


THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN THE CONTEXT OF PROBLEMATIC AND PROBLEM-ORIENTED CHILDREN'S LITERATURE			Literary Theory Keywords: emotional literacy, social literacy, ethical literary studies, fairy tale justice, problem-oriented, problematic, child sexual abuse.
Milena Mileva Blažić	Faculty of Education. University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia		
Hans Zollner	Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. Institute of Anthropology. Interdisciplinary studies		
Abstract			
<p>This study explores the importance of emotional and social literacy in the portrayal of sensitive issues in children's literature, with a particular focus on the motif of child sexual abuse. The following research questions were identified as particularly important: First, in what ways do such literary texts contribute to the development of empathy and ethical reflection? Second, to what extent do these texts place the child at the center of the narrative? Third, do verbal and visual elements support or hinder emotional awareness? The study is based on the literary analysis of selected picture books with traumatic content, including <i>The Tale of the Waterman</i> (O povodnem možu), <i>The Little Doll and Giant</i> (Punčka in velikan), <i>Kiko and the Hand</i> (Kiko in roka), the <i>Sad Book</i>, <i>Red Apple</i> (Rdeča jabolka), and <i>Blue</i> (Azul). The literature that does not place the child at the center of the narrative runs the risk of losing its pedagogical and ethical credibility. The article argues that there is a connection between literary aesthetics and ethical responsibility and develops a holistic pedagogical model for emotional and social competence.</p>			

1. INTRODUCTION

Tomo Virk (2017: 18) reflects on the ethical turn in literary studies, which he compares to the Copernican turn in thought. This approach is particularly important in the context of youth literature, as it is directly related to the didactic goals and ethical responsibilities of children's literature. The literature, especially the youth literature, is able to convey moral examples, thematise complex ethical situations and individual moral decisions, and serve as an exercise in moral imagination. This potential gives it a unique educational function.

In the context of fairy tale theory, M. Lüthi (2011: 107–108) defines the concept of "fairy justice", which is realized when a fairy tale offers symbolic redress for injustices of the real world. The difference between problematic and problem-oriented youth literature is particularly important: high-quality problem-oriented literature thematises trauma with a clear ethical point of view and with the child as the center of perspective, whereas problematic literature often reproduces the view of the perpetrator. In this context, Marjana Kobe emphasizes that youth literature must be "on the side of the child" and defend their perspective as a central ethical and narrative point (Kobe, 1999–2000).

In accordance with Žižek's understanding of symbolic order, each narrative is mediated and committed to a specific interpretative position. His question "[to] whose gaze is it staged?" (Žižek, 1997: 22) is crucial in the analysis of youth literature in which abuse—as in the case of *The Doll and the Giant* or *The Tale of the Waterman*—is often ambivalent or even biased in favor of the perpetrator.

2. METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the method of literary analysis, taking into account both the verbal and visual components of picture books. The analysis includes the interpretation of the symbolic layers of the text, the relationship between intentional and immanent meaning, and the identification of the narrative perspective in relation to the ethical imperatives of child protection. The focus is on the question of narrative reliability and the symbolic codification of violence, which affect the reader's emotional and social literacy.

By comparing several picture books that address child abuse or trauma, this article highlights the differences between problem-oriented and problematic approaches in the youth literature. The emphasis is on the relationship between artistic expression and the ethical responsibility of creators, publishers and educational institutions that select literature for pedagogical use.

3. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CASES

3.1 Problematic literature

3.1.1 *The Tale of the Waterman (O povodnem možu, Šavli and Gošnik Godec, 1972/2021)*

The picture book *The Tale of the Waterman (O povodnem možu)* addresses the motif of child abduction through the archetypal figure of a water spirit. With detailed descriptions of the underwater realm, the narrator establishes an imaginary space, but it does not conceal the fact that the story is about kidnapping and covert violence. The visual image of a child lying half-naked on a glass bed, as well as the perpetrator's repeated question, "Who are you crying for, my little boy?" create a disturbance effect. The use of artistic language and the motifs of gold pearls, glass rooms and toys create a distance from trauma and aestheticizes it.

The analysis shows that the verbal and visual texts are not in the service of sensitization with respect to the issue of child abuse but can – in the absence of critical reading – lead to desensitization. The narrator attributes to the Waterman the qualities of a caregiver while ignoring the child's perspective and experience of trauma. The picture book ends four times and never clearly condemns abduction but instead covertly rationalizes the satisfaction of the parents through material compensation.

Particularly problematic is the visual depiction of the kidnapper in a friendly, even charming, manner, which could confuse a young reader with the moral judgment of his actions. The boy, who at first resists and cries, is eventually presented as someone who is placated with the gifts he receives, and the emotional truth of the event is replaced by material compensation. This is a classic example of the so-called narrative veiling (Žižek), where the symbolic order of the

story inhibits the possibility of the true recognition of violence and consequently prevents the development of emotional and moral sensibility.

3.1.2 *The Doll and the Giant (Punčka in velikan, Kodrič Filipić and Torjanac, 2007)*

The picture book *The Little Girl and the Giant (Punčka in velikan)* thematise incestuous abuse with obvious elements of symbolic concealment: the father is called the "giant", the daughter is called the "doll", the language is euphemistic, and the narrative perspective is ambivalent. Although the intentional paratext promises a story of generational pain, the immanent meaning is clearly recognizable as a narrative that reproduces the dynamics of violence without an appropriate distance or judgment.

The visual layer follows a narrative veil: the doll is often portrayed as fragile, tired, and sad; the symbolism of the stone in her heart, which she herself is trying to push out, places the responsibility for the trauma on her. The most problematic part is the ending, with a child born of incest, a fact that remains uncommented on. The ethics of storytelling are not focused on the child's well-being but rather on the narrative aestheticization of trauma.

Although the illustrations deftly underline the psychological discomfort and tension, the unclear position of the narrator leaves the impression that the text does not take a clear ethical stance. This ambivalence creates the danger of misinterpretation, since the reader, especially a child reader, does not have the support of understanding trauma as a consequence of the perpetrator's act. It is a typical example of problematic literature that, under the guise of sensitization, reproduces the language and logic of abuse.

3.1.3 *Kiko and the hand (Kiko in roka, Gray and Punga, 2013)*

The picture book *Kiko and the hand (Kiko in roka)*, created under the auspices of the Department for Children's Rights of the Council of Europe, is intended to teach children about unauthorized touching. However, the analysis reveals that the verbal and visual text is full of ambiguity and symbolic traps. The hand, shown with an outstretched index finger, symbolizes the perpetrator, whereas the child is depicted as a "green creature" in his underwear, encouraging associations with superheroes rather than real-life children.

Throughout the picture book, the hand "tests" the child: he offers him sweets, toys, even flying. The didactic purpose is clearly written only at the end, but until then, the picture book has reproduced typical strategies of manipulation and abuse. The effect is paradoxical: the reader is not sensitized but is trapped in a misleading narrative logic.

In addition, the formal level is problematic: the text is not signed with the author's name, and the illustrator is shown as a collective, which makes it impossible to hold the creators ethically

responsible. The visual metaphor is ambiguous and often associatively controversial, and the overall structure does not allow for a clear dividing line between a safe space and a violent transgression. Such texts call for serious reflection on editorial, institutional and European responsibility in the publication and distribution of children's literature.

3.2 Problem-oriented literature

3.2.1 The Sad Book (Rosen and Blake, 2004)

The picture book *The Sad Book* represents a paradigmatic example of the artistic treatment of grief as an emotional experience, which the reader recognizes and interprets through the author's first-person confession. Michael Rosen thematises the loss of his son with direct honesty and without sentimentality, which allows for the creation of a space for reflection on grief. Quentin Blake's illustrations, with pale colors and quivering lines, visually depict inner turmoil and support the narrative line of the crack between the outer smile and the inner pain.

Metaphorical depictions of grief as a space or cloud make it easier to understand abstract emotions. Of particular importance is the chorus "Sad is anyone", which universalizes the experience and reduces the feeling of loneliness. The picture book enables the development of emotional literacy through identification and reflection and, at the same time, promotes social literacy by gaining insight into different forms of response to loss. *The Sad Book* is an example of an artistic picture book that can handle complex emotions with respect to and without manipulative gestures.

Notably, the book does not offer solutions or simplified answers. Its strength lies precisely in the acknowledgment of irreparable loss and the fact that it allows the young reader to experience grief without the need for explanation or didactic emphasis. The author thus encourages the reader's self-reflection and enables the learning of emotional regulation through empathy with the narrator. In this respect, it is a rare example of a work of art that not only conveys content but also establishes an ethical relationship with the reader.

3.2.2 Red Apple (Rdeče jabolko, Makarovič and Kosmač, 2008)

The picture book *The Red Apple (Rdeče jabolko)* works on the level of allegory and symbolic attributes, which thematises child abuse in an institutional environment. The protagonist – a nameless girl – travels through a space of control and loss: a forest, a gate, or a river. The wolf that accompanies her initially presents itself as a caring companion, but over time, it reveals the mechanisms of manipulation and depersonalization. Through the rhetoric of apparent care, he gradually appropriates her identity, with each gift symbolizing a layer of the girl's autonomy that is being lost.

The climax comes with the wolf giving the girl a new name – "Red Apple" – which signifies the symbolic appropriation of the subject. The story ends not with a conventional return to order but with an act of resistance: the girl no longer submits to an imposed role; the apple begins to roll

– the movement becomes a symbol of regeneration. The picture book enables the development of emotional and social literacy through aesthetic experience and offers a powerful critique of the power structures that mask violence.

An additional value of the picture book is that it allows a multilayered reading. Both the child and the adult reader find symbolic meanings in the story that allow for reflection on identity, autonomy and the abuse of power. Kaja Kosmač's illustrations contribute to the theme of a dark, almost claustrophobic atmosphere that creates the emotional discomfort necessary for critical reflection. In this respect, the picture book does not offer consolation but rather space for reflection, which makes it one of the more demanding but important works of art for children and young people.

3.2.3 *Blue (Azul, Murillo and Peña, 2022)*

The picture book *Blue (Azul)* is a distinctly aesthetically and ethically accomplished work of art that thematizes the sexual abuse of a child via metaphorical language and subtle visual symbolism. The most important line in the book is "The key is to never stop pedalling. Even if you're scared or tired" offers a metaphor for perseverance as a form of survival and resistance. The picture book gradually reveals the traumatic experience—falling, loss of voice, dissociation—and places it within the framework of the narrative building of trust.

The visual depiction of a child without a mouth and emotionally neutral images of cycling create space for a quiet but powerful narrative voice. The idea that "trust can only be built where there is an Other [...]" emphasizes the importance of a secure relationship for the recovery process, which is also confirmed by modern attachment theories (Bowlby, 1969). The picture book concludes with "I got my story back... so that I could continue", implying a narrative restoration of the subject.

A specific feature of this picture book is that it is based on the authentic voice of a survivor, which gives it additional credibility and emotional resonance. The interaction of the verbal and visual codes at the structural level is subordinated to an ethical gesture: to give the child the opportunity to speak and to give him back his voice. This text is not just a representation of trauma but a process of overcoming it.

4. THE CHILD AT THE CENTER: AN ETHICAL PARADIGM

It follows from the discussion that within the ethical paradigm, the most significant artistic texts are those that place the child at the center of the narrative and treat them as a sovereign subject with their own perspective, vulnerability and capacity for resistance. Hans Zollner (2019) developed the concept of "the child at the center" in a theological and pedagogical context, which emphasizes the responsibility of institutions, especially churches and schools, to protect children's integrity. These principles can also be applied to the field of youth literature, where the starting point of any literary treatment should be the question of whether the text defends the well-being of the child.

Here, it is essential to distinguish between problem-oriented and problematic literature: the former opens up space for ethical reflection, whereas the latter, owing to its narrative structure and perspective, often reproduces the view of the perpetrator. Works of art that, despite the apparent intention of raising awareness (e.g., *The Tale of the Waterman Kiko and the Hand*, *The Doll and the Giant*) in their immanent structure do not take a position suitable for children, are ethically denied. It is therefore necessary to introduce criteria of literary selection on the basis of ethical standards, not merely on an aesthetic or moralistic level.

The ethical paradigm of the "child in the center" means not only the formal inclusion of the child character in the story but also, above all, the narrative, symbolic and affective centering of their perspective. The point is that the literary text does not reproduce a position of power but allows the child to speak—even when it is fragmentary, silent, visual or metaphorical. In this sense, the key features of an ethical narrative are the choice of the narrator, the symbolic register, and the way in which violence is treated: whether it is covert, aestheticized, and relativized, or revealed, named and reflected.

Literary works that manage to realize an ethical narrative not only contribute to the development of empathy but also model possible ways of resisting, recovering and establishing a new subjectivity after trauma (Zollner, Williams 2024). Such texts do not consolidate existing power structures but rather unravel them. In this respect, literature represents an important space of symbolic resistance – not because it reveals the truth but because it opens up the possibility of establishing a different symbolic economy, where the child has the power to name their experience.

5. CONCLUSION

The article highlights the importance of emotional and social literacy through the artistic representation of traumatic content in youth literature, especially in the case of child sexual abuse. Through the analysis of selected picture books, it was found that only those texts that respect an ethical perspective and advocate the well-being of the child enable the development of empathy, moral imagination and reflective distance.

The picture book *Blue* is highlighted as an example of good practice, which, through a subtle interweaving of symbolic language and visual composition, implements the paradigm of the child in the center and enables a transformative reading experience. In this context, an important distinction between problem-oriented and problematic literature becomes apparent. Problem-oriented literature sensitizes the reader, builds emotional resilience, and encourages reflection on trauma. Problematic literature, on the other hand, despite its possible aim to have an ethical orientation, can reproduce violent patterns in an immanent narrative structure, blur the responsibility of the perpetrator, and even shift empathy to them from the victim. Such narratives are not only ethically questionable but also pedagogically harmful, as they can lead to the normalization of violence and the clouding of moral judgment. In the education system, it is therefore necessary to enforce criteria that include more than just the aesthetic, genre or didactic values of literary texts. The ethical component must become a key condition in the inclusion of literary works in school curricula, especially when they address sensitive topics such as sexual abuse, trauma, death and loss. In this respect, emotional literacy has wide didactic potential, as it not only includes the recognition and articulation of emotions but also enables the development of the moral competencies that are essential for the formation of a comprehensively developed personality (Zollner, Beer 2025). At the same time, it is necessary to draw attention to the systemic reasons for the passivity or even complicity of institutions that keep problematic texts in pedagogical use. Without clear ethical guidelines, editorial responsibility and empathetic reading literacy, there is a danger that such works of art will not serve to break the silence but rather prolong it. Therefore, ethical literacy—of creators, intermediaries and readers—is key to establishing a safe literary space. As such, this paper not only raises literary questions but also opens a broader discussion about the responsibility of the profession in the formation of the cultural imaginary of children. It highlights the need for a holistic pedagogy that understands literature as a space of symbolic solidarity and ethical growth—not as a tool for moralizing but as a medium of expression, recognition and liberation.

References

- Amsterdam, G., & Punga, P. (2013). *Kiko in roka*. Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe.
- Kodrić Filipić, N., & Torjanac, T. (2009). *Punčka in velikan*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Mladinska knjiga.
- Makarovič, S., & Kosmač, K. (2008). *Rdeče jabolko*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Center za slovensko književnost.
- Murillo, J. A., & Paz Peña, M. (2022). *Modra* (B. Pregelj, Trans.). Medvode, Slovenia: Malinc. (Original work published 2022)
- Rosen, M., & Blake, Q. (2004). *Sad book*. London, England: Walker Books.
- Šavli, A., & Gošnik Godec, A. (1972). *O povodnem možu*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Mladinska knjiga.

Literature

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kobe, M. (1999a). Sodobna pravljica. *Otrok in knjiga*, 26(47), 5–11.
- Kobe, M. (1999b). Sodobna pravljica. *Otrok in knjiga*, 26(48), 5–12.
- Kobe, M. (2000a). Sodobna pravljica. *Otrok in knjiga*, 27(49), 5–12.
- Kobe, M. (2000b). Sodobna pravljica. *Otrok in knjiga*, 27(50), 6–15.
- Lüthi, M. (2011). *The fairytale as art form and portrait of man*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Virk, T. (2017). Etična literarna veda med kakofonijo in pluralnostjo. *Primerjalna književnost*, 40(2), 13–31.
- Zollner, H. (2019). The child at the center: What can theology say in the face of the scandals of abuse? *Theological Studies*, 80(3), 692–710. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919856867>
- Zollner, H., & Beer, P. (2025). Mehr Schein als Sein beim Schutz vor Missbrauch? *HerderKorrespondenz*, 3, 49–51.
- Zollner, H., & Williams, M. J. (2024). Glimpses of hope: Reflections on journeying with survivors of clergy sexual abuse. *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 22(2), 352–360. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355324000342>
- Žižek, S. (1997). *Kuga fantazem*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo.