



DEATH MOTIF IN THE FOLK LITERATURE CLASSES – AN (IM)POSSIBLE SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge that the dialogue on death is a sensitive, but then again a necessary topic in the context of education, prompted the emergence of the concept of death education in which literary texts can also play an important role. Therefore, it may be important to say that some oral literary works, frequently with the death motif, have their place in the elementary school curricula. Thus the aim of our paper is: (1) to point to the oral literary texts with the death motif in the curriculum and to those that are incorporated in the approved reading-books and to show (2) the dominant aspects of the thematization of death in the reading-book texts and how to approach them in the didactic and methodical apparatus. The qualitative analysis of the curriculum is focused on the upper elementary classes and the analysis of the reading-books and the didactic and methodical apparatus is done using the reading-books published by the three different publishers. The three dominant areas stand out in the analysis: (1) the description of the emotions that accompany death, (2) the description of life after death, (3) the characteristic motifs featured in oral literature in the service of the thematization of death. Moreover, the analysis shows that, among the already mentioned aspects, the methodical apparatus sheds the faintest light on the images of life after death. Based on the results of research, the specific recommendations are given to increase the genre variety of the reading-book texts and to use the segments of the folklore and folk traditions in order to gain a better understanding of a particular work of literature.

Key words

death motif, didactic and methodical apparatus, folk literature, literature teaching methodology, reading-book.

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Introduction

There is one exclusion – says Jean Baudrillard (Bodrijar, 1991: 165) – “that serves as a model, built into the foundation of the very ‘rationality’ of our culture: it is the exclusion of death and the dead”. Although his view primarily refers to the Western European culture, it seems that it also adequately applies to the entire contemporary European world. This exclusion also implies the relocation of the usual place of death from homes to hospitals and relocation of graveyards to the outskirts of cities, banishing grief from the public space, which results in the situation in which “one has no longer right to cry if one is seen or heard doing it” (Arijes, 1989: 69–70; also compare Bodrijar, 1991: 207). However, first, life itself presents us with the knowledge that “never before have wars been so bloody, threats of pollution or of nuclear attacks so dramatic” (Toma, 1980: 25). Even if we overlook a rather convincing thesis that “an attitude towards death – and a corpse – is that ultimate natural line which helps a man partly escape nature to become an animal immersed in culture” (Toma, 1980: 27), it is certain that death emerges as a rather important political question since power is always based “on the manipulation and administration of death” (Bodrijar, 1991: 146).

Although even nowadays we detect uneasiness in the conversations about death that we have in our family circle or at school (compare Talwar, 2011), it seems that if we stifle that dialogue, we will suffer negative consequences for it and thus “make the deceased look more cruel” (Toma, 1980: 24), whilst “prohibition on the public display of emotions and the duty to grieve alone and in private enhances the trauma caused by the death of a loved one” (Arijes, 1989: 71). The avoidance of this theme in the context of education cannot be justified even from the perspective of developmental psychology: it has become a common knowledge that children start to conceptualize death at an early age (for the overview of the research done in this field see Speece & Brent, 1984; for recent Serbian studies compare Spasić, 2016). Psychological insights into the children’s view of death bring forth the deliberations on death education with a view to providing pupils with the adequate information on death, prompting critical thinking among them about the concepts related to it, acquainting them with the factors which affect the mood and behavior of persons who lose someone close to them, encouraging them to communicate their feelings caused by such a loss (compare Aspinall, 1996: 346; specific instructions in: Thornton & Krajewski, 1993; Woodard, 1997; for more details on the concept of death education see: Wass, 2003: 211–217; DeSpelder & Strickland, 2015: 31–34; Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018: 491–510). Even though we do not have a systematic approach here, educators and teachers are well aware of the importance of the dialogue on this topic, and they do not steer clear of it when children become interested in the phenomenon of death (see Milašinović, 2020; Živković, 2023). Such a conversation with children is occasionally inspired by the interpretation of literary texts which thematize the death of a hero and which sporadically appear in the lower elementary classes curriculum (compare Janićijević,

2017), but are more regular in the upper elementary classes curriculum (compare Božić, 2019).

Hardly ever do we find such a unifying thread as teaching folk literature is since it links all the curricula from lower to upper elementary classes, enabling pupils to acquire the knowledge of certain concepts in terms of literary theory closely related to that literature – from the elements of style and versification to the genre characteristics (compare Jančićjević 2016: 45–46, Nikolić, 1992: 376–397, 408–424; for the interpretation of stories and traditions especially see Mrkalj, 2008). In that regard it is important to us to say that at the very first glance we notice that the death motif is present in every genre form of oral literature: the duels of two heroes are frequent in oral epic songs, in oral ballads in which the very poetics of the genre commands the tragic end which invokes the death motif, and such an end is implied in the laments because of the genre itself; besides, the death motif is seen in folktales in the duels of heroes and their adversaries and humorous folk stories have it too, etc. Therefore, it can be assumed that the texts with the death motif are to be also found in the corpus of oral literary texts in elementary education (for lower elementary classes, compare Mitić, 2024). If that be the case, then it is only logical to ask the question if it is possible to incorporate the particular aspects of death education into the interpretation of folk literature.

Research methodology

We have two sets of questions in our research – one covers literary content prescribed by the curriculum and by the reading-book content, the other refers to the aspects of the thematization of death in the reading-book texts and the frequency of their interpretations in the methodical apparatus which indirectly sheds the light for us on the expected directions the dialogue can take in the teaching practice (for the relation between the curriculum, reading-books and teaching practice see Cvetanović, 2012: 45–51). These are the following sets of questions: (1) Can we find the folk literature texts with the death motif in the curriculum and in the reading-books? If we can, how frequently? (2) What aspects of the conceptualization of death dominate the reading-book texts? How are they to be approached in the didactic and methodical apparatus that accompanies the texts of oral literature?

We shall attempt to answer these questions by means of the qualitative analysis of the curricula and texts required by the curricula, by means of the qualitative analysis of the reading-book content, done for the purpose of determining the frequency of the folk literature texts with the death motif and by means of the qualitative analysis of the aspects of death occurring in the reading-book texts and in the accompanying didactic and methodical apparatus. Taking into account the fact that we can expect a more complex comprehension and interpretation of the death motif at the second cycle of elementary education, the analysis of the curriculum and texts at this level of education focuses on the upper elementary classes, the analysis of the reading-book content and methodical apparatus is done using a random sampling method in which

we select the reading-books published by the three different publishers (Vulkan, Klett and the Zavod za udžbenike [The Textbook Institute]) whose textbook sets are approved for elementary schools by the Ministry of Education.

Results

The presence of the folk literature texts with the death motif in the curriculum and reading-books. The curricula for the upper elementary classes (Pravilnik, 2018; Pravilnik, 2019a; Pravilnik, 2019b) are designed in such a way to require a particular text to be part of (1) the compulsory school reading list which is to be done in class (2) the compulsory homework reading which is to be done at home, or (3) optional reading list, meaning that the text may or may not be selected from the given list (out of approximately ten available texts three can be selected).

Apart from that, when it comes to a folk literature text, it is possible (a) to prescribe the text directly as compulsory; (b) to prescribe a passage from the particular text as compulsory; (c) to prescribe the text as compulsory, and to offer the possible alternatives; (d) to prescribe the corpus of texts as compulsory, with (optional) choice of particular texts from that corpus.

Thus, following the given categorization, the Table 1 contains the selection of oral literature texts (the formulations are taken from the curriculum).

Table 1. The status of the texts with the death motif in the Serbian Language curriculum for grades 5–8

Grade	Title of the text	Status
5	“Sveti Savo” [Saint Sava]	1a
5	“Ero s onoga svijeta” [Ero from the other world]	1a
5	“Ženidba Dušanova” [the Marriage of Dušan] (a passage with the description of Miloš Vojinović overcoming the obstacles)	1b
5	Folk epic poetry (about the Nemanjić family and the Mrnjavčević family – the Pre-Kosovo thematic cycle)	2d
5	Folktales, short stories, humorous folktales (selected)	2d
6	“Marko Kraljević ukida svadbarinu” [Prince Marko Abolishes the Marriage-tax]	1a
6	“Smrt Majke Jugovića” [the Death of the Mother of the Jugović Brothers]	1a
6	Folk epic poetry about the battle of Kosovo (selected)	2d

Grade	Title of the text	Status
6	Folk epic poetry about Prince Marko (selected)	2d
7	“Mededović” [The Bear’s Son]/ “Čudotvorni prsten” [The Magic Ring] / “Zlatnoruni ovan” [The Golden-fleeced Ram] (one of them by choice)	1c
7	Folk epic poetry of the post-Kosovo thematic cycle (“Smrt vojvode Prijezde” [The Death of Duke Prijezda], “Dioba Jakšića” [How the Jakšić Brothers Were Divided] and a song by choice)	2d
7	Folk epic poetry about the outlaws and bandits (“Mali Radojica” [Little Radojica], “Stari Vujadin” [Old Vujadin], “Starina Novak i knez Bogosav” [Old Novak and Prince Bogosav]; “Ivo Senković i aga od Ribnika” [Ivo Senković and the Agha of Ribnik], “Ropstvo Janković Stojana”) ¹ [The Captivity of Janković Stojan]	2d
8	“Ženidba Milića Barjaktara” [The Wedding of Milić the Standard-bearer]	1a
8	Folk epic songs of more recent times (the thematic cycle on the liberation of Serbia: “Početak bune protiv dahija” [The Beginning of the Revolt Against the Dahijas], “Boj na Mišaru” [The Battle of Mišar], “Boj na Čokešini” [The Battle of Čokešina])	2d
8	“Usud” [Fate]	3

Although we can safely assume that the criterium for the selection of the texts prescribed by the curriculum is not the presence of the death motif in them, the analysis of the curriculum shows that the particular oral literature texts with the death motif are planned for each of the grades in question.

It leaves no doubt that we have a genre variety here: although at this level of education the focus is on the thematic cycles of folk epic poetry, we also find here lyric and epic lyric poetry, and a few oral narratives.

In addition to that, this dispersion of genres is also vital because it enables the identification of the different modes of the death motif (compare Vukomanović Rastegorac, 2018). Majority of texts from this corpus speak about the emotions accompanying death or about the moral dilemma that the epic hero faces and that is

¹ In this set prescribed by the seventh grade curriculum, only “Stari Vujadin” lacks the death motif.

closely related to the death motif (compare, e.g. “Smrt vojvode Prijезде”); on the opposite end stands alone the humorous treatment of the afterlife motif (compare “Ero s onoga svijeta”).

The analysis of the curriculum shows, though, that the degree of the compulsory quality of the texts varies – pupils may or may not come across many of them. Therefore, the authors of the reading-books play an important role: given that in some places the current curriculum allows them to have the freedom to choose (from epic songs belonging to a particular cycle, folktales, humorous stories etc.), editors may or may not set the particular texts on the pupil’s reading horizon.

That is the reason why it is important for us to determine the number of these texts which thematize death that occur in reading-books and which aspects of this thematization can be found.

Table 2. The oral literary texts with the death motif in the selected reading-books for grades 5–8

Grade	Title of the text	Vulkan	Klett	Zavod za udžbenike
5	“Aždaja i carev sin” [The Prince and the Dragon]	/	+	+
5	“Biberče” [The Peppercorn]	/	+	/
5	“Ero s onoga svijeta”	+	+	+
5	“Ženidba Dušanova”	+	+	+
5	“Zidanje Skadra” [The Building of Skadar]	+	+	/
5	“Najveća je žalost za bratom” [The Greatest Grief for a Brother]	+	+	+
5	“Sveti Savo”	+	+	+
5	“Uroš i Mrnjavčevići” [Uroš and the Mrnjavčević Family]	+	/	/
6	“Komadi od razliĉnijeh kosovskih pesama” [The fragments of the various Kosovo songs]	+	+	/
6	“Kosovka devojka” [The Kosovo Maiden]	/	+	+
6	“Kneževa večera” [The Prince’s Supper]	/	/	+
6	“Marko Kraljević i vila” [Prince Marko and the Fairy]	/	+	+
6	“Marko Kraljević i Musa Kesedžija” [Prince Marko and Musa the Outlaw]	+	+	+

Grade	Title of the text	Vulkan	Klett	Zavod za udžbenike
6	“Marko Kraljević ukida svadbarinu”	+	+	+
6	“Oranje Marka Kraljevića” [Prince Marko’s ploughing]	/	+	/
6	“Propast carstva srpskoga” [The Fall of the Serbian Empire]	/	/	+
6	“Smrt Majke Jugovića”	+	+	+
6	“Smrt Marka Kraljevića” [The Death of Prince Marko]	+	/	/
6	“Car Lazar i carica Milica” [Prince Lazar and Princess Milica]	/	+	+
7	“Dioba Jakšića”	+	+	+
7	“Ivo Senković i aga od Ribnika”	+	+	+
7	“Mali Radojica”	+	+	+
7	“Međedović”	+	+	+
7	“Ropstvo Janković Stojana”	+	+	+
7	“Smrt vojvode Kajice” [The Death of Duke Kajica]	+	/	/
7	“Smrt vojvode Prijezde” [The Death of Duke Prijezda]	+	+	+
7	“Starina Novak i knez Bogosav”	+	+	+
8	“Boj na Mišaru”	+	+	+
8	“Boj na Čokešini”	/	+	+
8	“Ženidba Milića Barjaktara”	+	+	+
8	Serbian folk laments	/	+	/
8	“Početak bune protiv dahija”	+	+	+
8	“Usud”	+	+	/

In the selected reading-books, we see 33 texts in total appear while their distribution varies: the reading-books published by the Klett publishing house contain the highest number (28), those published by the Textbook Institute have the lower number (24) and we find (23) in those published by the Vulkan publishing house. This disparity comes from the fact that editors are allowed to organise differently the free

space in their reading-books. Consequently, the Vulkan publishing house team does not offer fairy tales at all in the eighth grade even though they are on the homework reading list while the story “Usud” is left out of the reading-book published by the Zavod although it is optional (in the same grade).

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the editors of the reading-books decide to incorporate into them the texts that thematize death even when they could have avoided them. This does not apply only to the texts which meet the general consensus that they should be part of the pupils’ reading experience (e.g. epic song about prince Marko and Musa the outlaw or folk lyric song “Najveća je žalost za bratom”), but also to those that appear in one reading-book and fail to appear in the other.

The most striking example is the song “Zidanje Skadra” (Vulkan, Klett) and “Marko Kraljević i vila” (Klett, Zavod); in addition to that, the Vulkan publishing house team distinguish themselves from others through the particularly individualistic choice they make since they incorporate into their reading-books the songs that the other two publishers choose not to (“Smrt Marka Kraljevića” and “Smrt vojvode Kajice”, among others). Interestingly, the Klett publishing house team is the only one to take a step forward and introduce the lament into their reading-book.

The dominant aspects of the thematization of death in the folk literature texts in the reading-books and their frequency in the didactic and methodical apparatus. Since the analysis of all the aspects of the thematization of death far exceeds the already established framework of this paper, in the following passages we shall present only the results of the qualitative analysis of the three dominant areas that come into focus: (1) the description of the emotions that accompany death, (2) the description of life after death, 3) the characteristic motifs featured in oral literature in the service of the thematization of death.

The description of the emotions that accompany death. As expected, in the analysed texts grief is the most frequent emotional reaction to somebody else’s death. It can be so intense that facing the death of a close person and moving scenes in the aftermath of such events cause new victims; these are usually female characters (the mother of the Jugović brothers, Kulin’s wife) which can be interpreted as the trace of the cultural stereotypes that allow for the fact that female characters are prone to having more intense emotions. However, it is only fair to say that strong emotions are not consistently and exclusively ascribed to female characters: in the song “Zidanje Skadra”, we witness the moving scene in which Gojko is stricken with grief at the fate that befalls his wife and child; Prince Marko at once feels grief and remorse for having killed a hero worthier than himself while, on the other hand, he faces his own death, shedding tears in resignation because he has to leave this world; in addition to that, duke Kajica’s father and Milić the standard-bearer utter the laments in the songs in which they appear. We should not also forget that in the song “Smrt Majke Jugovića”, animals, too, grieve for the deceased (Damjan’s horse Zelenko in

particular). In this regard, we should put particular emphasis on the decision of the Klett publishing house team to incorporate the lament into the reading-book for the eighth grade. In other words, while laments as the segment of long epic songs can be avoided in the analysis, an encounter with a particular work of art as a typical example of this genre denies an editor and/or a teacher that possibility and consequently implies dealing with a delicate matter of designing the adequate didactic and methodical apparatus.

Here, however, we should stress that grief is not the only reaction to somebody else's death: when it comes to the death of an enemy, e.g. prince Marko laughs at the Moor when he defeats him, whilst in the song "Boj na Mišaru" we see the rage of Kulin's wife in the finale of the song. Fear of death rarely appears: in the emperor's daughter when she, together with the emperor's son, goes to the river bank to wait for the dragon or in the Moor, or in the Agha of Ribnik when they realize that they are defeated by prince Marko and Ivo Senković. We can also note that in these songs both words and silence are used to express emotions (in the song "Smrt Majke Jugovića"), and also in the texts with the special symbolism (compare the actions of young Đurđevica which correspond to the various degrees of grief for the loss of the loved one).

In the methodical apparatus, among the questions regarding the various aspects of the thematization of death, we find that the largest group of questions consists of those about the emotions accompanying death. This is particularly obvious when it comes to the songs "Najveća je žalost za bratom", "Smrt Majke Jugovića" and "Ženidba Milića Barjaktara" because these questions take up the whole sections of the apparatus in all the three selected sets of reading-books. Some of them are about, for example, the way in which emotions are expressed (through silence, actions), others are about their intensity and about the symbolic expression of both: "How does Đurđevica express her pain for the loss of her husband, her brother-in-law and her brother? What do you think, why does the folk singer describe her pain through her actions and not through her words? Why does not the young woman speak? Who does she grieve most deeply for?" (JPK, 2023: 75; for the same song also compare: MN, 2023a: 94; M, 2018: 109)².

In the didactic and methodical apparatus we ask the questions that refer to the way animals show their grief in the song "Smrt Majke Jugovića": "How do the women in the Jugović family react, and how do their loyal companions, horses, falcons and lions react?" (JPK, 2024a: 108); "Why does Damjan's horse Zelenko scream in the middle of the night?" (MN, 2023b: 135; also compare: M, 2019: 126). When it comes to expressing grief in the specific genre of lament, as we have already mentioned,

² For the sake of saving the space and making the paper easier to read, the following abbreviations are used: for the Vulkan publishing house team: Jerkov, Petrović and Kolaković (JPK in further text), for the Klett publishing team: Mrkalj and Nestorović (MN in further text) and for the Text-book Institute: Milošević (M in further text).

Klett's team goes farthest and in the accompanying text points to its characteristics in terms of its content and form (mourning the death of the loved ones, the perspective of the next of kin, addressing the deceased, the images from the life of the deceased; MN, 2024b: 100), and then deliberately sheds the light on them by providing a particular example, asking the questions: "From whose perspective was the song composed? Who is uttering it and whose death does it lament?" (MN, 2024b: 100).

In the methodical apparatus in some of the reading-books we can find the questions that focus on the feelings of male characters, albeit without reference to the cultural stereotypes and their deconstruction: "Describe Gojko's feelings when he sees that his beloved brings lunch to labourers. What golden apple does Gojko refer to when he says that he has lost it and that he cannot get over the loss?" (JPK, 2023: 188; also see for the song "Smrt vojvode Kajice": JPK, 2024b: 45). At the same time, in all the reading-books prince Marko's feelings are under particular scrutiny after the duel with Musa the outlaw, which is of the paramount importance for understanding the complexity of this epic hero: "Why did prince Marko start to cry? Based on this information, what conclusion can you make about him?" (M, 2019: 103; also compare JPK, 2024a: 80; MN 2023b: 159).

Finally, we can emphasize here that in some cases the positive aspect of the methodical apparatus is that it establishes a connection between the emotional lives of heroes in different songs through comparative study, thus pointing to formulaicity as the main poetical characteristic of oral literature.

With the help of the song "Ženidba Milića Barjaktara", this is done in the reading-books published by Klett and the Zavod: "Read again the folk lyric song 'Najveća je žalost za bratom' and folk epic song 'Ropstvo Janković Stojana', and compare the way in which grief and great happiness are expressed in them" (MN, 2024b: 21; also compare in: M, 2021: 28).

The description of life after death. The reading-books offer various modalities of a man's afterlife in oral literary works. First, in the fairy tale "Aždaja i carev sin" the landscape of the particular underworld is depicted: the hero enters this world when he undercuts three sticks and three times strikes the roots with them, then before him "the iron door to the large cellar opens", and "in that cellar there are so many people, young and old, rich and poor, big and small, women and girls, that they can populate an entire empire" (SNP, 1988: 79).

In the scene at the end of the fairy tale when those people leave the underworld, it seems that they existed in it just like they had in this world (the difference in age, in the social status, in appearance, is kept, their physical integrity is also kept and they easily continue to move about, to hug and kiss each other just like they did before). The similar idea of life after death is developed in the story about Ero from the other world in which the death motif is treated humorously: resourceful Ero describes to the Turkish woman afterlife as the life on the other side. He says that Mujo and he are neighbours in that life, Mujo "has good health, but indeed, not a farthing to his name.

Penniless, he cannot buy tobacco for himself or treat his friends to coffee” (SNP, 1988: 22), so the Turkish woman feels pity for Mujo and sends him a pouch full of coins. This image of life after death in the already mentioned works is not surprising if we remember that the traditional ideas of existence after death are such that they paint the picture of the same life as the one in this world: namely, in some folk images, “the other world” very much resembles this world and “there the sun also shines, the birds also sing, the trees also grow and the houses also stand” (Tolstoj & Radenković, 2001: 405–406).

Contrary to this image of literally “rising from the dead”, stands the image of the symbolic continuation of life after death. Thus, the song “Sveti Savo” does not seemingly speak directly about death, but its central idea is there to promote the concept of the continuation of life even after death through somebody’s (good) deeds that remain after that person dies: saint Sava, however, shows that his “dad” did not waste his wealth, but put it to good use and built the three churches as his legacy (Vilindar, Studenica and Milješevka): the first one “glorious and splendid, devoted to himself”, the second one “glorious and splendid, devoted to his mother”, and the third one, “glorious and splendid, devoted to Sava, an eternal home in the other wo’ld, / to have a liturgy chanted to him / of the other and of this world” (SNP II, 1988: 85). Although markedly different in character, it seems that the sacrifice of Gojko’s young wife that continues to exist through miracle resembles this kind of symbolic immortality: “kako tade, tako i ostade, / da i danas onde ide ’rana; / zarad’ čuda, i zarad’ lijeka, / koja žena ne ima mlijeka” [As it was then, so it is now / even to-day the white milk flows, for the sake of a miracle most sublime, quenching the drought in women whose breasts are dry] (SNP II, 1988: 100-101).

The third mode of afterlife implies gaining the victory over the perishability of the body through the attainment of the everlasting quality of everything that is unperishable in a man – such a concept motivates the decision to choose the “kingdom of heaven” and “to keep a pure/ proper soul”, which can earn you a place in that kingdom. Prince Lazar chooses this path because “zemaljsko je zamaleno carstvo / a nebesko uvek i doveka” [the earthly kingdom is a rather small one / and the kingdom of heaven is lasting and eternal] (SNP II, 1988: 220). In the same manner Jevrosima advises Marko to speak the truth “Nemoj, sine, izgubiti duše! / Bolje ti je izgubiti glavu / nego svoju ogr’ješiti dušu!” [Don’t lose your soul, my son! / ’Tis better to lose your life / than to sin against your soul] (SNP II, 1988: 149).

When it comes to the humorous story “Ero s onoga svijeta”, all the three publishers’ methodical apparatuses bring up at least some of the questions regarding the nature of “the other world” (“What is that world like?”, JPK, 2023: 231), as well as the reasons why the Turkish woman believes Ero (“Why does the qadi’s wife believe his story? What is she worried about?”, MN, 2023a: 142; also see JPK, 2023: 231; M, 2018: 136).

However, we should say that the question pool is not exhausted here and that a good opportunity to speak up about the possible images of life after death is wasted

in the apparatus of the Klett publishing house and in the apparatus of the Textbook Institute that accompany the text “Aždaja i carev sin”. Much attention is paid to the symbolic ways of overcoming death: “What is the purpose of building pious endowments?” (JPK, 2023: 191; also compare MN, 2023a: 56). The same is the case with the respect for the highest moral principles which is the particular theme of the song “Uroš i Mrnjavčevići” which comes with the question asked by the Vulkan publishing house team: “What does Marko do to deserve to have his name uttered as long as the sun and the moon rise and set in the sky?” (JPK, 2023: 182). Nevertheless, the explanation and significance of the Christian concept of the eternal kingdom of heaven take up the largest segment in the apparatus which is most obvious in the reading-book published by the Zavod: “What message does that letter convey to Prince Lazar? Which kingdom does he choose? Why?” (M, 2019: 121; also compare the questions about Boško Jugović in: MN, 2023b: 128; M, 2019: 118; also the question regarding the overlapping of motifs in the song “Boj na Čokešini” with the position Lazar finds himself in before the battle of Kosovo: MN, 2024b: 61).

In all these cases the soul (conscience and morals) takes precedence over the body (and the material existence), which is probably most clearly expressed by the words of Mother Jevrosima in the already mentioned song “Uroš i Mrnjavčevići” – the following questions refer to them: “Why does Mother Jevrosima think that it is better to lose one’s life than to sin against one’s soul?” (JPK, 2023: 182; also compare M, 2018: 123).

The characteristic motifs featured in oral literature in the service of the thematization of death. The thematization of death in oral literature can be viewed in context of folk tradition: death is seen here as the rite of passage and represents the last of the three initiation transitions during a man’s lifetime and thus its ritual actions are strictly defined and sanctioned (Van Genep, 2005; Đorđević, 1984; Jovanović, 2002; Jovanović, 2005).

Besides, we have already pointed out the fact that in the Serbian tradition it is believed that death means “only the temporary change of address and the departure to some other world similar to this one” (Zečević, 1982: 25–26).

In the corpus of oral literature we can discover numerous causes of the hero’s death. In epic songs death is often the result of the duel (compare “Marko Kraljević i Musa Kesedžija”, “Ivo Senković i aga od Ribnika” and the like), and the death in the battle is often thematized (“Boj na Mišaru”, “Boj na Čokešini”, etc.).

Actions guided by the high moral principles are worthier than life: prompted by the Prince’s curse and the wish to save their honour, the Kosovo heroes in the song “Car Lazar i carica Milica” do not want to stay away from the battle; in addition to that, it is imperative for them to preserve their dignity which introduces the motif of suicide into the space of the song (“Smrt vojvode Prijezde”). Moreover, oral literature opens the door to the fatal influence of the supernatural. In the fairy tale “Biberče”, the false hero is punished by the “higher power”: at midnight, “the moment he steps

into the church, the ground falls open under his feet and he is cut by the knives” (SNP, 1988: 245). The appearance of the mythical being (fairy) in the song “Zidanje Skadra” sets in motion the events leading to Gojko’s young wife being built in the foundation of the city which is to be viewed in the traditional context of “building sacrifice” (compare Kulišić, Petrović & Pantelić, 1970).³

The fairy’s actions result in death in the song “Marko Kraljević i vila” as she becomes angry on hearing Miloš’s song, she shoots “two white arrows: / one hits Miloš in his throat, / the other hits him in his heroic heart” (SNP II, 1988: 164). The cause of death here requires a more complex interpretation: since fairies are known for being vengeful and jealous (see Kulišić, Petrović & Pantelić 1970: 77), the fairy’s action may be motivated by jealousy or by the hero’s violation of the taboo of silence in the chthonic space on the mountain.

The ballad “Ženidba Milića Barjaktara” best shows how the causes of death weave a tangled web: first, there is the “sin of pride” when the hero finds fault with every girl, then, there is the disrespect for the tradition of asking a girl’s hand in marriage – such actions “shift to the world of higher power responsibility for the meaning, development and result of the events described in the song” (Detelić, 1996: 98), consequently exceptionally beautiful bride Ljeposava (like her sisters before her) dies because of the curse put on her.

Because of her beauty, Ljeposava easily falls prey to the curse (compare Đorđević, 1985: 57–58) – activated by the wedding ritual. It is also important to point to the place where the bride dies: as we have already mentioned, the mountain (forest) is traditionally perceived as a chthonic place to which “spells, curses and similar evil forces are banished according to the magic formula” (Detelić, 1996: 99).

The vow that a dying hero makes before his death is an important piece of the mosaic that depicts his death since the failure to fulfill the vow deserves retaliation. In the reading-books published by all three publishers, pupils can read the vow Murad makes before his death in the song “Početak bune protiv dahija” – the disregard for this vow in this artistic stylization brings on the punishment: the Turkish rule over the Christians comes to an end.

The Vulkan publishing house selects the song “Smrt Marka Kraljevića” in which the hero leaves behind a letter, putting under an obligation the person who finds his body to make arrangements for his funeral and the bereaved who were in his care; in addition to that, our hero’s important actions done before his death are also sung about: the destruction of the epic attributes⁴ – he kills his horse Šarac and breaks his

³ It is interesting that in the song “Usud” death motif appears in the lines which sing about water in which a man must be drowned (sacrificed) so that water could bring fertility. Namely, human sacrifice is given to water on the day of the festival of Dazhbog – that custom is later modified and on the feast of Epiphany into water the cross is thrown instead (compare Kulišić, Petrović & Pantelić, 1970: 34).

⁴ The master’s treatment of his horse, Svetozar Matić thinks (1972), has its roots in the old burial

weapons just like duke Prijezda does with his horse Ždral and his weapons in the song that thematizes his death.

We will mention here two more characteristic motifs which accompany and enrich the thematization of death. Ravens, impure and ominous birds in the folk tradition, often appear in the songs that sing about battles (Tolstoj & Radenković, 2001). Their appearance incorporates stylized formulaic lines (their “feet steeped in blood to their knees and their wings soaked in blood to their elbows”), and their role is to carry messages with the news of the hero’s death and to be a symbolic representation of death (Medenica, 1935; Šmaus, 1937).

Thus, two ravens bring Damjan’s hand to the Mother of the Jugović family, they are the bearers of bad news from Kosovo to princess Milica, and also from Mišar to Kulin’s wife.

The other interesting motif is found in the fairy tale “Aždaja i carev sin” in which the rival’s strength (life) does not reside in him, but in animals and therefore, once the hero kills the animals, the rival dies. This stylization may be connected with the ideas of a bodily soul which suggest that life force lies in hair, nails and the like (Čajkanović, 1985; Đorđević, 1926).

The apparatus does not delve into the theme of death in a duel, it only scratches its surface by the reproductive questions which ask pupils to describe its course (e.g. for the duel of Prince Marko and the Moor compare: JPK, 2024a: 72; MN, 2023b: 148; M, 2019: 108); only in some cases do the given tasks focus on the particular segments of the duel (“Choose the most dramatic moments in the duel of Ivo Senković and the Agha of Ribnik”; JPK, 2024b: 67).

Acting in accordance with moral principles implies risking one’s life which is also referred to in the apparatus accompanying the song: when we talk about the song “Car Lazar i carica Milica”, in the reading-books published by the Klett publishing house and the Textbook Institute respectively we find the following questions: “What is more important to both [Boško Jugović and servant Goluban] at the crucial historical moment than obeying orders given by their superiors?” (MN, 2023b: 128; also compare M, 2019: 118); when it comes to the death of duke Prijezda and his Jelica, all three publishers ask questions although they draw a subtle distinction between the character of Prijezda’s and Jelica’s sacrifice: “How do you understand Jelica’s and Prijezda’s sacrifice? Whose death is more of a heroic act, the duke’s or his wife’s?” (JPK, 2024b: 38; also see M, 2020: 163).

In the reading-books with the song “Marko Kraljević i vila” the fairy’s actions are brought into focus with the following questions: “Why does fairy Ravijojla shoot an arrow at Miloš Obilić’s heroic throat and heart?” (M, 2019: 97; в. и: MN, 2023b: 153), but the influence of supernatural forces and the complex cause of death are

custom in which a horse is offered as a posthumous sacrifice.

analyzed in detail in the ballad “Ženidba Milića Barjaktara” in the reading-books created by all three teams: “Which wedding rituals are not included in this ballad? [...]

Figure out why the beauty of Ljeposava and her sisters is a curse” (JPK, 2024v: 14; see similar in: M, 2021: 29); “Examine again the characteristics of the folk ballads and give accordingly the reasons why the misfortune befalls the hero of the song” (MN, 2024b: 21). At the same time, the authors of the reading-books published by the Vulkan publishing house and the Klett publishing house focus their attention on the chthonic nature of the place where Ljeposava dies: “Where does the curse strike her? [...] What creatures dwell in that space?” (JPK, 2024v: 14; also compare MN, 2024b: 21).

The apparatuses given by all three publishers point to the vow made by sultan Murad before he dies: “Find the advice given by Murad on his deathbed to his viziers. [...] What is the connection between his advice and the way the Dahijas rule?” (MN, 2024b: 54–55; also compare JPK, 2024v: 60; M, 2021: 44). Marko’s vow is also analyzed in the reading-book with the song “Smrt Marka Kraljevića” (“What does Marko write in his letter? Give your interpretation of his wishes”; JPK, 2024a: 85), and although this segment also points to the destruction of epic attributes, the meaning of this act is more adequately shown by the questions that accompany the song “Smrt vojvode Prijezde” in this apparatus: “Why does Prijezda kill his horse Ždral? What does he do with his sword? Explain his actions” (JPK, 2024b: 38). Apart from that, a plethora of questions in the apparatuses focuses on revealing the role of black ravens: “Why does a folk singer introduce ravens, of all animals, as bearers of bad news? What do they symbolize?” (JPK, 2024a: 108; also compare MN, 2024b: 60; M, 2021: 47, etc.); contrary to that, in the already mentioned fairy tale we do not find the questions that could reveal the artistic meaning of shaping up the dragon’s strength.

Discussion

Although the death motif can be found in all genres of oral literature, it is the exception rather than the rule when that motif becomes the focus of the books on teaching methods – the monographs and scientific papers – that centre on folk literature. This can be attributed, among other things, to “the feeling of unease in the culture” that tends to keep the dialogue on death away from the classroom which is quite unnecessary since it ends in failure. Namely, both the curriculum and reading-books contain numerous texts that thematize different aspects of death: from the emotions one feels when confronted with it, through various conceptualizations of life after death, to the particular way the discourse on death is shaped in our oral tradition.

In this respect, we can point out the variety of genres in the folk literary texts with the death motifs in both the curriculum and reading-books (which by no means implies that the criterium for the selection of the curriculum texts is the presence or the absence of the death motif in them). The presence of this motif in the texts does not hinder the authors of reading-books from including them in their selection.

Numerous aspects of the thematization of death that appear in the reading-book texts call for the analysis of this complex phenomenon which is the point where the methodical tasks related to the experience and the interpretation of the text, on the one hand, meet the tasks related to death education, on the other hand. For example, the descriptions of various complex emotions (grief being the most dominant one among them, although we also find the examples of “mixed” feelings, e.g. in the song about prince Marko and Musa the outlaw), their many layers (they incorporate a non-verbal, verbal and performative expression of grief) and the possibility for their comparative study – they are all mainly seen through the methodical reading-book apparatus – open the door to the communication about the feelings caused by the loss of the loved one. Similarly, the range of various representations of life after death, rooted in the folk tradition, in the Christian view of the world or in the possible symbolic immortality, has the potential to initiate comparative and/or critical thinking about the already mentioned concepts and to make way for the well-argued discussion among pupils.

Finally, first, the presence, and then, the study of the oral literature motifs in the service of the thematization of death can only deepen that discussion by identifying the traces of folk heritage, traditions and beliefs, and even more by studying their esthetic role in the work of art: from the influence of natural and supernatural forces, through the belief in the fatal power of curse and/or the bodily soul, the symbolism of the “black ravens” and chthonic spaces, to the meaning of the vow the hero makes before his death and the respect for the moral code which in liminal situations imposes the imperative that “it is better to lose one’s life than one’s soul” (which can also be the topic of discussion).

Contrary to that, apart from the variety of genres, we should bring up the question of the sporadic quality of genres in the curriculum and reading-books for the upper elementary classes. This can be corrected by introducing a larger number of prose texts, especially those that humorously treat the death motif (for good examples, we need not look any further than Vuk’s collections: “Dva novca” [Two coins], “Utopio se pop što nije ruku dao” [Drowned for He Would not Give His Hand], “Zla žena sačuvala muža” [The Husband’s Life Saved by His Wicked Wife]; see SNP, 1988).

When given free rein, the authors of reading-books make a different selection, which is not a bad thing, but it is a pity that some important texts are not included in some reading-books (only the Vulkan publishing house team chooses “Smrt Marka Kraljevića” and “Smrt vojvode Kajice” and only the Klett publishing house incorporates the lament into its reading-book).

All in all, even though the methodical apparatuses cover most of the previously analyzed aspects, they miss a chance to deconstruct the cultural stereotypes regarding the expression of emotions or to make a more effective comparison between the images of life after death, to point to the fact that breaking the vow the sultan makes before he dies results in fatal consequences in the artistic stylization or at least to shed

some light on the concept of a bodily soul whose stylization is one of the most impressive segments of the fairy tale “Aždaja i carev sin”.

The authors of the reading-books take an interesting approach to the song “Zidanje Skadra”, it is not included in the reading-book published by the Textbook Institute while the Vulkan publishing house publishes the reading-book with the song, but without the questions necessary for its analysis; the Klett publishing house is the only one to offer the contextualization of the sacrifice motif in verse, which shows that it is necessary for the reading-books and/or curricula to include the points of reference or passages that refer to the folk beliefs and traditions which in the comparative reading would explain the role of some other important motifs and themes (e.g. recommend: “Gavran” [Raven] in: Tolstoj & Radenković, 2001; “Žrtva, nečista mesta, urok” [Sacrifice, unclean places, evil eye] in: Kulišić, Petrović & Pantelić, 1970; “Naricanje, tuženje” [Lamenting, keening] in: Milošević-Đorđević, 1997; and the like).

Conclusion

Even though the encounters with death are part of one’s life and death itself is something young readers come across, the importance of the conversation about this subject in the school context is not formally acknowledged.

One way to introduce a dialogue on this subject into the school space is to experience and interpret the texts that thematize this phenomenon – folk literature texts, among others, which often have the death motif.

Our analysis of the curricula and the selected reading-books shows that the upper elementary classes read a substantial number of texts with the death motif and that the methodical apparatus that comes with the texts analyzes the different aspects of this phenomenon.

It means that even without significant interventions on the curriculum, the reading-book content and its apparatus and particularly with the interventions suggested here, we have grounds to believe that there is potential to launch the discussion on this subject which at the same time requires raising awareness that it is possible and necessary to have a dialogue on this subject.

In the end, we can say that the unavoidable limitations regarding the choice of the corpus of the analyzed works of art and the approved reading-books in this paper at the same may be seen as the invitation to do further research.

We may suggest a more thorough research of the potential of the literary works, done in the upper elementary classes, whose authors are known and which also thematize death (e.g. “Plava grobnica” [The Blue Tomb] by Milutin Bojić or “Svetli grobovi” [Bright Graves] by Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, the novel *My Grandfather Was a Cherry Tree* by Angela Nanetti and *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry and the like);

it is particularly delicate to approach this subject in the lower elementary classes whose current curriculum incorporates some texts with the death motif (for example, the folk song “Jetrvice adamsko koleno” [Dear noble sister-in-law] and folktale “Pepeljuga” [Cinderella]); since it is even more complex to examine this phenomenon in secondary school, a teacher might find it very challenging to discuss it with students.

All these directions that research might take lead to new insights into the death motif in the literary work and new ways to interpret it and open the door to a responsible, well-thought-out and cautious conversation about one of the most delicate subjects in the school context, taking into consideration the specific characteristics of the pupils’ age, cognitive and emotional features and interests.

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