and anxiety, and becomes a punishment for the child's behaviour, in this case—not eating. The adult does not ask about the reasons for the child's behaviour, their welfare, possibility to improve the situation, since the adult has the full knowledge of the child's needs.

A particularly expressive motif of death and dying as a punishment for a child protagonist was used by Carlo Collodi in *Pinocchio* (Czernow 2018:22). "The scheme of a 'plotline triptych' (warning—wrongdoing—punishment) is repeated multiple times, the wooden recidivist always strays from the path of virtue, each time suffering unpleasant consequences". Similarly as in the Hoffman's work, death serves as a so-called bogey and appears when the puppet refuses to drink bitter medicine—at which time, he is confronted with the vision of his own funeral (Czernow 2018:25).

After those words, the door opened and four rabbits entered the room, black as ink, carrying a coffin on their shoulders. – What do you want from me?! – Pinocchio screamed, and sat on his bad, terrified. – We came for you—said the largest rabbit. – For me? But I'm not dead yet! – Not yet, but if you refuse to take the medicine which would pull you out from fever, you have just a few minutes of life left! (Collodi 2012:74)

The child presented in the abovementioned works is treated as an object and a problem. This is indicated, among others, by the lack of clear focus on individual experiencing of existence by the child protagonist, and lack of reflection on improvement of the quality of his life. On the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on consequences of his actions. Death is supposed to raise fear, it appears as the highest punishment which cannot be disputed, and the world of the child's emotions is pushed to the background, often neglected, or completely unnoticed. Furthermore, the adult has full

knowledge of the child, his childhood and needs. Thus, the child has no voice of their own, as it is taken away from him by adults. In this context, it must be said that the abovementioned stories written for children as a warning, and using for this purpose the motive of death as a punishment, show the child from the perspective of the mainstream psychology and colonialism, as an object of research. The child depends on the adult, who has comprehensive knowledge of the child and their childhood.

With regard to the motif of death as a punishment, presented above, it must be noted that a sudden lack of a parent, a caretaker or a close person can be perceived by a child as an intentional action, or even punishment. That is why it is so important for caretakers to support the shaping of the notion of death in children, in order to eliminate the risk of solidifying the false understanding of death (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:192).

On the other hand, the classic picture book by Max Velthuijs, entitled *Frog and the Birdsong* (Velthuijs 2015) is of contemplative nature, contains philosophical content, and allows the child to understand that death is a natural end of life. The work refers to the naturalness and the processual aspect of death. This is a tale of a bird which sings beautifully, but dies. Other animals feel sad because of its death and bury it properly. In time, animals start to play again and announce that life is beautiful, according to the epicurean motto *carpe diem* (Velthuijs 2015:42). The cyclicality of life and death, shown using a metaphor in form of plants and animals, may help children project their own experiences to processes taking place in nature (Slany 2018:43). Furthermore, "in this text, death becomes one of the basic existential topics, presented in a simple and gentle way, adequately to the age of the recipient" (Slany 2018:43).

Among contemporary publications which aim to help a child deal with the death of a close person, the book by Hilde Ridden Kommendal entitled *Does Daddy cry?* should be mentioned. This is a story about the fact that death of a close person gives rise to various emotions, for example, anger. "The strong dad, who was the head of the family, worked on the farm and played with his sons, starts to disappear. He does not have the strength to handle everyday affairs, even to play with his children. Eventually, he goes to the hospital and dies there. The sons, in particular the few-years-old Olav, one way or the other had to accept the fact that they can no longer play with their father, and that their mother is crying, although they are very angry about it" (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018:301). Lack of a parent can be perceived by the child as abandonment. In order to deal with the loss, the child often applies defence mechanisms (in this case, denial) (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018:192):

I am not sad because Dad is dead, I did not like him at all—insisted Olav. Olav looks at photos of his Dad and knows that he was nice. But sometimes, looking at the same photos, he says that Dad was stupid. (Kommedal)

According to Beata Stachowska, a psychologist working at a hospice and managing support groups for families in mourning, that story is a perfect guideline, showing how to accompany orphaned children in their grieving process. The content of the story are conversations held by the mother with her five-year-old son (Woda 2012:18). In those talks, it is clear that the boy's mother is emphatic, accepts the child's emotions,

supports them—also when Olav says that he is not sad because of his dad's death and that he did not really like him.

The two books discussed above are inspired both by thanato-pedagogics, postulates of the hospice movements, and the post-humanistic discourse concerning the de-tabooization of death in modern societies. In those works, the subjectivity of the child manifests itself in the way of talking about death, which is adapted to the age and capabilities of a small child. Death is something which happens and lies in the nature of every being. Also, the child protagonist is treated as a subject functioning in the social and cultural context, and their "voice" is respected and, most importantly, heard. Therefore, the object of the discourse is no longer (as in Hoffman's and Collodie's works) the child as a problem, but problems faced by children and the subjective perspective of showing their experience and looking for methods to improve the quality of children's lives in this scope (Jarosz 2017:71). Based on the above-mentioned examples of literary works, one can see that the child is shown in the perspective of sociology of childhood and post-colonialism, considering the child to be a subject and a social actor, having their own voice and being an expert in the area of childhood.

In the 20th century, the way of thinking about the child and childhood changed. In this period, movements emerged proclaiming the child's autonomy. This definitely had a huge impact on children's literature. An example is the change of the motive of dying of children, who gradually stopped dying as an example or a punishment (Slany 2018:28). The humanistic approach to upbringing, which started at the beginning of the 20th century, influenced the change of the literary motif of death, shown from the existential perspective (Fati 2015:64). As a result of the abandonment of authoritarian pedagogical systems, the motif of death, on one hand, became a new inspiration for authors, and on the other hand—started to function in the sphere of a taboo, as a topic too scary, too difficult, and also too sad for the child, whose psyche needed to be protected, according to the 20th century spirit (Fati 2015:29).

According to Dorota Wojciechowska, in contemporary works for children, the index of taboo topics has been extended to include the problems of death, pain, illness, and suffering. However, it must be emphasized that those topics usually come up in specific contexts and approaches, and are subjected to the basic composition principle, according to which the story must end in a pleasant and nice way (Skowera 2013:128). It should be added that the terror of a happy ending forced artistic restrains on authors (Wojciechowska 2005:197). Contemporary thanatological children's literature shows individuality as well as intimacy and naturalness of death. More important and more valuable than off-hand remarks about death are wise conversations with the child, allowing the child to prepare for such final events and to get a proper distance to death (Slany 2018:41).

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted review of theoretical issues related to the understanding of death by children, the essence and function of thanatological education, as well as the analysis of the selected works based on the categories of analysis of the child and childhood, as

presented in the article, show that treating the child as a subject in terms of a dialogue with children about death supports their comprehensive development.

The discussed process of shaping the understanding of death by children develops gradually due to the emotional and intellectual immaturity of the child. The way children interpret death depends, among others, on their cognitive development, personal experience, the social and cultural context, as well as support from the closest environment of the child. It was also shown that children are naturally interested in death, and an open conversation about it does not cause fears in children. This is also confirmed by the selected scientific studies presented in the text, conducted by researchers such as, among others, Virginia Slaughter and Maya Griffiths as well as Birgitta Johansson and Gun-Britt Larsson. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the knowledge of the process of perception of death by children is important from the perspective of education. This refers to the relationship both between the teacher and the child as well as the parent and the child. Also, the knowledge of the discussed contents may contribute to better understanding of motivations of children's behaviours.

The characteristic of thanatological literature discussed in the other part of the article allowed to distinguish its four functions: familiarizing, therapeutic, supportive, and normalizing (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2018:75). Based on those functions, it was proven that such literature familiarizes the child with the topic of death, contributes to reduction of emotional tension, encourages reflection on the essence and sense of life, and abandons the social taboo of *distorted death* through affirmation of the category of death, which, in turn, shapes the child's personality. In terms of working with children in the context of the discussed literature, both at home and at school, it was noted that the use of such literature by adults in the context of upbringing depends on their will, awareness, and competences. The openness of both children and adults to a dialogue about death certainly depends on the teachers' readiness to offer thanatological education within the scope of the curriculum, and this is closely related to the academic education of future educationists. Such education should be preceded by deepened research in terms of theory and empiria (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:70). Certainly, results of such research would allow to determine the status of education in the context of achieving mature understanding of death in the process of both formal and informal education (Zamarian 2015:78). It should be noted that such research is also interesting from the point of view of development of children, who tend to spend more and more time in front of a TV or a computer screen (Wilczek-Różyczka 2002:17). In accordance with the canon of contemporary literature, the world of mass media depicts death as funny, scary, unreal, but also reversible, thus presenting death to children in a false way (Fati 2015:64) (e.g., presenting violent death as a result of a murder as well as violence in movies or computer games) (Sztobryn-Bochomulska 2021:177).

Furthermore, reflections aimed at determining and describing the categories of analysis of the four selected works for children in the present article showed that children's literature always constitutes a specific vision of the child and the world, and those visions shape the identity of the young recipient. Based on the presented transformation which took place in the understanding of the child and childhood over the

last three centuries, a reference was made to contemporary research on childhood, conducted from two perspectives: the sociology of childhood, and the mainstream psychology. Likewise, the analysis of the two aforementioned discourses allowed also to show similarities in the perception of the child and childhood with regard to the colonial and post-colonial theory in the context of research on childhood. Therefore, as categories for the analysis of children's texts dealing with death, selected were: the child as a subject, a social actor, and an expert in the area of childhood (sociology of childhood, post-colonialism), and the child as an object, less important than the adult, and the adult as an expert in the area of childhood (mainstream developmental psychology, colonialism).

The exemplification of depicting the child in children's literature about death based on the abovementioned analytical categories and the related research perspectives, was the analysis of the following works: *Golden Wand. Children, read and learn how bad things happen to the naughty ones* by Heinrich Hoffman, *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi, *Frog and the Birdsong* by Max Velthuijs, and *Does Daddy cry?* by Hilde Ridden Kommendal. The two first works are warning stories, in which death becomes a penalty for the improper behaviour of the child. The fact that the child in the discussed literary works was perceived as less important than adults and as a problem resulted in an approach to the child as an object, which is consistent with the optics of perception of the child and childhood by mainstream psychology and colonialism. It was also proven that such an image of the child in literature was influenced by the then functioning philosophy of the child and childhood. Abandonment of authoritarian pedagogical systems is reflected in the last two works representing contemporary thanatological literature, based, among others, on the post-humanistic discourse referring to the tabooization of death in the modern world. Contrary to the first two works, here, death is not a punishment, but something which simply happens as it is part of the never-ending cycle of nature. Thus, the emphasis in the works by Velthuijs and Kommendal on the child as a competent being, functioning in the social and cultural context, and the search for solutions to problems of the child and that way, improvement of the quality of their life, makes those stories consistent with the perspective of the sociology of childhood and the post-colonial theory of research on childhood.

In literary works for children, one can find a specific image of the child and childhood. Treating the child as a subject in the context of the topic of death definitely supports the child's correct development and is expressed, among others, by the openness of adults for a dialogue with children about that topic. That holding of a dialogue is clearly visible in the contents of highly artistic thanatological literature, which does not make one fear death, but familiarizes it through specific language adapted to the age and perceptive capabilities of the child. Familiarizing the child with the topic of death seems particularly important from the point of view of modern culture which approaches death in an unreal way, as well as scientific research confirming that lack of support from the child's environment regarding that topic may result in emotional disorders when the child experiences real death in their own life. Undoubtedly, knowledge of thanatological literature dealing with death in a familiar way, and related to the perception of the phenomenon of death by children in the context of the child's

development should be popularized, especially among parents as well as future and present teachers. It is the adults who open before children a path to a dialogue about death, which is part of existence of every person (Grzybowski 2009:9).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sandra Kwaśniewska-Paszta, MA, is a Doctoral Candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw. She is interested in education, schooling, childhood studies and children's rights issues.