

# Death as a Character and Its Philosophical Depiction in Children's Books

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*The analysis of the various depictions of death and its changing function in children's literature is of both social and literary interest. The aim of this paper is to explore and demonstrate how children's picturebooks legitimize and encourage the philosophical depiction of the concept of death and, at the same time, the philosophical thinking of children by allowing them to engage with existential questions in a developmentally appropriate manner. Death as a character is represented as global and irreversible through the interplay between text and imagery. The studied picturebooks 'trigger' the philosophical investigation of the concept of death and, through philosophical 'connections', encourage children to bestow meaning on their world, each in its own way.*

*Die Analyse der verschiedenen Darstellungsweisen des Todes und seiner sich wandelnden Funktion in der Kinderliteratur ist sowohl von sozialem als auch literarischem Interesse. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, zu zeigen, wie Bilderbücher für Kinder die philosophische Darstellung des Todeskonzepts legitimieren und fördern und gleichzeitig das philosophische Denken von Kindern anregen, indem sie es Kindern erlauben, sich auf eine altersangemessene Art und Weise mit existenziellen Fragen zu beschäftigen. Der Tod als Figur wird grundlegend durch das Zusammenspiel von Text und Bild als global und unumkehrbar dargestellt. Schließlich regen die untersuchten Bilderbücher, jedes auf seine eigene Weise, die philosophische Untersuchung des Todeskonzepts an und ermutigen Kinder, durch philosophische 'Verbindungen' ihrer Welt Bedeutung zu verleihen.*

## Introduction

Death, a universal constant, remains one of humanity's most profound enigmas, sparking diverse reactions ranging from reverence to fear. Historically intertwined with the fabric of universal tales and myths, death's portrayal in literature serves as a mirror, reflecting society's evolving attitudes and beliefs about this inevitable fate.

Within the realm of children's literature, this reflection takes on an added layer of complexity. Young minds, inherently curious yet still developing their cognitive frameworks, encounter the concept of death with a blend of innocence and wonder (Dolto 40; Nagy 3–27). While adults may shroud death in layers of taboo, avoidance, or mysticism, children's literature seeks to offer a more candid, albeit tailored exploration of this theme. This paper specifically focuses on the examination of death within three European children's picturebooks, selected for their impact on the philosophical engagement of young readers with the concept of mortality. Through a detailed analysis of these narratives, set against the backdrop of the late twentieth to the early twenty-first century, this study aims to unravel how death, transcending its traditional portrayal as an event or an end, emerges as a character with whom one can interact, whom one can question and understand. By exploring the ways in which these books frame death – philosophically and visually – this research endeavors to illustrate how children's literature in Europe has served as a medium for encouraging children to ponder, reflect, and ultimately derive meaning through the intriguing interplay between life and death.

### **Evolution of the Portrayal of Death in Children's Literature**

Historical children's tales frequently utilized death as a lesson. Aesop's fables, for instance, employed animals to convey moral lessons, occasionally highlighting the unpredictability and inevitability of death. For example, in "The Ant and the Grasshopper", the Grasshopper spends the entire summer singing and enjoying the weather, neglecting to prepare for the winter. In contrast, the Ant works diligently to store food for the colder months. When winter arrives, the Grasshopper finds itself starving and begs the Ant for food. The Ant, reflecting on the Grasshopper's earlier choices, declines to assist, leading to the Grasshopper's demise from starvation.

As societies evolved, particularly within the context of the Christianization of Europe, children's tales began to reflect the influence of Christian doctrines, portraying death not merely as an end but as a passage to the afterlife. Through these narratives, children were introduced to the concept of an afterlife where moral conduct in life influences one's fate beyond death, aligning with the Christian emphasis on virtues and moral rectitude as pathways to salvation (Ariès 30).

In the literature for children during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a notable trend emerged: the realistic portrayal of violence and death (Kimmel 265–68; Reynolds and Yates 153–54). While the Christian idea of salvation still permeated societal beliefs, the literature of the time began to address the harsh realities faced by children. This shift can be seen as part of a broader transformation in societal attitudes toward death. The high child mortality rates, combined with frequent incidents of child abandonment and the public executions of criminals – events that were often witnessed even by young children – painted a grim backdrop against which these stories were set (Butler). This period marked a continuation of the centuries-old struggle with child mortality, providing a somber context for children's literature.

Yet, within this setting, another trend developed: literature began to serve as a tool for disciplining the child, intertwining moral lessons with harsh consequences for misbehavior. An especially illustrative example of this trend can be found in *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845) by Heinrich Hoffmann. Intended as a series of moral lessons for children, the stories feature a variety of gruesome fates for children who misbehave. From the boy who refuses to stop sucking his thumb and then has it cut off by a tailor to the girl who plays with matches and ends up burning to death, the lessons are clear and uncompromising. These stories, harrowing to the contemporary reader, served as cautionary tales, aimed at instilling discipline and moral values, a reflection of what Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* as the increasing tendency to discipline and control bodies, including the youngest members of society. As Strong suggests (qtd. in Plotz 2), the collapse of innocence, especially when represented by a child, is the true theme

of the Victorian era, illustrating a societal shift towards using literature to instill discipline and moral values amidst the harsh realities of the time.

Other tales of the era also encapsulate this trend (Tatar 49). For example, *The Juniper Tree* (1812) by the Brothers Grimm presents a grim tale where a wicked stepmother kills her stepson and serves him as a meal to his father. Also, in *The Red Shoes* (1845) by Hans Christian Andersen, a young girl is forced to dance non-stop in her cursed red shoes until she begs an executioner to cut off her feet. Such fairy tales, jarring as they might seem now, used fantastic elements to teach lessons about the very real dangers and consequences of stepping out of line in a world that was often harsh and unforgiving.

Later, children's literature began to liberate itself from its overly utilitarian and moralistic direction, placing more emphasis on children's entertainment, humor, and sensitizing them to social issues. From the early twentieth century up to the 1970s, it can be observed that taboo subjects started to be removed from children's literature. This change reflects a broader societal shift, where the emphasis was on preserving the innocence and joy of childhood, shielding children from distress and trauma (Petkou 2). As a result, many authors of the era believed in protecting young readers from life's harsh realities.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, themes such as death were often depicted as taboo topics for a child audience.

In the twenty-first century, the landscape of children's literature has transformed significantly, and the theme of death is not a taboo anymore (Gibson and Zaidman 232). Every child, now more than ever, is recognized for their inherent right to intellectual freedom, personal growth, and an authentic understanding of the world. This acknowledgment aligns with the principles set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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1 Reflecting on the trend of avoiding taboo topics such as death in children's literature, it strikes me as a response intertwined with the bleak circumstances of two world wars. These periods of conflict introduced unparalleled levels of grief and loss, also touching the lives of children. Thus, the efforts of the era's authors to shield their young readers resonate with me as an attempt to safeguard childhood innocence, aiming to cast a ray of hope and maintain a semblance of normalcy in a world overshadowed by turmoil.

(2019), which emphasizes the importance of respecting children's rights to access information, to freedom of thought, and to seek, receive, and impart ideas of all kinds. As we navigate this era, it is imperative to equip the younger generation with the tools to comprehend and accept loss and death as natural facets of existence.

### **Literature, Philosophy, and Childhood: Delving into the Inevitability of Mortality**

The interplay between literature and philosophy with children has been a long-standing conversation (Theodoropoulou, *Searching Philosophy* 12–41). In an article entitled “Do children think philosophically?” Richard Kitchener, a proponent of the Piagetian theory, has made the claim that children cannot do “real” philosophy (426–27). On the other hand, Go, an opponent of the above view, raises two main issues: “The real possibility and right of philosophy to be addressed and produced by children, centered on the nature of itself and the danger of its alteration”, and “Are children capable of philosophical thought and what benefits will they derive from the acquisition of it?” (119–20).

The first issue that inevitably arises is perhaps the contentious question of “What kinds of concerns are included under the term philosophy?” (Theodoropoulou, *Philosophy for Children* 11–46). Briefly, I argue that philosophy, above all, is critical discourse that excels with inherently philosophical tools. It is, in other words, an inquiry that is itself philosophical. However, following this clarification, the question arises: “What do we mean when we talk about philosophy with/for children?” (Theodoropoulou, *Philosophy for Children* 11–46). Its practice, through teaching, means that our interest is focused on the child itself, aiming for them to gain awareness of themselves and the world. This activity aims to activate children and cultivate their capacity for dialogue, reflective inquiry, and critical thinking.

The American philosopher and educator Matthew Lipman conducted extensive research into the philosophical capacities of children (*Philosophy for Children* 17–33). He argues that children are not

just capable of understanding philosophical concepts, but that they can deeply benefit from such engagements (Lipman and Sharp 53). Children, with their insatiable curiosity and burgeoning cognition, are innate philosophers. Alison Gopnik, a renowned psychologist and author, explores this concept in her work, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*, in which she argues that young children's minds offer profound insights into the most fundamental aspects of human nature. Gopnik presents evidence that children's early experiences and thought processes are not just simplistic or immature versions of adult cognition, but instead represent a uniquely flexible and imaginative way of engaging with the world (5). She suggests that by studying how children think, feel, and explore we can learn much about the essential qualities of love, truth, and the meaning of life, shedding light on how human cognition develops and functions at its most elemental level (5). Lipman's initiatives in philosophy for children demonstrate that philosophical discourse can enhance critical thinking, moral reasoning, and even democratic sensibilities in young minds (*Thinking in Education* 28–56). His works, such as *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (1974), introduce children to complex philosophical ideas through relatable narratives, opening paths to logic, ethics, and even metaphysics for them.

Children's inquiries, particularly those that begin with "why", offer them the possibility of unfolding questions with philosophical aspects. According to Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan, philosophical questions formulated by children belong to the field of: a) metaphysics ("what is it? life, death, time, number, intellect"), b) logic, related to argumentation ("what follows from this?"), and c) of ethics ("what should/ should not be right?") (33–40). We are therefore talking about a pre-philosophical activation of human thought, signified by the innate curiosity that leads children to ask questions resembling the onset of philosophical thinking. These questions emerge from what we describe as 'philosophical receptors', the mental faculties or inclinations that spur children to question, ponder, and seek a deeper understanding of their surroundings. Encouraging the activation of these receptors entails creating an environment that values inquisitiveness and the pur-

suit of insight. It involves guiding children not just to accumulate facts, but to weave these facts into a meaningful narrative about the world and their place within it. Research conducted by Lipman showed that children's ability to "philosophize" is achieved at the age of 10–11 years and especially prominent at the age of 11–13 years, an age range that corresponds to Jean Piaget's "stage of formal logical operations" or "the period of abstract thinking" around 11–15 years of age (qtd. in Papailia, *Issue of Death* 113).

Introducing children to philosophical concepts, especially one as inevitable as death, requires a delicate touch, and literature can become the necessary instrument to do this (Kohan 2–8). Karin Murriss, in her doctoral dissertation in 1997 inspired by the P4C project by Lipman, proposed picturebooks as mediums for philosophical discussion with children. After the initial conception of the idea, Karrin Murriss wrote the book *Picturebook, Pedagogy and Philosophy* (2012) with Joanna Haynes, which also makes use of picturebooks to explain and illustrate complex and abstract ideas, concepts, and philosophical considerations. Picturebooks represent a multimodal genre that places equal value on text and illustration, where images and words collaborate in the storytelling process (Nikolajeva and Scott). Images expand the text, filling in the gaps left by words and adding layers of meaning and emotion that text alone cannot convey. Indeed, the 'gaps' between words and images and the ambiguity of meaning create a space in which readers bring their own experiences and knowledge to the reading process (Ekonomidou 239; Papailia, *Wordless Books* 45–47). In these gaps, in other words, philosophical thinking can thrive.

As the twenty-first century progresses, with its rapid technological advancements and shifting societal norms, it becomes even more crucial for children to be grounded in philosophical thinking. The challenges and dilemmas of today's world require a generation that can think critically, reason ethically, and navigate the complexities of human existence with empathy and understanding. And while death might be a daunting theme to introduce to young minds, it is an essential part of the human experience, one that literature and philosophy, in tandem, can help them understand and accept.

## A Philosophical Approach to Picturebooks

The chosen methodology for this research paper is content analysis in conjunction with a philosophical approach to literature, as proposed by Helena Theodoropoulou (*Philosophical Findings* 3–5). The aim is to highlight the intersections and interplays between literature and philosophy, especially when seeking philosophical themes within literary works.

A key aspect in analyzing the philosophical depth of a text relates to its intrinsic ‘density’ and ‘frequency’ of philosophical content. It is also tied to a reader’s ability to bring to light such an analysis and to understand such philosophical intricacies (Theodoropoulou, *Philosophical Findings* 4). The goal in employing quasi-philosophical readings is to illuminate the philosophical imprint of the concept of death in picturebooks for children. A philosophical reading of a picturebook is not merely about finding literal meanings in the images. Instead, it requires an understanding that images metaphorically express ideas, dispositions, abstract concepts, and qualities which cannot be directly depicted. Building on the close relationship between literature and philosophy, fostering analytical pathways both within and outside the texts helps excavate their potential philosophical undertones. The rationale behind choosing a philosophical approach to picturebooks lies in its intriguing proposal: to view picturebooks as alternative philosophical texts (Murriss 277). I am interested in how each work, through its unique structure and disposition, fosters philosophical frameworks, concepts, issues, and reasoning. This methodology enables an analysis of the connotations of portraying death as a living entity within the narratives of select children’s books.

This study focuses on high-quality picturebooks published in Europe around the turn of the millennium (1997–2007). In the careful selection of books for this study, a deliberate focus was placed on early readers as the primary audience, as early childhood represents a crucial period for gently and accessibly introducing complex themes. Also, a pivotal selection factor was the personification of death, aiming to present this abstract concept as a character with whom children can interact, empathize, and whom they



can understand, making death more accessible and less intimidating. The selected books are: *Bonjour Madame la Mort* (1997) by Pascal Teulade and illustrated by Jean Charles Sarrazin, *La visite de petite mort* (2004) by Kitty Crowther, and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (2007) by Wolf Erlbruch. Each of these books contributes to the exploration of death as a personified entity, both in narrative content and illustrative depiction, thus forming a cohesive collection that provides a comprehensive perspective on the subject.

The primary objective of this analysis revolves around the examination of how death is characterized and depicted. The analysis probes deeply into both the textual narrative and the accompanying illustrations (Nikolajeva and Scott 225–39). Central to this analysis are three key dimensions. Firstly, the visual representation of death is a pivotal point, encompassing aspects such as its appearance, attire, and expressions. Secondly, the dialogues and interactions that revolve around or involve the character of death are assessed to understand the narrative depth. Thirdly, understanding the emotional undertones associated with death's portrayal, such as feelings of fear, acceptance, or even curiosity, is paramount. In tandem with these analytical points, the study explores the philosophical depths these portrayals touch upon, especially in the context of engaging young readers. By diving into these narratives, the overarching aim is to discern how such books might serve as potent tools for philosophical inquiry with children.

### **Personifications of Death in Picturebooks**

In the book *Bonjour Madame la Mort*, as the narrative unfolds, an elderly woman with diminished sense of hearing is greeted by an unexpected visitor, Madame la Mort. This chance encounter evolves into an endearing bond, ultimately culminating in a touching waltz and the woman's serene passing. Visually, Madame la Mort is represented as a skeletal entity, cloaked in black with her iconic scythe, appearing amidst the striking backdrop of lightning, a portrayal echoing the familiar depictions of death from the 19th century, especially those by French painter and illustrator Gustave Doré

(Fig. 1). By maintaining this traditional attire, the illustrator bridges past and present, suggesting that while our interpretations of death may evolve, certain symbols remain potent and universally recognizable. This continuity allows for a dialogue between the old and the new, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring nature of these symbols across generations. But the tale surprises us with its adaptability: Madame la Mort transitions from her symbolic cloak and scythe, adopting a more everyday apparel when living with the elderly woman, such as jeans or a nightgown, challenging and reshaping traditional death archetypes. This shift reimagines death with a feminine touch, accessorized and elegantly dressed, while carefully sidestepping explicit gender categorization.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1: Gustave Doré's illustration for Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (cropped)

In the beginning of the story, Madame la Mort's demeanor is resolute and commanding, her voice echoing the haunting proclamation "Allez! Il faut mourir!" ("Come on! You must die!", Teulade & Sarrazin 6). Her presence is designed to instill fear and descriptions such as "la main *glacée*" ("cold hands", 9) underline her separation from the living. Yet, the elderly woman's affectionate hospitality, coupled with her lack of recognition, prompts a transformative journey for this harbinger of the end. Engaging with life's simplicities, Madame la Mort learns laughter, play, and the joys of being, gradually becoming more humane in the process.

By the conclusion of the book, it becomes evident that Madame la Mort does not take lives out of malice, but rather because it is an inherent part of life's cyclical nature, as a lot of people are waiting

2 Such a representation is no isolated incident. Anne Quesemand's *La Mort-maraine* also contains a feminine representation of death in quotidian clothing.

for her to come (Teulade & Sarrazin 19). Thus, the elderly woman gracefully departs, her spirit fading like the final flicker of a candle. Life and death are intrinsically intertwined. As this story shows, it is life that determines when one's journey concludes, and death merely serves as the gentle guide on this inevitable transition.

*Bonjour Madame la Mort* is an existential exploration which probes the essence of life and its relationship with the inescapable shadow of death. By anthropomorphizing Madame la Mort, the tale nudges children to consider that even abstract concepts such as death can have desires for understanding, purpose, and companionship. Such a representation seems to echo the existential musings of thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre who argues that individuals must navigate their existence to define their essence (90), which mirrors Madame la Mort's quest for purpose, and Albert Camús' exploration of the absurd, highlighting the struggle for meaning in a universe that remains silent to our queries (7), which is reflected in the story's contemplation of death as an inevitable yet profoundly significant part of life. Furthermore, Friedrich Nietzsche's concepts of 'being' and 'becoming' is vividly embodied in the transformation of Madame la Mort from an emotionless specter to a character filled with feelings and curiosity. This evolution reflects Nietzsche's philosophical musings on the journey of 'becoming who you are' and can inspire children to reflect on their personal paths of discovery and acceptance (Nietzsche 175–78). The narrative's exploration of life's cyclical nature also offers an accessible gateway for children into the foundational tenets of Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism and Taoism. By illustrating the serene passing of the old woman, the story introduces children to the continuous cycle of existence: from birth to life, death, and perhaps, rebirth (Tzu 76). The portrayal of rebirth, particularly through the imagery of a tomb in the last scene, serves as a metaphor within the Christian tradition, symbolizing the end of physical life but also the promise of eternal life through the potential of resurrection.

Ultimately, *Bonjour Madame la Mort* serves as a powerful example of how children's literature can be both a source of joy and a foundational philosophical tool. Through the presentation of the subject of death, several questions arise, such as: Should we ac-

cept death or feel rage against it? Do we want to know when we will die? Why yes or why not? Why do you think the old lady and death became friends? What is the significance of the candle at the end of the book?. The text and the illustrations offer further reflection on the good or bad nature of death and its acceptance or not. For example, death, when living with the old lady, is fully humanized, dressed in human clothes, cooking, sitting by the fireplace, and even taking pictures. This humanization symbolizes the old lady's acceptance of death's presence and role in life. She comes to terms with death's inevitability, accepting it both literally, as a character she interacts with daily, and figuratively, as a natural part of existence.

In *La Visite de Petite Mort* by Kitty Crowther, death is a little melancholic child, lonely and misunderstood. From the very outset, the title's use of the diminutive *petite* ("very small") sets the tone for a portrayal of death that is devoid of the formidable presence often attributed to it. The emphasis on *petite* evokes feelings of innocence and vulnerability, setting the stage for the character's later introduction as a child. The characterization of Petite Mort is a whimsical reimagining; it serves as a metaphorical tool to address the young readers. By adopting a childlike representation, Crowther simplifies the complex theme of death, making it more accessible to a younger audience. The shift from a traditionally male, aggressive portrayal of death to a softer, female one further helps in reducing the anxiety associated with the concept.

Crowther's exploration of societal beliefs and fears is evident in the interaction between Petite Mort and her first acquaintance in the book, an old man (8–14). The old man's fear, stemming from deep-rooted cultural beliefs about death and hell, is palpable: he is crying and he is feeling cold (10). His negative reaction to the warmth offered by Petite Mort underscores the ingrained fear and the misconceptions about death as an entry into a torturous afterlife.

Yet, it is the encounter of Petite Mort with Elsewise that becomes the pivotal moment in the narrative. Unlike the fearful old man, Elsewise, a little girl who is very ill, embraces death, signaling an acceptance and understanding that many adults lack. Her excla-

mation: “Enfin, vous êtes là!” (“You’re finally here!”, Crowther 15) resonates with relief, suggesting that for her, death is not an end but a release from pain. Her name, when deconstructed, gives us insights into her character. As someone with a different wisdom or an unconventional perspective, Elsewise represents an alternative viewpoint on death. Rather than fearing it, she embraces it, seeing it as a gateway to relief and transformation.

Crowther’s portrayal of the journey with Petite Mort is deeply poetic. Drawing from Greek mythology, the journey to the realm of death recalls the familiar tales of souls crossing the Acheron, where according to mythology was the entrance to Hades, the Underworld. By setting Elsewise’s journey in a boat that transcends to the Underworld, a setting echoing this myth, Crowther bridges the gap between ancient legends and contemporary narratives, creating a continuity of themes and emotions that resonate across time. The moments Elsewise and Petite Mort share by the lake, and the joyous play and laughter in Petite Mort’s kingdom, all symbolize a transition that is not rooted in fear, but in acceptance and understanding. Petite Mort is an allegorical figure that is depicted with childlike innocence and vulnerability. Elsewise, with her vivacious spirit, playfulness, and laughter, humanizes death and reminds it of its own childlike essence. Petite Mort’s statement “*Elle ne s’est jamais sentie aussi vivante*” (“She had never felt so alive”, Crowther 22) stands as a testament to this transformative interaction. It is not just about death bringing an end to life, but about how life and death are interconnected and mutually influential.

Crowther also uses animals as symbolism, placing owls and snakes in her illustrations. These animals have contrasting yet complementary relationships in different cultures, religions, myths, and legends around the world. The owl is seen as a symbol of wisdom in many Western cultures, particularly in Ancient Greece, but also as a harbinger of death in some Native American tribes, in many parts of Africa, and in various Asian cultures (Eason 71). The owl is often shown present next to Petite Mort: an owl is seen far away from the bed of the old man and another one lying in Elsewise’s bed the first time she meets her friend (Crowther 8; 15). Regarding the illustration of snakes, those have long been associated with

both good and evil, representing life and death, creation and destruction. They are seen as guardians of the underworld particularly in Ancient Egypt, as well as representing the forces of rebirth and fertility, for example in Hinduism (Eason 19–25). Thus, the use of these symbols highlights her kingdom as a place of ending, but also as a place of beginning, a place that raises awareness of the inevitable events of the life and death cycle.

In her work, Crowther thus brings philosophy down to a level where children, with their inherent curiosity and wonder, can grasp and ponder over a concept as abstract as death. The decision to personify death as a little childlike figure serves multiple purposes. Beyond making the topic more approachable, it nudges young readers to recognize and relate to the universal experiences of loneliness, misunderstanding, and longing for acceptance – themes that *Petite Mort* embodies. The relationship that Elsewise develops with *Petite Mort* allows the emergence of themes related to the fear and acceptance of death. In the book under consideration, the child-reader can move from a stage of simple interpretation to the level of reflection through the posing of relevant questions, such as: What happens when we die? What takes place afterwards? Where do we think we go after we die? Can we go anywhere? The philosophical core of the story is about understanding life, existence, death, and the myriad of emotions that come with it. By framing these in the context of a child's experiences, Crowther ensures that her young readers do not feel overwhelmed. Instead, they are gently guided into the realm of introspection and contemplation. It is an invitation to ponder over life's cyclical nature, to understand that endings are often new beginnings, and to see that there is beauty and wonder even in topics that adults might shy away from discussing with children.

This gentle approach to weighty topics is echoed in the minimalist illustrations and delicate prose of Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, which delves into an exploration of mortality, acceptance, and the essence of existence. By providing Death with feelings, thoughts, and the ability to engage in conversation, Erlbruch demystifies death. Moreover, by illustrating her in soft shades and by

clothing the skeletal figure with a dress, Death is again further portrayed as a feminine figure.

In the narrative, a Duck crosses paths with Death and initiates a profound exchange with her. The meeting of Duck with Death acts as an allegory for the human experience. The initial fear and mistrust Duck feels upon realizing Death's presence is emblematic of our own innate fear of the unknown, especially when it comes to the end of life. However, as the story progresses, the growing bond between Duck and Death highlights a profound truth: understanding and accepting death can enrich our appreciation of life.

For children, the narrative offers an invaluable lesson about the transient nature of existence. The changing seasons symbolize the phases of life and this revelation is particularly significant for young minds as it nudges them towards grasping the idea of impermanence and the cyclical nature of life and death. The interaction between Duck and Death about the afterlife delves into humanity's perennial quest for understanding what lies beyond. By not providing a definitive answer, Erlbruch encourages young readers to ponder, question, and form their own beliefs. This open-ended approach aligns with the philosophical tenet of promoting inquiry over dogma. Furthermore, the heartwarming and, at times, humorous exchanges between Duck and Death serve a dual purpose. Examples such as "‘What shall we do today?’ Death asked. ‘Well, let's not go back to the pond. Let's do something really exciting.' Death was relieved. ‘Shall we climb a tree?’ he teased" (Erlbruch 19) or "‘Are you cold?’ Duck asked. ‘Shall I warm you a little?’ Nobody had offered to do that for Death" (14) lighten the weight of the subject matter, ensuring young readers remain engaged, while also emphasizing that discussions about death need not be somber or terrifying.

Towards the end, when Duck's life culminates with the onset of winter, the serene depiction of Death carrying her to the river becomes a beautiful metaphor for the cycle of life and death. The act of releasing Duck into the river and the accompanying realization: "*But that's life*" (Erlbruch 31; original emphasis), encapsulates the essence of acceptance and the natural order of things.

## Conclusions

In analyzing children's literature that explores the theme of death, the three picturebooks under examination provide interesting insights into how death is portrayed and understood in narratives aimed at young audiences. Similarities across the three picturebooks include the humanization of death, making it a relatable and less intimidating figure for child-readers. Each book incorporates death into daily life, presenting it as a continuous presence that interacts with the living. However, the differences between the books are as revealing as their similarities. In *Bonjour Madame la Mort*, death initially appears in a traditional, fearsome guise, but transforms into a more benign, even comforting presence as the story progresses. This portrayal contrasts sharply with *La Visite de Petite Mort*, where death is introduced immediately as a vulnerable, child-like figure, emphasizing innocence and eliciting empathy from the outset. *Duck, Death and the Tulip* presents yet another approach by depicting death as a gentle, almost humorous companion from the beginning, focusing on building a friendship that teaches about the transient nature of life through calm and reflective dialogue. The way death interacts with other characters also varies significantly. In *Bonjour Madame la Mort*, the narrative focuses on death's transformation through its interaction with an elderly woman, highlighting a journey from an emblem of fear to a symbol of peace. *La Visite de Petite Mort* explores societal fears and misconceptions through death's encounters, featuring a transformative encounter with a sick child who reacts differently to its presence. Meanwhile, in *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, the interaction between Duck and Death is used to explore philosophical questions about life and the afterlife in a gentle, accessible manner. Visually, each book also takes a distinct path. *Bonjour Madame la Mort* uses stark, dramatic imagery that gradually softens, reflecting the narrative's shift in tone. *La Visite de Petite Mort* employs simple, minimalist illustrations to complement its portrayal of death as a child. In contrast, *Duck, Death and the Tulip* utilizes soft shades and delicate illustrations to create a comforting and thoughtful atmosphere around the topic of death.



These narratives are not just stories; they serve as platforms where literature and philosophy intersect harmoniously by blending narrative engagement with deep philosophical inquiry. Literature traditionally engages through stories and emotional resonance, inviting readers to experience life's mysteries via empathetic connections with characters. Philosophy, on the other hand, approaches these questions through abstract reasoning and conceptual analysis, aiming for clarity and theoretical understanding. By integrating philosophical questions within engaging narratives, the books under examination manage to encourage both emotional empathy and intellectual curiosity. They make philosophical themes tangible by illustrating universal concepts through personal, narrative-driven experiences. Through their distinct approaches, these books destigmatize death, presenting it as a universal and immutable truth. This philosophical framing allows children to perceive death through a lens of acceptance and curiosity, rather than fear. As characters in the stories explore and come to terms with the notion of mortality, the line between storytelling and philosophical exploration blurs, enriching the reader's comprehension of life and existence. Especially for children, this interaction with the text stimulates a process of introspection and self-reflection.

From the data of the present study, it emerges that contemporary picturebooks can open alternative ways of constructing and representing the concept of death, particularly in the gap between the words and the images which results in opportunities for different kinds of knowledge and for different ways of speech and thinking. Finally, the studied picturebooks, each in its own way, trigger the philosophical investigation of the concept of death and through their philosophical receptors encourage children to give meaning to their knowledge and their existence as well.

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