



Literary Representations of Death, Dying and Bereavement in Children's Literature

Candidate: Klara Charlotte Schroth

Supervisors: Dr Katie Jones (University of St Andrews)

Dr Teresa Botelho (Universidade Nova de Lisboa)

Presented to the
University of St Andrews
Universidade Nova de Lisboa

2017

Declaration

I, Klara Charlotte Schroth, hereby certify that this dissertation, which is 21,966 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work (with or without trivial changes) have been placed within quotation marks, and specifically acknowledged by reference to author, work and page. I understand that plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of such passages – will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation and, if serious, in the degree programme as a whole. I also affirm that, with the exception of the specific acknowledgements, these answers are entirely my own work.

Signature of candidate:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Schroth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'K' and a clear 'Schroth'.

Synopsis

Death, dying and bereavement are universal human concerns and yet never fully comprehensible or knowable. In order to find an approach to the topic, this paper examines and analyses literary representations of death, dying and bereavement in Anglophone literature for children. Scholars such as Kathryn James or Roberta Seelinger Trites have argued for a shift from objective and realistic representations in pre-1980 children's novels towards an increasing use of narrative devices and fantastic elements in contemporary texts. By comparing three books from before 1980 (E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, Doris Buchanan Smith's *A Taste of Blackberries* and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*) with three contemporary novels (Evan Kuhlman's *The Last Invisible Boy*, Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* and Sally Nicholls's *Ways to Live Forever*) with regards to the ways in which various narrative devices enable the reader to comprehend the topic, this paper will examine this claim and will aim at determining a possible tendency for children's literature concerned with death and dying.

The analyses and comparison will be supported by a theoretical introduction to children's literature, to the concepts of death, dying and bereavement and to the treatment of those concepts in literature in general and in children's literature in particular. Ultimately, it will be argued that by means of a shift in the usage of narrative devices the readers are more and more allowed and demanded to autonomously interpret the texts, to invest in them and therefore to approach the topics of death, dying and bereavement subjectively and independently. These themes are thus increasingly represented as approachable by means of a subjective use of imagination and fantasy.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Theoretical Background	4
2.1 Children's Literature	4
2.2 Literary Representations of Death, Dying and Bereavement	10
2.3 Death, Dying and Bereavement in Children's Literature	15
3. Literary Analysis	19
3.1 Pre-1980 novels	19
3.1.1 Overview	19
3.1.2 Composition	22
3.1.3 Narrative Perspective	26
3.1.4 Narrative Devices	30
3.2 Contemporary Novels	36
3.2.1 Overview	36
3.2.2 Composition	38
3.2.3 Narrative Perspective	42
3.2.4 Narrative Devices	45
3.3 Comparison and Discussion	55
4. Conclusion	62
Bibliography	64
Appendix	67

1 Introduction

To die will be an awfully big adventure.

One may consider it exciting like Peter Pan in the introductory quotation (Barrie 2012: 123), daunting, obscure or relieving, in any case the inescapable death as the end of each creature's life remains one of the few truly universal concerns of humanity. However, although the certainty of one's own eventual dying and death are deeply rooted in every person's consciousness and bereavement caused by the loss of a loved individual is a painful and yet recurring aspect of life, it is not simple to define either of the three as concepts. This becomes understandable in view of the large number of often contradictory or inconclusive explanations provided by science, literature, philosophy, religion and history.

So as to avoid or minimise such ambiguities, literary analysis has been chosen as the main focus of this paper. Literary representations of death, dying and bereavement are of especial significance since, as Bradbury argues, 'our talk about death has a very real impact on how we die, what we do with our dead and how we experience our bereavements' (1999: 2). Representations of these subjects are thus not mere reflections of a culture's view on death, dying and grief but can noticeably affect them. This is true for all verbal or written narration. Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting to consider the case of literature written for a young readership. While one would naturally assume a distinct separation of childhood and the topic of human mortality, James claims that in children's literature, a literature of becoming, 'representations of death [...] can have especial relevance' (2009: 2).

Nevertheless, death, dying and bereavement as concepts must be determined before an analysis of their literary representations can lead to insightful results. Based on assessments by critics such as Bradbury, Luper and Forster dying will in this project be understood as the physical process of extinction of the subjective self while death is the lasting

state which follows this process (cf. Bradbury 1999: 152, Luper 2014: n.pag., Forster 2002: 36). Both are ‘at the same time experiences and not experiences’ (Forster 2002: 36) inasmuch as they are omnipresent and yet never fully knowable or comprehensible in all their aspects. Bereavement as the emotional reaction to the death of a valued other as well as to the ‘loss of the self that was partly constructed through the interaction with the deceased’ (Bradbury 1999: 176) differs from the other two concepts as it is both knowable and communicable. Consequently, death, dying and bereavement are closely linked and yet distinct in their implications for and their impact on life.

As James claims, ‘as human beings, we are arguably the only creatures able to reflect on this knowledge about our mortality, making death a topic unlike any other’ (2009: 1). Although bereavement stands in close connection to the concepts of death and dying and is indispensable from the critical discourse, representations of the two latter are of particular interest since their experiencing relies on imagination, fantasy and interpretation. Studying people’s understanding of death and dying as expressed in the various forms of their cultural and social representations thus provides insights into the ways in which ‘we order and give meanings to our lives’ (ibid.). This is also acknowledged by Kübler-Ross who was one of the first scholars to study the social implications of how a culture deals with death, dying and bereavement. In *On Death and Dying* (1969) she describes denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as the five fundamental stages of both the realisation of one’s own mortality and of bereavement (cf. 1997). These stages are particularly relevant since they have had a considerable impact on many people’s understanding of death, dying and bereavement and have therefore found their way into cultural products concerned with the subjects of mortality and loss.

Since academic publications suggest that before the 1980s children’s novels which are concerned with death, dying and bereavement have strongly depended on a representation of the themes based on Kübler-Ross’s works, an analysis and comparison of both pre-

1980 and contemporary realistic narratives will be the main subject of this project. Here, in using the term ‘contemporary’ I am referring to those texts which have been published in the last ten years. The reading age of this study will be nine to twelve years which is due to the fact that, on the one hand, this age represents the transitional phase between a parentally guided reading and young adult fiction and that, on the other hand, there are still relatively few studies concerned with the respective texts. By means of an analysis of the narrative aspects of the texts, a possible shift in representations of death, dying and bereavement after 1980 towards an increasing use of elements of fantasy to allow for more ambiguous interpretations will be examined.

For the analysis of the pre-1980 novels I have chosen E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), Doris Buchanan Smith’s *A Taste of Blackberries* (1973) and Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977). All three books are modern children’s classics and, although they were published within a period of more than twenty years, can be considered as belonging to the same time category inasmuch as they were written before the claimed post-1980 change in the representations of death, dying and bereavement. Furthermore, they exhibit prominent similarities in terms of plot and structure. For the analysis of the contemporary texts I have chosen *Ways to Live Forever* by Sally Nicholls (2008), Evan Kuhlman’s *The Last Invisible Boy* (2008) and *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness (2011), all three of which have been met with great critical acclaim. All six books belong to the genre of realistic fiction, were written and published in either Great Britain or the United States and thus offer a suitable basis for the subsequent comparison.

Before turning to the analysis itself, this paper will provide a theoretical background of the relevant research fields. Initially, a generic overview over children’s literature as such will demonstrate historical and thematic aspects. Subsequently, a thematical and formal approach to literary representations of death, dying and bereavement will determine narratology as a suitable method for the analysis before both aspects are brought together

in the last theoretical subchapter. Dividing the literary analysis into pre-1980 novels and contemporary texts serves the purpose of separately determining parameters and conclusions for both groups of literature. Each analysis will provide a short overview of the respective novels before concentrating on their composition, narrative perspective and narrative devices. Then, they will be contrasted with each other and the results will be compared. Ultimately, in the conclusion it will be determined to what extent the analyses could reveal a tendency for the literary representation of death, dying and bereavement in children's literature to become less explicit and more open for interpretation and considerations for further possible research will be discussed.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Children's Literature

From the vantage point of the present, children's literature is an indispensable part of the global literary world. Its productive market is demonstrated through countless new releases and republications each year and its value and popularity are pointed out to potential readers and buyers by means of literary prizes, festivals, merchandising and screen adaptations (cf. Maybin and Watson 2009: 2). Furthermore, Meek argues that '[o]ur constant, universal habit, scarcely changed over time, is to tell children stories' (2004: 2). However, although 'children's literature' has become a universally recognized term, defining and delineating it proves to be difficult. For this reason, this chapter will outline a broad overview of the development of children's literature to provide a basis for the subsequent definitions and the portrayal of children's literature as a field for academic research. Furthermore, the historical overview will allow for a clearer understanding of the forces which led to the contemporary notion of children's literature.

The production as well as understanding of written children's literature has self-evidently altered remarkably in the course of the last centuries. Before the eighteenth century children were yet to be discovered as a serious audience for written tales. What had been published for centuries until then were mainly secular and religious instructional books which were aimed at educating their young readership (cf. Grenby 2009: 4). Fighting 'a battle eventually won by entertainment' (Rudd 2004: 29), children's literature 'has transcended linguistic and cultural borders' (O'Sullivan 2005: 1) in the course of its development throughout the last centuries.

It goes without saying that the development of children's literature is not a phenomenon which occurred solely in the Anglophone countries. However, Maybin and Watson argue that 'the anglophone tradition of children's literature has historically had a disproportionate and avant-garde influence upon the development of the idea of children's literature' (2009: 5). Scholars such as Lerer claim that the origins of children's literature as we know it today lay in 1744, the year in which John Newbery 'established the first press devoted to children's books' (2008: 8; cf. Grenby 2009: 4). Those early stages resulted in a sudden rise of the production of - as well as the interest in - children's texts. This trend can at least partially be explained by structural factors, including the growth of a sizeable middle class, technical developments in book production and the influence of new educational theories. According to Grenby, '[w]hat these demographic and cultural shifts meant was a society increasingly full of, and concerned with, children, and willing to invest in them both emotionally and financially' (2009: 7).

During the Victorian era in the second half of the nineteenth century then, for the first time it was possible for authors to make a living out of writing solely for children and to become famous for it. The Victorians were the first to explicitly make children the protagonists and heroes of their novels and children's classics such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1856) and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), J. M.

Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1904) or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) have proven their lasting success until the present day. Since this era which left us with many tales and stories that still strongly influence modern children's literature, the number of publications of children's books grew rapidly and especially since the turn of the millennium children's literature has become both publicly visible and commercially popular (cf. Maybin and Watson 2009: 1). Today, children's books are well-represented in the annual literary publications all over the world and, as Lerer points out, 'the categories of the children's books are codified not just by writers and readers but by book sellers, librarians, and publishing houses' (2008: 8).

Nevertheless, despite this predominantly Anglophone development of a successful market for children's books, one has to be aware of the fact that such a portrayal inevitably leaves aside other histories of children's literature, often those ones which are less influenced and shaped by Western cultures (cf. Rudd 2004: 29). Although it is indeed the Anglophone tradition which will be relevant for the present analysis, it is important to realise that a historical overview of this length can only ever provide a short insight into the various developments and trends. As Lerer states, '[c]hildren's literature, in short, is world literature' (2008: 11). However, despite children's literature's importance as an essential part of the modern literary world it is indeed a difficult task to define it. Lesnik-Oberstein argues that 'it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: children.' (2004: 15). However, concepts of childhood and of what it means to be a child are historically and culturally dependent and are subject to continuous change. Similarly, ideas about children's books, too, vary in relation to cultural or societal changes (cf. Lyon Clark 2003: 14). These altering ideas and concepts influence not only a reader's perception of a text but also the consumer and production behavior in a certain place during a certain time (cf. Immel 2009: 19). While this serves as an explanation for the difficulty of a definition of children's literature,

it ‘display[s] an awareness of children’s disempowered status’ (Rudd 2004: 39) rather than to allow for a fruitful approach to literary analysis.

Consequently, Grenby calls for an alternative strategy and argues that it might be developed ‘on the basis of certain qualities of the texts themselves. [...] Perhaps true children’s books are only those which take seriously the child’s point of view, and represent it sympathetically’ (2009: 6). This, however, poses another problem with regards to the definition of children’s literature: If it relies on the child’s point of view, then how can the fact that children’s texts have been - and still are - almost exclusively written by adult authors be justified or at least explained? (cf. Maybin and Watson 2009: 3) As is argued by Knoepflmacher and Myers, ‘[a]uthors who write for children inevitably create a colloquy between past and present selves’ (1997: vii). This results in a unique relationship between the author, the implied author, the narrative voice, the implied reader and the reader which is characteristic for children’s texts (cf. Wall 1991: 3). Thus, one can conclude in Knoepflmacher’s words that children’s books are often hybrid texts ‘that combine a child’s perspective with the guarded perspective of the former child we call “adult”’ (2009: 159).

Indeed, this hybridity seems to be an important feature of children’s literature inasmuch as Falconer states that ‘stories are what adults and children most effectively share’ (2010: 160). Likewise, Meek claims that ‘[a]lthough myths, legends, folk and fairy tales tend to be associated particularly with childhood, throughout history they have been embedded in adult literature’ (2004: 3). It can thus be argued that children’s literature is essentially characterised by hybridity and the texts define themselves through the common ground which they provide for the literary exchange between child and adult (cf. Rudd 2004: 36). These overlaps ‘between a child’s constructions of reality and their later reappropriation by adult authors and adult readers’ (Knoepflmacher 2009: 160) can on the one hand lead to tensions. On the other hand, however, they add additional modes of reading and additional dimensions of interpretation to the texts. Lesnik-Oberstein states that

‘[a]ttempts to define “children’s literature” and the reading “child” thus also operate within this field of tensions’ (2004: 18). As a result, one can conclude that there is no common understanding of what children’s literature is but rather a collection of aspects which it is not. Furthermore, there is no clear definition of parameters or approaches. For the purpose of my dissertation I will thus follow Maybin and Watson in their assessment that children’s literature is

a foundation of shared intergenerational national and international culture, a barometer of beliefs and anxieties about children and childhood and a body of literature with its own genres, classic texts and avant-garde experiments. These features recommend it is an important area of interest for scholars, whether of literature, or of childhood, or of culture more generally. (2009: 1)

Rather than providing a conclusive definition of what children’s literature is, it will therefore be understood as a construction which provides the basis for productive literary studies. This approach opens up questions and perspectives for the study of this particular group of literary works and promises new insights into topics which are not inevitably connected to childhood and young readership.

Despite these interesting aspects, children’s literature has only lately been recognized as a field worthy of scholarly attention. As is explained by Maybin and Watson, ‘[t]he academic study of children’s literature has only become firmly established relatively recently; until the 1970s it tended to be dismissed as trivial, easy, often ephemeral and fundamentally “childish”’ (2009: 1). Hunt explains this fact with his observation that ‘childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from’ (1999: 1). This is reflected in the relatively small number of publications in literary studies that focus on an analysis or a comparison of children’s texts. However, developments during the last decade show a growing interest in the studies of children’s literature which slowly but persistently seem to indicate that modern academic literary studies are increasingly becoming aware of this research field’s possibilities (cf. Stevenson 2009: 111). Yet, in academia there is no distinct consensus about methodologies and approaches for the study of children’s literature. While the texts can be ex-

amined from an educational, psychological or developmental point of view, O'Sullivan argues that 'children's literature studies that neglects the comparative dimension is approaching significant areas in a questionable manner' (2005: 1). Furthermore, scholars make use of practices of narratology, formalist theories and structural, linguistic and rhetorical analyses which have been established in the studies of adult literary fiction for decades (cf. Meek 2004: 3). Nevertheless, as Lesnik-Oberstein argues, '[c]hildren's literature critics in various ways claim repeatedly that this meeting of children's literature, literary criticism, and theory [...], is yet to begin, or has only recently started' (1999: 3).

Despite the undoubted benefits that children's literature studies entail, research can be complicated by the sheer amount of texts which are yet to be analysed and discussed as well as by a lack of specific devices and approaches. For the purpose of this dissertation, especially with regards to the interplay between children's texts and the literary representation of death, dying and bereavement, it will thus be necessary to develop distinct and clearly defined methodologies which allows for a comparative approach to children's texts. These methodologies will represent a fruitful way to combine established approaches to written works with the developmental and educational aspects of children's literature and the human experiences of death, dying and bereavement. The following section will therefore provide an engagement with the questions of how these experiences can be represented in literature and which methods will be useful for the analysis of literary texts. Subsequently, in chapter 2.3 the two topics of children's literature and of death, dying and bereavement will be brought together and lead to the analysis which is the key focus of this dissertation.

2.2 Literary Representations of Death, Dying and Bereavement

In his book *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, Alvarez claims that ‘perhaps half the literature of the world is about death’ (1990: 236). In a similar manner, MacLeish argues that death is ‘the perspective of every great picture ever painted and the underbeat of every measurable poem’ (qtd. in James 2009: 1). Indeed, one could argue that, although self-evidently not every text is unambiguously concerned with the topics of death, dying or bereavement as such, the form of a written account or tale itself resembles an examination of and comment on those universal human experiences. Books can only have a limited amount of words and each turning of the page inevitably functions as a reminder to the reader that both the characters and the story are finite. In John Greene’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), an adolescent novel which is directly concerned with the consciousness of every person’s eventual death and which has been highly successful during the last years both as the printed version and as its movie adaptation, the protagonist summarises this as follows: ‘That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence’ (2012: n.pag.). Likewise, Stewart claims that ‘as narrative event, death is the ultimate form of closure plotted within the closure of form’ (1984: 6). Consequently, the closed form of the novel already foreshadows the narrative content but at the same time ‘can be safely outlasted, lived through in reading’ (Stewart 1984: 48).

However, books are not only constant reminders of the mortality of every life and story but also work as a ‘continual defence against death’ (Seale 1998: 1). It can be argued that by putting a story into writing one also preserves it to be repeatedly experienced. Not only can the readers turn back the pages and, consequently, rejuvenate the characters and the plot but the story is also made accessible for perception and interpretation independent from its time of production. Furthermore, written texts often function as a means for au-

thors to produce time-independent remainders of their existence. This is especially evident for the case of autobiographies but is equally true for fictional stories. Thus, books incorporate in themselves both a reminder of and a resistance to death and dying.

Notwithstanding this, an explicit textual representation of death and dying remains a challenge of expression and form. While bereavement must be considered an exception since it is a perceptible human experience which can be reflected upon, both other concepts rely on imagination and interpretation. Hall argues that '[r]epresentation [...] enables us to refer to either the "real" world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events' (1997: 17). For the cases of death and dying, however, a distinction between reality and fantasy cannot easily be drawn. It cannot be denied that both are universal parts of human reality. At the same time, however, what exactly both entail can never be fully comprehended and thus has to be filled with fiction. Ultimately, knowledge of death and dying apart from the reality of medicine originates from mental concepts which are themselves highly influenced by cultural practices, traditions and beliefs (cf. Hall 1997: 17).

Seale claims that through language 'we all engage daily in orienting ourselves towards life and away from death' (1998: 68). Proceeding from this assumption, how can language be used to represent dying and death? Gilman claims that notwithstanding the form which its representation takes, death in fiction always stays 'a thought experiment' (2015: 160). Stewart, however, argues for a relationship between death, literary fiction, style and language. What remains when content and plot can no longer be based on rationally perceptible events is nothing but purely constructed language and style (cf. 1984: 4-6). Likewise, Whitehead claims that inevitable uncertainty about and inexperience with the topic call for the use of fantastic elements in literature to complement what is understood as "real". Such fantastic elements 'do not exist outside the text (they are not actually real) and so their primary mode of existence is in language and through the linguistic and narra-

tive techniques used in the literary fictional text to create them' (2013: 9). Thus, representations of death and dying demand their own distinct form, language and literary style in such a way that an analysis of exactly these aspects promises to lead to relevant results. This not only results in the need for specific methods in order to analyse such texts but also contradicts authors such as Meek who claim that the most productive approach to the topic can only be an analysis of readers' responses (cf. 2004: 9). Likewise, questions of subjectivity, personal background, cultural influences, psychology or pedagogy are not relevant aspects of the focus of this dissertation since they would lead away from an explicit analysis of the texts as such.

Defining language and style as the key to a successful and productive analysis of the representation of death, dying and bereavement in literature ultimately results in determining distinct patterns or themes by means of a close reading of the texts. Consequently, narratology will form the basis for the analyses in this dissertation. Forster argues that although 'the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect' (2002: 21), it is eventually determined by specific voices and tones which result in a reader's understanding of and response to a text. Hence, those voices and tones form part of a narrative and can therefore be analysed by means of narratology. Meek claims that narrative is 'a range of linguistic ways of annotating time, related to memory and recollections of the past, as to anticipations of the future, including hypotheses, wishes, longing, planning and the rest' (2004: 3) and, likewise, Porter Abbott states that 'narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time' (2002: 3). Ultimately, what narrative thematises in terms of structure and style can thus be understood as a comment on the finiteness of life as one's personal time.

Having chosen narratology as a suitable approach to the literary topic of death, dying and bereavement, it now remains to be specified which formal traits will be relevant parts of the subsequent analysis. For Nikolajeva 'these formal traits include composition (plot,

temporal structure), characterisation (the palette of narrative devices used by writers to reveal a character), and narrative perspective (voice and point of view) (2004: 166).’ Indeed, this proves to be a suitable starting point for establishing productive methods for this dissertation. However, it has to be developed further in order to account for the fact that there is a close interconnection between the story as a sequence of events and the narrative discourse as reflecting those events by means of representation (cf. Porter Abbott 2002: 17). Thus, the use of narrative devices will need to be analysed on a broader scale than is proposed by Nikolajeva. Taking those considerations into account, each of the analytical chapters will be divided into four parts: overview, composition, narrative perspective and narrative devices.

‘Overview’ will provide a short summary of the novels’ plots as well as of the main characters and their relationships. Furthermore, the subchapter will refer to the critical response with which the texts were received. By this means, a fundamental basis will be created to allow for a suitable starting point for the subsequent more detailed analysis.

The subchapters ‘Composition’ will be concerned with the fundamental determinants which define the plot. Those include place and space and thus ‘the topological position in which the actors are situated and the events take place’ (Bal 1997: 133) as well the temporal structure and questions of sequential ordering, the linearity of time and retroversions and anticipations (cf. Bal 1997: 80). Furthermore, examinations of the representation of closure and of paratexts such as pictures will be part of those sections. Those are relevant aspects since Porter Abbott claims that ‘all of this tangential material can inflect our experience of the narrative [...]. So in this sense all of this material is part of the narrative’ (2002: 26).

‘Narrative Perspective’ will concentrate on all formal traits which shape the reader’s own perspective on the plot and thus on the story. As Forster argues, ‘the story, besides saying one thing after another, adds something because of its connection with a voice’

(2002: 30). Therefore, it is relevant to focus in detail on the narrator as ‘the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts.’ (Bal 1997: 19). Furthermore, questions of reliability, voice, distance and the various forms of speech will be considered (cf. Bal 1997: 50).

By contrast, in ‘Narrative Devices’ the portrayal of characters will be examined. Additionally, the use of embedded texts and stories as well as stylistic devices will be identified. These include motifs, repetitions of themes, metaphors and linguistic choices such as a distinct vocabulary and syntax and will prove to be of particular importance as Stewart stresses ‘fiction’s inherent need to account for death in idioms and metaphors drawn from life’ (1984: 11). These narrative devices will ultimately be connected to the question of the importance of fantasy for the analysed texts. This is relevant since Forster states that ‘fantasy asks us to pay something extra’ (2002: 76) which will be one of the keys to an understanding of death, dying and bereavement in the analyses. Furthermore, the role of writing and storytelling will be examined.

Having defined methods for a general analysis of texts which deal with the representation of death, dying and bereavement, the following chapter will demonstrate interconnections between this methodology, death, dying and bereavement in literature and the concept of children’s literature. As Nikolajeva claims that ‘narrative theory is perhaps the area of critical enquiry least explored by children’s literature scholars’ (2006: 166), this is a little explored but nevertheless very promising approach.

2.3 Death, Dying and Bereavement in Children's Literature

As a reaction to the described uncertainties and unknowingness concerning death and dying as described above, talking about these topics is largely treated as a taboo in Western societies today. Likewise, the public expression of sorrow, grief or even depression is often stigmatised (cf. Koutsompou and Kotsopoulou 2015: 154). With regards to death's negative implications of loss, finiteness and human mortality, James argues that '[p]erhaps the very act of bringing together "death" and "children" is unsettling' (2009: 2). Initially, it thus seems only natural to exclude death, dying and bereavement from children's literature to spare the young readership sadness and concern as well as to avoid unpleasant or simply unanswerable questions.

However, an examination of both topics demonstrates remarkable analogies between representations and understandings of dying as 'rites of passage' (James 1009: 4) and growing up as an interim stage towards an unfamiliar state of being. Furthermore, death's ambiguous double position as unknowable and repressed but also inevitable and omnipresent makes it a hybrid of human reality and societal fiction. In this way, it resembles the hybrid nature of children's literature, as presented above, as an interface between fiction and the reality of both the child's and the adult's world. Consequently, bringing together the two seemingly incompatible areas can not only contribute to satisfying children's natural curiosity but also offers new textual and stylistic possibilities. This becomes apparent from the example of young adult fiction which has for several decades been characterised by its 'willingness to engage with the traumatic and harsh aspects of life' (James 2009: 45) and which has often treated 'death as catalyst for growth' (James 2009: 74). *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Greene, which has been referred to above, is only one of many examples of books for teenagers which make death and dying a topic of discussion and which have been received with great critical acclaim.

For a younger readership, however, the development of literature which explicitly addresses one's own mortality or the possible loss of loved family members or friends has started comparatively late and has been considerably slower. While classic fairy tales 'discouraged easily and lyrically on the themes of love and life, evil and death' (Goldreich 1977: 18), Koutsompou and Kotsopoulou argue that in these tales death and dying are attributed strong moral dimensions. In contrast to realistic narratives in which death is a possible threat to everyone, in the fairy tales it is mostly used as an often violent but fair punishment against evil characters (cf. 2015: 154). When Gretel pushes the evil witch into the flames, the reader has as little sympathy for the dying as when the wolf drowns after Red Riding Hood and her grandmother have been freed from his belly.

As a universal part of human life, death, dying and bereavement as subjects have been present and yet marginalised during the development of children's literature. As Goldreich states, 'it wafted gently across the pages of Heidi and lurked dangerously in every corner of Treasure Island' (1977: 20) but just as in many other popular examples such as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) by Beatrix Potter, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) or Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (1945) it remained part of the narrative framework rather than becoming the centered subject to which the story is geared. This changed markedly from the 1970s to the present; in this period, 'books about death are appearing more frequently on children's book lists' (Romero 1976: 674) and, as Goldreich points out, in these publications the 'victims of death are not evil stepmothers or malicious trolls. They are good - and yet they die' (1977: 18). She sees the reason for this change in the decreasing importance of religion in people's lives. Before, a majority of the people had found comfort in the belief that God would judge each individual equitably and that death and dying were thus not unpredictable but just. Furthermore, the biblical promise of a paradisiac life after death alleviated the perceived danger and therefore dispelled the people's fear. The declining impact of religion on people's lives thus resulted in a ten-

dency towards a more rational understanding of dying and of what comes after death (cf. Goldreich 1977: 20). In an interview about her children's novel *Brothers Lionheart* (1973), a book about a dying boy and his confrontation with the question of what comes after death, Astrid Lindgren states:

When I was a child, people believed that when you die you go to heaven; that was not one of the most amusing things one could imagine, to be sure, but if everyone went there... That would at least be better than lying in the ground and not existing any more. Today's children no longer have this consolation. They no longer have this tale. (Astrid Lindgren to Egil Törnqvist, 1973, qtd. in Eva-Maria Metcalf 1995: 165)

Furthermore, a growing interest in the social implications of death, a reaction to Kübler-Ross's publications about bereavement (1969, 1974; cf. Delisle and Woods 1976: 683) and a tendency towards rationality and frankness in child education supported the emergence of children's literature about death, dying and bereavement but also made sure former religious content was replaced not by fantastic elements but rather by 'existentialism and sociology' (Moore and Mae 1987: 53). Consequently, both fictional and non-fictional publications of that time about the topic tend to focus on the educational benefits which can derive from the literary representation of death and dying, and particularly of bereavement. Furthermore, children's literature as a possible medium for bibliotherapy for grieving children and as providing 'models of behaviour' as well as 'attitudinal and emotional guideposts' (Delisle and Woods 1976: 683) is repeatedly assessed. Questions of criticism of the texts as literary works and thus of form or linguistic style, however, are for the most part left aside and remain unanswered (cf. James 2009: 2). One can therefore summarise with James's words that in the 1970s in fictional texts as well as in academic publications there is 'little discussion of the social and cultural meanings of death, and insufficient examination of its function in discursive, ideological, and rhetorical forms' (2009: 3). To what extent this claim holds true for the three pre-1980 sample texts *Charlotte's Web*, *Bridge to Terabithia* and *A Taste of Blackberries* will be determined in the subsequent analysis chapter of this dissertation.

Even if the pre-1980 children's books about death, dying and bereavement often aim for a literary representation which is as realistic as possible, as James notes, 'a realist text is as much a fictional construct as any other literary text' (2009: 74). As such it can make use of fantastic and seemingly unrealistic elements without forfeiting its credibility. For the case of the representation of death and dying this is particularly valuable since, as has been argued, neither are ever fully knowable and thus have to be partly complemented with beliefs and fantasy. Indeed, various scholars have pointed out intersections between death and the fantastic. Jackson, for instance, claims that '[l]ike the ghost which is neither dead nor alive, the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness' (1981: 20) while Armitt argues that 'via the fantastic we are enabled to journey beyond limits we would otherwise not dare to cross' (1996: 97). Furthermore, James calls the fantastic a 'textual space which, like death, can be seen to challenge cultural ideas about order and boundaries, is surrounded by an instability of meaning, and is difficult to articulate or to define' (2009: 113).

After the 1970s, authors' as well as critics' awareness of the possibilities of such fantastic literary elements for realistic children's fiction increased. Moreover, the general understanding of children's literature as being primarily educational changed towards a comprehension of the texts' literary potential and merits. For the case of the representation of death, dying and bereavement this means a growing importance of the 'relationship between death as subject and death informing narrative structure' (Seelinger Trites 2000: 123). This notable change has been positively emphasised in academic publications about the topic. Mills, for example, argues that 'fiction that is too narrowly focused on any mission of teaching or shaping readers is likely to be aesthetically flawed for that very reason' (2014: 3). In her view, what could be an appropriate tool to combine both the didactic and the literary aspect is 'anthropomorphism, and fantasy more generally' (2014: 12).

Although a distinct tendency away from bibliotherapy and pedagogy towards a stronger focus on narratology can be perceived, literary analyses of contemporary children's novels about death, dying and bereavement are still rare. Nevertheless, they can lead to significant results since, as James points out, 'representations of death in children's fiction can provide an unusually clear opportunity to understand some of the ways in which meaning is created and shared within a society' (2009: 2). Furthermore, Goering argues that such texts can call attention to a 'disconnection between what adults think children can handle, and what children are interested in discussing' (2014: 236). Ultimately, the analysis of narratological elements of those texts can reveal practices and structures of a society's treatment of death and a comparison can thus indicate changes over time. This will be demonstrated in the following literary analyses.

3. Literary Analysis

3.1 Pre-1980 novels

3.1.1 Overview

Before the actual analysis of the three chosen pre-1980 children's novels a short summary of their plots and a presentation of their main characters will provide a basis for more profound examinations of their textual form and construction. It is interesting to note that all three highly successful novels approach the topic of death from a similar angle and by means of a comparable plot inasmuch as in each of the texts the male protagonist loses his best friend and must come to terms with the loss as well as with the suddenly immediate reality of death.

E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*¹ from 1952 tells the story of the piglet Wilbur who is facing an early death and is saved by the girl Fern. Surrounded by many other animals, Wilbur grows up unconcerned in the barn of Fern's uncle until he finds out that he is intended for the slaughterhouse. In panic, he asks his best friend and mentor Charlotte, a spider, to save him. She helps him by weaving words into her web which advertise the pig as special and worth saving. Amazed by the alleged wonder, Wilbur's owners decide to spare his life. Charlotte, however, dies of old age but leaves behind more than 500 descendants. The novel became a great success not only in the United States but all around the world and is today considered a children's classic. It was adapted into three different movies in 1973, 2003 and 2006, received prizes and awards such as the *Newbery Honor Book* in 1953 and as of 2010, had already been translated into thirty-five foreign languages (cf. Sims 2011: 4). As 'the best-selling children's book ever published in the United States' (ibid.) and as a book which is directly concerned with the topics of death, dying and bereavement, it is suitable for the following analysis and comparison and, as argued above, an essential element of the pre-1980 children's books even though it was published more than twenty years before the other texts which will be analysed in this subchapter.

Doris Buchanan Smith's *A Taste of Blackberries*² from 1973 is also a novel about friendship and loss. The nameless protagonist loses his best friend Jamie due to his allergic reaction to a bee sting. All other characters in the book only play a minor role and the novel's focus thus unquestionably lies on the loss of the friend. Jamie's sudden death comes unexpectedly to the boy who has to live through the five stages of bereavement described by Kübler-Ross before he can fully comprehend and process what has happened. As Keenan argues, 'A Taste of Blackberries brought critical success and several awards [to the author] for her sensitivity to the internal life of a child. In dealing directly with the death of

¹ will hereafter be abbreviated with *Web*

² will hereafter be abbreviated with *Blackberries*

a child's playmate, it broke a taboo of twentieth-century American children's fiction.'⁷
(Keenan n.d.: n.pag.).

With regard to plot and character, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*³ from 1977 resembles both other novels. Like *Blackberries* it tells the story of a boy who must face the sudden loss of his best friend and just as in *Web* this described friendship is characterised by a mentor-student relationship between the female character and the male protagonist. Jesse is an artistic and creative boy but he is constrained by the simple life on his family's farm. He is often lonely until he meets Leslie who invents the imaginary kingdom of Terabithia as a refuge from reality for both of them. Leslie drowns on her way to Terabithia when the rope with which the children reach their sanctuary breaks and Jesse is left with the task of facing his painful loss on his own. In the end, he gains strength from the tragic event, adopts Leslie's former role as the keeper of Terabithia and finally passes the kingdom on to his sister May Belle. The novel was received with great critical acclaim, won the *Newbery Medal* in 1978 and was adapted into a TV film in 1985 and into a Disney movie in 2007 (cf. Paterson 2015: 181).

Consequently, all three chosen pre-1980 books show noticeable concurrences in terms of plot and characters. From this one can presume a tendency of children's novels during this time to address the topic of death, dying and bereavement in relationships which are close enough to allow for an authentic representation of loss and grief but which are also not as threatening as the loss of a parent or a sibling might feel to the young readership. Differences and similarities with regard to the texts' composition, narrative perspective and narrative devices and how they stand in relation to the question of death, dying and bereavement will be determined in the following analysis.

³ will hereafter be abbreviated with *Bridge*

3.1.2 Composition

This subchapter will be concerned with the fundamental determinants of the plot. They include a text's formal and temporal structure, place and space and paratexts. All these aspects are relevant for the thematic interpretation of the text since they are essential parts of the narrative (cf. Porter Abbott 2002: 26). As far as the structure of *Web* is concerned, its close connection to the subject of death and dying become apparent immediately. The novel starts with death threatening Wilbur, presenting the piglet as seemingly doomed for a short life, and with Fern rescuing the animal from her father's axe (cf. 4). By means of this storyline, the first two chapters foreshadow the subsequent plot. This sets the tone for the rest of the novel and can be interpreted as a reference to the notion that every beginning already predicts its ending, every birth of a creature also implies its eventual death. Furthermore, the story of *Web* starts in spring, covers summer and autumn and Charlotte's death in winter and ends in the following spring with the birth of Charlotte's children. The structure thus imitates the year's cycle and its steady progress throughout the novel is made comprehensible to the readers by means of formulations such as 'The early summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year' (56) or 'The crickets [...] sang the song of summer's ending, a sad, monotonous song' (152). This structure can be interpreted as a reference to the circle of life where after every alleged ending a new beginning gives cause for hope and secures the continued existence of life. Just as the cold winter is replaced by a warm and sunny spring, Charlotte continues to live on in her newborn children. By completing the circle, *Web* therefore offers the readers closure and ends its literary discussion of death, dying and bereavement on a positive note.

In *Blackberries*, the novel's structure unambiguously makes death the subject of the text. The edition of the book at hand has 85 pages and the protagonist is told about Jamie's death on page 39. This announcement in the almost exact middle of the book thus represents the plot's climax around which a systemic framework is arranged. The text begins

with the protagonist and Jamie picking the blackberries promised by the title. 'They need a few more days to ripen' (1), the protagonist says and indeed the book ends less than a week later with the protagonist picking the ripe berries in Jamie's memory. Like *Web*, *Blackberries* thus suggest the possibility of emerging life after death. Consequently, this very systematic structure not only clearly marks death as the main subject of the short novel but also implies that death is not the very end but a dramatic and traumatic event around which a whole story can revolve. It noticeably interrupts ongoing events and has a remarkable impact on other people's lives but it is not the end of life as such.

With regard to the temporal structure of the novel, it can be noted that before Jamie's death the story-time does not exceed the discourse-time a lot. A detailed description of the boy's day is given and only few ellipses and summaries speed up the plot. After death interrupts the events, phrases like 'ever since it happened' (65) refer back to the deathly accident and the protagonist's memories of his dead friend now include plot from outside the novel's timeframe (cf. 43). Nevertheless, the even progression of time seems only slightly disrupted and thus does not reflect the protagonist's emotional distress after the loss of his friend. Instead, it ends with a positive look at the future when the protagonist promises Jamie's mother to visit her 'every day' (85). *Blackberries*, just like *Web*, therefore suggests that death is no ultimate ending but can be dealt with and still allows for a future.

In contrast to the other two novels, death only relatively late becomes the explicit subject of *Bridge*. Although death is a constant threat and everyone's eventual fate, the focus of this story thus lies on life and on what comes before death and dying. Nevertheless, as Misheff argues, the book is comparable to the other two inasmuch as '[i]n each of these stories, the ending is one of hope in the face of death' (1998: 137). After a period of grief, Jesse remembers his time with Leslie happily, by doing so passes the whole book in review and demonstrates to the readers that his friend will live on in his memory (cf. 174). Chaston states that Jesse therefore 'resolve[s] his feelings through his own actions, build-

ing a bridge into Terabithia, sharing with May Belle what he has learned from Leslie' (1991: 241). Ultimately, for all three protagonists death entails not only loss and grief but also the possibility for realisation and growth and the structures of the texts, as different as they might be, support this representation of the subject.

Similar notions are expressed through the novels' representations of place and space. What is most productive for analysis in *Blackberries* are the two neighbouring gardens. They stand in clear contrast to one another. Jamie gets stung by a bee (cf. 23) in Mrs. Houser's neatly arranged garden whereas the protagonist finds comfort in Mrs. Mullin's garden which is described as 'an overgrown jungle', 'wilderness', a 'bird sanctuary' (29) and 'radiant with summertime' (57). This juxtaposition of the two places can be understood as referring to death on earth, where nature is controlled by humans and is struggling to regain its strength, and recovery in a paradise governed by nature. Furthermore, it again stresses the representation of death and dying as a part of nature's circle of life in which every ending also entails a new beginning.

Web and *Bridge* are very comparable in terms of place and space since both are set in the countryside. However, the seemingly idyll, characterised by animals, hay, aromatic barns and warm summer days, is overshadowed by the reality of physical work, hard lives and threatening death. Both Jesse and Wilbur are thus in need of a safe place which allows them to evade their daily routine and to recover from it. In *Bridge*, this place is provided by Leslie in the form of the imaginary kingdom of Terabithia, a place the children go to 'only at times of greatest sorrow or of greatest joy' (64). It serves them as a sanctuary from the real world but at the same time also entails death and grief since the breaking of the rope, the symbolical bridge to Terabithia, eventually causes Leslie's deathly accident. This swinging of the rope as a metaphorical transition into an afterworld is foreshadowed by Jesse who, on his way to Terabithia months before the catastrophe, 'grabbed the end of the rope and swung out towards the other bank with a kind of wild exhilaration and landed

gently on his feet, taller and stronger and wiser in that mysterious land' (63). After her death, Leslie continues to live on in her legacy of Terabithia but is in the end released by Jesse when he passes the place on to his sister. The imaginary kingdom thus serves a dual function of a safe haven as well as a source of danger.

The protagonist's safe space in *Web* is, as is suggested by the title, Charlotte's web. Although for Wilbur it is not a place which he can physically stay in, just like Terabithia it functions as a possibility for escaping reality and as a space for imagination. Nevertheless, the web is not exclusively a safe space either but as Terabithia is from the beginning linked to the notion of threat and even death. It is constructed mainly in order to capture insects and to provide Charlotte with sustenance and thus serves as a death trap as well as a refuge. The ambiguity in both safe places, the web and Terabithia, can be understood as comments on the uncertainties which arise from people's unknowingness with regard to death and dying and their striving for security and stability even while recognising their own indispensable death. Just as the web and Terabithia entail both protecting and deadly elements, people find themselves in a world which allows for life and provides nutrition and safety but which is ultimately also finite for every individual.

The last aspect to be discussed in this subchapter is the novel's use of illustrations. Although Nikolajeva and Scott argue that 'pictures are subordinated to the words' (2006: 8), paratexts are nevertheless an important aspect of a children's book's composition. They form part of the narrative and of the way the main subjects are presented to the readers. According to Nikolajeva and Scott, it is particularly relevant to determine if the pictures merely reproduce the written story, if 'words and images fill each other's gaps wholly' (2006: 17) or if there is contradictory information to be found in the written and the visual texts. However, for all three pre-1980 novels one can identify close consonances between words and images which leaves little room for interpretation. Furthermore, the illustrations can in these cases not be regarded as vital aspects of the narrations since, with the excep-

tion Garth Williams's pictures in *Web*, they vary in the different editions of the books and thus cannot be understood as part of the original texts. While an analysis of the three novels' para-texts is therefore irrelevant at this point, this fact will in the subsequent comparison represent an important distinction to the contemporary novels. Before this, however, an examination of the narrative perspectives and the narrative devices of the novels will complement this first part of the analysis.

3.1.3 Narrative Perspective

The narrative perspective of a text has a great influence on the readers' perception of the plot and of the representation of its main subjects. Whitehead states that 'by far the most important device in persuading a reader of the "realness" of the fictional world is the presence of a trustworthy and informative narrative voice' (2013: 10). In *Web*, it is the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator who knows the thoughts and feelings of all characters, human or animal, and can interpret and reflect on the events. He is thus able to move from character to character and can, for instance, in the scene in which Wilbur moves into Fern's uncle's barn determine that 'Mr Zuckerman knew that' (18), '[i]t made [Fern] happy' (19) and '[i]t made Wilbur happy' (20) within only three pages. The ending of the book in which Wilbur's whole life is summarised indicates that the point of time from which the story is told is several years after the time of the story itself. Furthermore, the narrator directly addresses the readers, stating that '[i]f you had been sitting quietly in the barn cellar that evening, you would have heard something like this' (127). He is thus undoubtedly aware of his role as a storyteller and of his audience. This makes the narrator reliable since he appears objective and fully informed. At the same time, however, it also creates a distance between the readers, the narrator, the characters and the events. Conse-

quently, death, dying and bereavement are presented as subjects but remain the impersonal phenomena for the readers to a certain degree. The wary reluctance which, as has been argued above, was characteristic before 1980 in dealing with the delicate topics is thus reflected in *Web's* narrative voice.

In contrast to this, *Blackberries* is told by a first-person narrator. From this one might conclude an immediacy as well as a subjectiveness of the perception of death and dying and of the bereavement which follows the tragic accident. However, the fact that the protagonist stays unnamed throughout the whole novel creates a remaining distance between the narrator and the readers. By this means, bereavement is portrayed as too personal to be ever fully shared with or understood by uninvolved bystanders. Furthermore, death is presented as neither graspable nor namable. Representative of this perceived distance between the narrator and the story's recipient is the scene in which the novel's protagonist describes the moment of Jamie's death in retrospect (cf. 25). Although the narrator already knows what happens since he retells the events from a point further in the future, he leaves the readers in the same confused state of misunderstanding which he found himself in when the actual tragedy happened. '[Jamie] wanted to put on one of his dramatic shows for everyone', the narrator recounts. 'He screamed and gasped and fell on the ground' (ibid.). He explains only fourteen pages later to the readers that 'Jamie is dead' (39). The readers are therefore put through the same thought processes and emotions which the protagonist had to live through as well and is thus enabled to understand death and dying as ambiguous and difficult to process or comprehend.

Nevertheless, this form of narration, the slow revealing of facts which must meanwhile be well-known to him, makes the narrator inaccessible, difficult to characterize and consequently not reliable. This is stressed further by scenes in which he knows more than the protagonist of a story usually would. When the two boys fear they might be chased with a shotgun, he judges Jamie's behaviour as 'false confident' (8) and as a reaction to a

conversation with a friend he comments: 'My eyebrows arched in surprise' (72). In conclusion, it remains questionable whether and to what extent a narrator who tries to objectively recall a personal traumatic event can ever be reliable. The readers, however, depend on the narrator and cannot get an objective view on death, dying and bereavement. They are thus represented as unknowledgeable and beyond human ascertainability and the only possible way of approaching them is by filling the gaps with interpretations.

In *Bridge*, the third-person narrator focalises on Jesse's thoughts, emotions and actions and is therefore capable of reflecting the events objectively from the protagonist's point of view. Facts only become known to the readers when they are known to Jesse. After Leslie's death, for example, Jesse meets her grandfather for the first time and, since the protagonist does not know who he is yet, he is introduced to the readers as a 'strange man' (155). The readers are thus presented an objectified account of the only subjectively experienceable event of losing a close and loved person. The subject is made emotionally comprehensible to the audience without claiming an objective omniscience regarding death and dying. However, the established relative distance between narrator and protagonist is slightly imbalanced after Leslie has died. Recalling the past and reflecting his own role in the tragic events, Jesse talks to himself: 'I wanted to be the best – the fastest runner in school – and now I am' (171). The boundaries between inner speech and narration become blurred through the use of free direct discourse. Therefore, death, dying and bereavement are presented as strong forces which can shake one's perception of objectivity and subjectivity and can ultimately even question one's own perception of the self.

As far as different forms of speech are concerned, all three novels create the impression of an immediacy of the plot by frequent use of direct speech. The speech is thus not mediated by the respective narrators but is open to objective interpretation for the readers. However, a few particular scenes which elaborate on the use of direct speech have to be pointed out. For one thing, in *Web* Charlotte talks to herself while she is weaving her spi-

der web. She gives herself explicit orders such as ‘Attach! Ascend! Repeat! Good girl!’ (128). The creation of the safe place which she builds in order to save Wilbur therefore appears to be an elaborate, structured and well-rehearsed process. This can be read as a reference to the fact that everyone is confronted with the reality of death at times and eventually knows how to cope with it.

As a final point, all three novels end with the protagonists’ conversations with the deceased characters. As Misheff points out, ‘[i]n Wilbur’s thoughts and in Jess’s conversations with the dead Leslie, the saviors live on. Charlotte and Leslie have achieved immortality in these memories’ (1998: 138). Jamie, too, becomes immortalized when *Blackberries*’s protagonist narrates ‘[d]o you remember, I asked Jamie in my mind, the taste of blackberries?’ (81). By this means, the protagonists’ friends are kept alive in their memories. Therefore, a unilateral exchange of thoughts is still enabled and provides consolation. This, however, is only possible when fantasy is used and reality is negated to a certain degree. One could assume this to be a reference to the fact that imagining what death means, where a deceased person might go to after he has died and how this person would react in a particular situation always requires fantasy. Ultimately, however, it can be registered that those examples for an unusual use of forms of speech are rare and that the direct speech of the novels, just like their narrative voices, predominantly serve to secure a distance and seeming objectivity between the readers and the discussion of the subjects of death, dying and bereavement.

3.1.4 Narrative Devices

The narrative devices which are used in a text are of great importance with regards to the conveying of its content and to its handling of the topics of death, dying and bereavement. They can serve as a tool to bridge the gap between the text as a fictional construct and the often unsettling or frightening reality of mortality and loss. They include the portrayal of characters, embedded texts and stories, stylistic devices like metaphors, motifs, repetitions or distinct vocabulary and the contrasting of fantasy, fiction and reality. To begin with, this analysis will concentrate on the characterisation in the three texts, or more precisely on the portrayal of the characters who die in the course of the stories. These are the characters closest connected with death and are thus most relevant for the thematically focused study.

In *Bridge*, this character is Leslie. She is presented as intelligent and self-confident but with her unconventional haircut and clothes and her ‘unusual hobby’ (45) of scuba diving she also stands out from other children of her age. When Jesse remarks that ‘the girl had no notion of what you did and didn’t do’ (37), this demonstrates his mildly irritated fascination with his future friend but it also presents Leslie as reckless and therefore as a predestined accident casualty. Furthermore, the school essay about her hobby also foreshadows her fate. Jesse concludes from her writing ‘[t]hat she wasn’t scared of going deep, deep down in a world of no air and little light’ (46). This as well as the protagonist’s statement that Leslie was his ‘way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond’ (62) can be interpreted as early references to the danger in which she places herself. At the same time, however, they also present the girl as tough and as capable of orienting herself in unknown and potentially frightening surroundings. Both the foreshadowing and her characterisation thus moderate the shock of her accident.

Similarly, in *Blackberries* Jamie is presented as a loud and often impetuous boy who attracts and provokes minor accidents. However, here the foreshadowing of the tragic events by means of characterisation is negated by the protagonist who views his best friend

as essentially invulnerable and thus leaves the readers to believe in a positive outcome of the accident in the garden: ‘What could happen to Jamie the great? He yelled a lot, but he was tough’ (38). Consequently, the effect of death and dying as the climax of the story is further reinforced and both are represented as unexpected and arbitrary.

The characterisation of Charlotte in *Web* provides a distinct contrast to Jamie and Leslie in *Blackberries* and *Bridge*. The spider herself is not only aware of the inevitable reality of death but is also directly engaged in it as she weaves her web in order to catch, kill and devour insects. Furthermore, she is boldly realistic in her explanations for Wilbur and spares him no details when she admits: ‘Of course, I don’t really eat them. I drink them – drink their blood. I love blood’ (51). By means of the realistic adult character Charlotte, the naturalness of a circle of life and death, which is an essential aspect in *Web*, is therefore further stressed. This becomes even more apparent when she does not try to find excuses for her diet but explains: ‘I just naturally build a web and trap flies and other insects’ (52). Consequently, it matches the spider’s view on this topic that she later also awaits her own death with equanimity. She has no fear or regret but simply assesses: ‘In a day or two I’ll be dead’ (223). The down-to-earth and unsparingly realist Charlotte as Wilbur’s teacher opposes death, dying and bereavement as taboo subjects in the society. By means of her characterisation, *Web* thus argues for a more open approach to and confrontation with the topic.

One such possible approach can be using embedded texts and storytelling as tools to face the subject of death from a relative distance without shying away from its reality. This technique is in evidence in two of the primary texts. In *Web* the power which words can entail is apparent. Using only single words, Charlotte creates an entire story around Wilbur and by doing so invents a narrative which fights not only death itself but also the fear of it. Her tale becomes a prophecy inasmuch as Wilbur starts to feel and act according to the adjectives attributed to him (cf. 129, 154, 202). Hereby, he is saved from an untimely death

himself and is furthermore able to cope with his grief when Charlotte dies. In the novel storytelling thus serves as a means to approach, imagine and ultimately accept the reality of death, dying and bereavement.

In *Bridge*, the importance of the storytelling aspect is even more evident. Leslie tells Jesse about Terabithia and by doing so creates the magical kingdom for the two children. Furthermore, Terabithia is not a sole product of her imagination but is itself based on references to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the bible, *Moby Dick* and *Hamlet* (cf. 55; 57; 72). With regard to the subject of death and dying, however, Chaston points out that '[a]lthough many characters die [...], these tales do not provide Jess[e] with much insight into death – he savors them as stories which he would like to draw or as inspiration for Terabithia; but after Leslie's death, they cannot wipe away his grief' (1991: 240). Nevertheless, the use of embedded stories and storytelling in *Bridge* can be understood as, as Chaston argues, 'a type of bibliotherapy before either of [the characters] has to cope with death.' (1991: 239). One example to support this claim can be found in the song Miss Edmunds sings with the school children: 'I see a land bright and clear / And the time is coming near / When we'll live in this land / You and me, hand in hand' (41). The reference to the song 'Free to Be...You and Me' is not only a distinct foreshadowing of the creation of Terabithia but can also be read as a description of a paradisiac place and thus as a place which can only be reached after death.

Another example of the children's early confrontation with the subject of death and dying through storytelling is Leslie's school essay about scuba diving. Her descriptions of diving into the cold, wet and dark deep hint at her own fate. Moreover, her words are powerful enough to trigger in Jesse the feeling of suffocation: 'Suddenly he could hardly breathe' (45). By this means, he not only already lives through Leslie's accident but his feelings also resemble his later reaction to the news of her death when '[t]he coldness inside of him had moved upwards into his throat constricting it' (166). However, the readers

are not enabled to experience the full power of the stories embedded in the text since they are always re-narrated and thus mediated. Ultimately, to the readers the wording of the stories remains as much dependent on fantasy as the knowledge of what death and dying entail. While storytelling serves the characters in *Bridge* as a tool to overcome at least partially the distance between life and death, the same distance is maintained for the readers.

With regards to the stylistic devices of the novels, one can determine a recurring use of the cycle metaphor for all three texts. The deceased not only give way for other life forms but also return to the mourning characters in the form of objects, practices or other characters and are thus not entirely lost. In *Bridge*, Jesse feels ‘that running was the only thing that could keep Leslie from being dead’ (145) and figuratively retrieves his deceased friend by doing so. Furthermore, she is brought back to him in the form of her paints. After Jesse has destroyed his own box of paints in the same water in which Leslie had drowned only few days earlier, her father hands them over to him at the end of the book (cf. 162). This scene can be interpreted as Leslie’s symbolic resurrection and the return of the colours as the rediscovering of hope and happiness in his life.

Blackberries concludes on a similar note of hope. The fruits from which the book takes its title can be interpreted as metaphors for a continuation of life even after death and for the possibility for a lost person to be recovered in a different form. Just like Charlotte’s children in *Web*, who symbolise the releasing of the past and a start into the future, they are an analogy for the understanding and acceptance of the natural life cycle. Moreover, they are tangible and perceptible manifestations of the mourning characters’ memories. Ultimately, all three novels thus use the metaphor of the life cycle to represent death, dying and bereavement as natural processes which ensure further life.

However, not all stylistic devices used in the books serve the purpose of portraying death and dying as essentially unsettling and yet comprehensible. In *Blackberries*, for instance, after Jamie’s death the protagonist’s mother’s explanation ‘Jamie is dead, darling’

(39) is repeated four times. This repetition stresses the degree of severity of the statement as well as the protagonist's difficulties in fully comprehending its meaning. At the same time, it hints at the definitiveness and irreversibility of death. This is further enhanced in the scene in which the protagonist remembers how the two boys used to send light signals through the darkness. He states: 'When we signaled we could never see each other, only the dots of light' (51). After Jamie's death, the protagonist signals into the night but does not receive an answer. This can be understood as an analogy to the fact that Jamie's disappearance into the dark unknown is irreversible and a two-way communication is no longer possible.

The disturbing reality of death and dying is in *Bridge* exemplified by the disrupted syntax as a reaction to the news about Leslie's accident. Only single words echo in Jesse's head which implies that he is not yet able to fully grasp their meaning: 'Leslie – dead – girl friend – rope – broke – fell – you – you – you' (145). This syntax therefore symbolically seizes on a simile about life and death which Jesse develops earlier in the text: 'Sometimes it seemed to him that his life was delicate as a dandelion. One little puff from any direction, and it was blown to bits' (108). The readers are left with the task of rearranging these bits, the stringing together of single words, to create meaning and to interpret the text. At this point, death, dying and bereavement are thus represented not as natural and purposeful but as unsettling and as creating emotional disturbance.

Finally, the portrayed relationship between reality, fantasy and fiction has to be examined. In *Blackberries*, the reality of death and of the painful feeling of loss is repeatedly stressed and leaves little room for imagination. The protagonist goes through all five stages of grief as determined by Kübler-Ross and accepted by psychologists for decades. At first he denies that Jamie has died and is angry about his alleged show (cf. 25). Following this, he bargains when he says that '[i]t seemed that as long as I acted like he wasn't dead, he wouldn't be dead' (45). Eventually, he can mourn his friend (cf. 54) before being able to

accept his death as a given reality (cf. 76). Confronted with his own emotions after his friend's death the narrator even states that '[n]o matter what we wished, or hoped, it was real' (67). What cannot be explained rationally by humans, the questions of what dying feels like and what happens to a deceased person after death, is dismissed by the protagonist's neighbour: 'Honey, one of the hardest things we have to learn is that some questions do not have answers' (62). Ultimately, the novel approaches death, dying and bereavement from an angle which obtains a high degree of realism and objectivity.

Bridge makes a significantly stronger case for fantasy and fiction. The need to escape from reality is positively represented not only through the creation of Terabithia but also through running as a hobby which unites the school children. As argued above, storytelling, fiction and imagination play an important role in the book and allow Jesse and Leslie to confront the issue of death even before it becomes relevant in their lives. However, this discovering of imaginary worlds is disrupted by Leslie's death. At the same moment in which Jesse's teacher actively supports his interest in arts and creativity by taking him to the National Gallery in Washington, Leslie dies on her way to Terabithia. Reality breaks into the previously imaginary world of fantasy and adventures and from that moment on both sides strongly contrast with each other. Eventually, Jesse gives up Terabithia, a fact which can be interpreted as implying that, when faced with the harsh reality of death, dying and bereavement, fiction and fantasy cannot provide adequate answers or consolation and can no longer endure.

In *Web*, too, the balance between reason and imagination and reality and fantasy is a crucial thematic aspect (cf. Misheff 1998: 140). Charlotte creates her story around Wilbur out of the reasoned need to help him and by eventually saving him demonstrates the perceptible power of the imaginative. Nevertheless, just as in *Bridge* it becomes also apparent in *Web* that one can ultimately not escape reality and that death is the inevitable fate of every creature. When Charlotte, the storyteller and saviour of the pig, dies of old age, her

ability goes with her to her grave. This can be read as referring to an imbalance between reality and fantasy in which reality ultimately gains the upper hand. However, the narrator states that throughout Wilbur's whole life 'nobody ever forgot the year of his triumph and the miracle of the web' (248). Fantasy and the imaginary thus prove to be effective as well as lasting approaches to the topics of death, dying and bereavement.

In summary, one can conclude from this analysis a tendency of all three pre-1980 children's novels to represent death, dying and bereavement as unsettling and emotionally stressful yet natural events. By means of composition and narrative perspective they create a distance between the texts and their readers and thus enable the young readership to approach the topic realistically and critically without becoming strongly emotionally involved. To what extent the same is also the case for the three chosen contemporary novels will be determined below.

3.2 Contemporary Novels

3.2.1 Overview

The three contemporary children's novels about death, dying and bereavement which have been chosen for this analysis are *The Last Invisible Boy*⁴ by Evan Kuhlman from 2008, Sally Nicholls's *Ways to Live Forever*⁵ from 2008 and Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*⁶ from 2011. These are relevant texts since they have all been received with great critical acclaim, have been translated into other languages and have won a large number of prizes. It is thus reasonable to assume that they are considered representative for other works by both critics and the young readership.

⁴ will hereafter be abbreviated with *Invisible*

⁵ will hereafter be abbreviated with *Ways*

⁶ will hereafter be abbreviated with *Monster*

Invisible tells the story of the twelve-year-old Finn whose father has died unexpectedly from, as the boy explains to the readers, ‘natural causes’ (156). After his father’s death, he notices that little by little his hair turns white and his skin becomes increasingly paler. Finn puts his fear of becoming invisible, or even disappearing from the earth completely, into writing, by doing so creates a compound of diary and autobiography and ultimately uses his own book as a tool for healing. By this means, his experiences are shared with the readers and they are enabled to comprehend his family story, his memories and his emotions. For its unique language ‘this painful but often funny novel’ (*Publisher’s Weekly* n.d.: n.pag.) has received critical commendation. For its German translation, it was nominated for the *Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis*⁷ in the category Children’s Book in 2011 which was its biggest success (cf. *Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis 2011*: n.pag.).

Ways is also written in the form of a diary. Eleven-year-old Sam is terminally ill with leukaemia and writes down his experiences and memories to be able to face his own imminent death. He describes his striving for a still worthwhile life, ticks tasks off his life list, mourns his best friend Felix who dies after a severe illness, and imagines his family’s future without him. Furthermore, his text is conceived as a scientific investigation of death, dying and bereavement and thus approaches the topic from both a very personal and a factual angle. *Ways* was translated into a large number of languages such as, for instance, German, French, Italian, Portuguese and Indonesian. The novel won, among others, the *Waterstone’s Children’s Book Prize* and the *New Writers Award* in 2008 (Nicholls 2015: n.pag.) and was adapted into a movie in 2010 (*IMDb*, ‘Ways to Live Forever’ n.d.: n.pag.).

In *Monster*, thirteen-year-old Conor knows that his mother is terminally ill with cancer but he is not yet able to fully face this truth, let her go and move in with his grandmother. He is haunted by nightmares until a monster arises from the neighbouring yew tree and starts to visit him at 12:07 almost every night. The monster tells him three stories but

⁷ German Prize for Young-adult Literature [own translation]

in return demands that Conor tell him his own truth. When he eventually does, he learns to face his fears and to cope with the inevitable loss of his mother. By this means, loss and consolation, fear and confidence, and reality and fiction come together. The unusual treatment of the serious subject has been met with a very positive response from critics and from readers of all ages (Ness 2011: n.pag.). The novel won the *Carnegie Medal* in 2012 and its movie adaptation was released in 2016 (*IMDb*, ‘A Monster Calls’ n.d.: n.pag.).

To summarise, it can already be noted from this short overview a concern of all three contemporary texts with the connection between the issues of death, dying and bereavement and the mode of writing or storytelling. This correlation will therefore feature prominently in the subchapter ‘Narrative Devices’ of the subsequent literary analysis. Like the previous subchapter about the pre-1980 novels, this analysis will also address questions of the composition and the narrative perspective of the contemporary children’s books.

3.2.2 Composition

As for the pre-1980 analysis, the subchapter ‘Composition’ will again focus on the fundamental determinants of the plot such as the formal and temporal structure, place and space and paratexts of the three contemporary texts. In the case of *Monster*, the story starts with the monster’s first appearance and ends with its last on the night of Conor’s mother’s death. The novel therefore follows a clear and transparent structure and its regularity is only disrupted by the four stories which are told by the monster and eventually by Conor. This steady formal structure of the text resembles Conor’s own monotonous routine of domestic chores, school, hospital visits and recurring nightmares. Subsequently, both the structure and his routine are initially disturbed by the monster’s demand for storytelling but are ultimately rearranged around it. The monster’s announcement of a total of four stories

allows both the readers and the protagonist of the text to accept a new regularity and to anticipate the plot's ending. The formal structure of the text thus not only diminishes the distance between Conor and the readers but also demonstrates the impact of death and dying on a person's life as a disruptive power which demands a reorganisation of the previously known.

As far as the temporal structure of *Monster* is concerned, one can note a regular linearity which is not disrupted but only supplemented by the insertion of the four stories. In the storytelling scenes, story-time and discourse-time are equal as both the readers and Conor listen to the same tale in the identical wording. Again, the stories therefore are a means for the readers to identify with the protagonist of the novel and to at least partially undergo the same experiences. However, when the plot is concerned with Conor's life rather than with the monster's narrations, story-time not only exceeds discourse-time significantly but is also often difficult to reconstruct both for the readers and the narrator of the book: 'A few days passed. Then a few more. It was hard to tell exactly how many' (188). Like the formal structure of the text, this is to be interpreted as the representation of death and dying as impairing one's established life and as requiring an engagement with the changed circumstances.

The formal and temporal structure of *Ways* remains transparent to the readers throughout the whole book by means of its diary form. Most chapters are headed with a date on top of their respective title. Hereby, the progression of the plot is just as much elucidated as the deterioration of Sam's health and his fast approach to death. This is further reinforced by Sam's statement that with medication '[p]eople can live for a whole year or more. I've had four months already' (54). Consequently, the date towards which the diary edges its way is made explicit and illustrates that with Sam's death his story has a distinctly marked ending. Indeed, this ending is already pointed out on the first page of the novel when the protagonist writes: 'By the time you read this, I will probably be dead' (1).

Interestingly, the protagonist's anticipation of the future and his decision for a written account of his experiences result in a particular temporal structure. While the story is told in the past tense and read in an anticipated future, multiple examples demonstrate that for Sam the process of writing takes place in his present. For instance, he describes how his teacher wanted him and his friend Felix to write about their lives and he states: 'So that's what we're doing' (5). Here, the moment of writing merges with the moment of narration and by this means the present of the deceased protagonist becomes experienceable for the readers. In *Ways*, the formal and temporal structure thus support the representation of death and dying as the expected end of each life story which, although it is not knowledgeable, can be experienced and shared.

Although the protagonist of *Invisible* also produces a written account of his experiences with death and bereavement, unlike Sam's diary not many chapters provide a date. Here, Finn's father has already died before the narration starts and in terms of its temporal structuring the text thus implies that after death time becomes less relevant as the life story is no longer geared towards an inevitable ending. Furthermore, the protagonist emphasises his understanding of time as 'sneaky and tricky' (13) and as 'out of control' (85). This instability is illustrated by the absence of definite date specifications one would expect to find in a diary and is fought against by Finn who by writing 'NOW' (13) in capital letters emphatically specifies his present and thus determines a point of reference for himself and for the readers.

The formal structure of the book is also ambiguous and requires the readers to arrange and organise what they read in order to fully understand the story. The various chapters of the novel tell episodes of Finn's past with his father, his present as a mourning half-orphan and his possible future. However, they are not set out in a linear fashion but advance the day of the protagonist's father's death from various directions. It is thus the narration of this fateful day which can be understood as the principal objective and the climax

of the text after which Finn can start his healing process. Furthermore, the medium of the book itself as a representation of the finiteness of life and as a possible defence against this reality is stressed when Finn writes: 'If you are ready for this book to end, turn the page. If not, please set this book aside until you are ready, or go back to the first page or someplace in the middle and start reading again' (233). Both the formal and temporal structure of *Invisible* can therefore be changed and adjusted to personal needs and consequently demonstrate death's disruptive and unsettling effect as well as the demand for a personal contribution from the readers.

With regard to the question of places and spaces presented in *Invisible*, the most distinctive feature can be found in the contrasting of 'Dad Is Still Here World' and 'Dad Is Gone World' (15). The protagonist states that these worlds, symbolic geographical manifestations of the past and the present, are distinctly different from each other and are characterised not by their appearance but by their inhabitants (cf. 95, 159). He says: 'I want to be in this world, but also the other one, where my dad's at' (139). In the novel, the graveyard represents the space in which both worlds, separated by the death of the loved person, meet. However, Finn states that this place does not allow for a real encounter with his father either since only his body lives there and 'not his soul' (101). Hence, death causes a disruption of the known reality and separates both time and place into before and after.

Likewise, in *Monster* all places that play an important role in Conor's life are noticeably changed by the onset of his mother's disease and her impending death. Their house no longer feels like a home to Conor and at school he is not only treated as an outcast but is bullied and physically injured. The narrator states that after the news of his mother's illness had spread, '[a]ll of a sudden the people he'd thought were his friends would stop talking when he came over' (89). However, this already holds true when the novel starts and for the readers both fictional places therefore bear the stamp of death from the beginning of the story. For them, the destructive force which death, dying and bereavement set free in

Conor is made comprehensible when the protagonist, led by the monster's narration, destroys 'almost every inch' (138) of his grandmother's living room. Consequently, both in *Monster* and in *Invisible* death, dying and bereavement are represented as a devastating power which irreversibly changes the established parameters of the protagonists' lives.

Regarding *Ways*, the distinct use of paratexts both in this novel and in *Invisible* is noteworthy, even more so since they show noticeable similarities. Both books include drawings by the protagonists, contributions by other characters (cf. Nicholls 13, Appendix A, B, C) and artifacts from their lives before it was impacted by death and grief such as tickets (Appendix D), a coin or photographs (Appendix E; F). Additionally, they base their accounts of their experiences with mortality and loss on scientifically verifiable facts and provide the readers with definitions (cf. Nicholls 112), microscopic pictures (cf. Kuhlman 58) and a stellar constellation (cf. Kuhlman 71). These can be interpreted as attempts to provide a visualisation of aspects in dealing with the subject and to make them experience-able. Both novels thus provide their readers with an approach to the topic outside of the written texts.

In summary, it can therefore be stated that all three contemporary novels stress death's disruptive and disturbing power by means of their composition. At the same time, however, they also strive for approaches to the subject which allow their readers to identify with the protagonists and demand that they invest personal contribution in the texts.

3.2.3 Narrative Perspective

This analysis of the narrative perspective of the three books will determine to what extent the conclusions drawn in the previous subchapter prove true here as well. In *Invisible* the first-person-narrator starts his accounts by introducing himself to the readers and by

providing his full name (cf. 1). Furthermore, he presents himself as ‘the bleached-out Nearly Invisible Boy’ (5) and does not shy away from this open self-assessment. Thus, the relationship which is established is one of directness and familiarity. This is further stressed by the fact that the narrator repeatedly addresses the readers. He asks them questions about their own experiences with death, dying and grief and demands: ‘You really should tell me about it’ (49). The book is thus conceived as a dialogue between the narrator and the readers which can, however, only ever take the form of a unilateral communication. This can be interpreted as an analogy for the one-way communication between Finn and his dead father on the graveyard.

At the same time, the narrator addresses the readers and states: ‘You are like I was’ (90). Hereby, he claims that his experiences could just as well happen to anyone else and thus reduces the distance between the readers and the written text. From this created proximity one could conclude a closer insight into the boy’s process of bereavement after the death of his father and of what he assumes death or dying to be. However, from the first page it becomes apparent that Finn is not yet ready to completely share his story with the readers. He shies away from giving away what happened and only refers to the death of his father as ‘a story of sudden change’ (1). Thus, death here is not presented as impossible to understand or grasp but as the unspeakable. It leaves the narrator speechless and even drawing on the more rational medium of the written word does at first not enable him to acknowledge death’s existence. Regarding this narrator, bereavement is the paralysing state which follows the death of a loved person and which at the same time demands and denies a rational dealing with it.

Ways is also told from the perspective of a first-person-narrator. Like the narrator in *Invisible*, Sam presents himself to the readers on the first page of the novel by providing a list of ‘five facts’ (1). By this means, he makes himself transparent and relatable both in his role as a narrator and writer and as the protagonist of the story. From the start of the book,

the relationship between him and the readers is one of proximity and familiarity. This enables the readers to gain insights into the emotions and experiences of a dying person and therefore does not represent dying as a solitary stage of life but rather as an experience from which valuable knowledge can be obtained. However, death and dying remain strongly emotionally charged and disturbing aspects of life. One could thus question to what extent the narrator of *Ways* is able to present his personal account objectively and whether his strong personal involvement with the topic limits his credibility.

Indeed, when Sam's friend Felix dies and the protagonist is directly exposed to the destructive effect of death for the first time, he appears uncertain about his own ability to face this reality yet. Asked if he wants to see the dying boy, his answer is contradictory: 'Yes, I did. No, I didn't' (106). Here, the narrator is limited by his own inconsistent emotions and his psychological instability in the face of the impending death of his friend. Nevertheless, it can be stated that he upholds a high level of credibility throughout most of the text. He accomplishes this by repeatedly reflecting upon and assessing his own role as the narrator and writer of his diary and by pointing out its structural weaknesses. For example, considering his biggest challenge, the writing of his own eventual death scene, he strives for authenticity: 'The rest of the book is all true, that's the whole point. But people would know I couldn't write the last bit, so they'd know I was making it up' (62). By designing a questionnaire for his parents to be filled out after his death, he solves this problem, stresses his own credibility and yet essentially stays the writer of his own death scene. Ultimately, one can conclude from this an unquestionably subjective but nevertheless trustworthy narrator who enables his readers to comprehend his own view on and experiences with death, dying and bereavement.

Monster is told by a third-person-narrator while Conor as the protagonist is the sole focaliser. The readers do therefore not gain insights into the emotions or ideas of, for instance, Conor's mother or grandmother or into the reasons for the monster's appearance.

This results in a limitation of the readers' perspective but it also leads to a closer proximity to and a stronger identification with the main character of the novel. However, the details of the boy's recurring nightmare are initially not shared with the readers just as Conor himself tells 'no living soul' (34) about what he experiences in his sleep. By means of the created ambiguity and uncertainty the narrative thus mirrors Conor's own insecurity in the face of his mother's death.

Through narrative perspective all three novels therefore create a proximity between their protagonists and the readers and by doing so allow them to understand their representation of death, dying and bereavement. However, this proximity can never be fully maintained but is questioned by remaining doubts or breaks which arise from their personal involvement with mortality and grief. These topics are therefore represented as writeable and comprehensible but also as ultimately separating the people involved from everyone else.

3.2.4 Narrative Devices

As above in the case of the pre-1980 novels, this subchapter will start with an analysis of the portrayal of the dying or deceased characters in the three contemporary novels before taking a closer look at stylistic devices, the contrasting of fantasy, fiction and reality and the role of writing and storytelling. In *Ways* as the only novel in which the first-person narrator and protagonist is also the dying character, this part of the analysis coincides with the narrator's self-portrayal as described above. In *Monster*, in contrast, Conor's mother is only a minor character of the plot although the protagonist's life is unquestionably strongly influenced by her terminal illness. The readers do not learn much about her besides the symptoms caused by her cancer. Her outer appearance is marked by her bare scalp which

the narrator describes as 'too fragile in the morning light' (28) and her daily routine is shaped by her weakness and constant nausea resulting from her treatments. Apart from this, she remains nondescript throughout *Monster*. This creates an insurmountable distance between her character and the readers which can be interpreted as paralleling the distance between Conor and his mother. The latter is deliberately maintained by the boy for emotional self-protection and is characterised by the feeling of guilt on this account. However, although the protagonist distances himself from his dying mother, his daily life and his dreams and nightmares are nonetheless subject to the reality of her approaching death. This is to be understood as a reference to the destructive force of death against which no one can secure themselves completely.

In *Invisible*, Finn's father is himself never an active character of the plot but is only presented to the readers by means of the boy's memories, fantasies and descriptions. He is portrayed as a loving family father who used to enjoy playing baseball with his sons (cf. 78) and is remembered as 'a good dad' (118). However, he is also a sometimes restless and even careless person. One example for this can be found in his refusing to seek protection from a storm (cf. 33), another in his riding the motorcycle without a helmet which the narrator judges as 'a stupid risk' (102). Finn assesses his father's sometimes irresponsible manner as a manifestation of his desire to go 'to places where you've never been before' (209). In the figurative sense, he starts this journey into the unknown when he dies and his behaviour could thus be understood as a challenge to life. However, when death strikes, it is not self-inflicted despite all recklessness. Finn's father dies involuntary and unexpectedly. By means of this characterisation, death is therefore represented as unpredictable and in his grief, the protagonist struggles with the arbitrariness of his loss.

In terms of stylistic devices used in the novel, Finn's father also plays an essential role in *Invisible*. Referring to the protagonist's middle name Abner, the narrator claims: 'My father is light' (8) and concludes his story with the same statement in the past tense.

The ambiguity of the word 'light' meaning either bright, unburdened or weightless can be interpreted as a reference to the uncertainty regarding the fate of a deceased person. Finn's perception of his father's state is thus unquestionably positive and when he formulates 'My father was light' (233) on the last page of the book, this demonstrates his gained ability to release the deceased and to go back to a life which is not exclusively characterised by loss.

It is this use of stylistic devices that is of particular importance in *Invisible*. The examples of metaphors in the novel are various and are explicitly pointed out to the readers. Referring to the feeling of bereavement, for instance, Finn states that 'a giant eraser fell from the sky and flattened me', a formulation which he describes as 'just a dumb metaphor' (2) on the same page. Additionally, he interprets his father's death 'ten thousand feet above Earth' as a metaphorical approaching of heaven (cf. 164). This demonstrates the narrator's awareness of the significance of linguistic and narrative devices in the written discussion of death, dying and bereavement.

However, the novel's eponymous and thus undoubtedly most important metaphor is the protagonist's increasing invisibility. Having lost his father, the protagonist states that he 'had lost a little bit of [himself] (3). Furthermore, he explains his vanishing hair and skin colour by saying: 'My box of crayons has been stolen from me' (53). Since he is not only referring to his changing outer appearance but compares it to his loss, his fear of becoming invisible and disappearing from the earth can be interpreted as a metaphor for the loss of his father and the emotional distress this puts him through. Additionally, this metaphor is made explicit when Finn's psychologist asks him if his turning white could be a subconscious attempt to counteract his grief: 'Maybe your body, in a symbolic way, is taking you in the opposite direction, to your old age, so you are closer to your own ending. Closer to maybe seeing your father again' (138). When Finn is eventually ready to share his story with his readers, the colours begin to return to his life. By means of the metaphor

of invisibility, bereavement is thus represented as depriving life of all happiness and death as provoking this emotional state of misery.

Another implication of the metaphor of invisibility can be found in *Monster*. Here, Conor feels ‘like he’d suddenly turned invisible’ (89) after his classmates are informed about his mother’s disease. They no longer talk to him and he is not punished by his teachers for absences or misconduct. The threatening death of his mother thus marks the boy as different and impacts him inasmuch as he feels as if he himself, too, was vanishing from the earth: ‘If no one sees you, [...] are you really there at all?’ (175). Consequently, Conor’s perceived invisibility can be interpreted as a metaphor for society’s incapability and fear of facing and openly addressing the topics of death, dying and bereavement. This avoidance is also typified in the book by the repeated use of the text characters ‘–’ and ‘...’ whenever the narrator or characters of the novel cannot speak about the reality of death. For instance, trying to describe Conor’s nightmare, the narrator says: ‘The one that always ended with –’ (15) and fearing the truth about his mother’s imminent death, Conor asks: ‘Why is everyone acting like –?’ (112). Here, death is represented both as the unspeakable and the unknowledgeable.

In contrast to this, the perceived threat of death and dying is exemplified by the capitalisation of every word in Conor’s father’s question ‘How He Was Holding Up’ (57) and in his grandmother’s demand: ‘We Need To Have A Talk’ (104). Moreover, it is visualized by Conor’s nightmare and his notion of death: ‘This is what it felt like, this is what it *looked* like, the edges of the world crumbling away’ (167). The boy metaphorically tries to resist the approaching loss by stopping his grandmother’s clock and by regaining the feeling that ‘he was the one in control’ (121). However, this control proves to be a fallacy when the clock hands come to a halt at 12:07, the anticipated time of his mother’s death. Ultimately, this illustrates the unstoppable nature of death and the fact that trying to resist it can cause more damage than good.

Another and without question the most prominent stylistic device in *Monster* is the creation of the monster arising from the yew tree as a metaphorical embodiment of fear and of the power for self-healing. Varner argues that in the tradition of most European countries the yew tree is ‘a gentle guardian of the dead’ (2006: 66) as well as ‘the most important of all healing trees’ (2006: 128). It is thus to be read as a reference to this tradition when the neighbouring tree in the text starts ‘groaning like a living thing, like the hungry stomach of the world’ (19) and turns into a monster which presents itself as ‘everything untamed and untameable. [...] I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O’Malley’ (50). Indeed, the readers later learn that the yew tree has taken the shape of the monster both in order to guide Conor’s mother in her dying process and to support the boy’s healing after his loss.

However, when the monster presents itself by stating: ‘I am far more than just one tree’(134), this refers not only to the yew tree’s long cultural tradition but also to the fact that the monster is an essential part of the protagonist himself. Andriano argues that the monster in literature is a ‘creature we wish to believe is totally Other, alien, but that we know, deep down, is not’ (2013: 274). This statement is supported in the novel in the scenes in which Conor acts as the monster, feels ‘like he could reach down and tear the whole floor right out of the dark and loamy earth’ (61) or feels ‘the monster’s voice [...] like it was in his own head’ (179). These scenes demonstrate that the monster is not a character completely separated from Conor but is rather the cathartic subconscious which encourages the boy to act out his desperation and fear. This relationship between the protagonist and the monster demonstrates the nature of the fantastic creature. It is further stressed by the fact that no one except for the boy seems to be able to see it and visualised by the fact that the monster’s utterances are not indicated by quotation marks as is the case for all other direct speech but are printed in italics. Consequently, the monster is to be interpreted as a product of Conor’s imagination which is inspired by the European cultural tradition

and triggered by his anxieties and emotional distress. Ultimately, this matches Andriano's claim to 'consider the monsters as signs and symbols, as cultural icons, and as indexes of our own identity' (2013: 276).

Moreover, the monster as an embodiment of fear is a common metaphor in literature and comes into effect both in *Monster* and in *Invisible* (cf. Andriano 2013: 273). In *Invisible*, Finn refers to his 'monster-sized worries' (2) and states that '[f]ear is a ferocious monster or it's a pesky little bug. We decide' (166). In *Monster*, Conor is not frightened of the monster which arises from the yew tree: 'This wasn't the monster he was expecting' (21). While he feels 'no terror, no panic, no darkness' (48) in this scene, the boy's real fear is represented by the second monster which visits him in his nightmares. This 'real monster' (210) contrasts with the imaginary first monster which, regarding death and dying, implies that the reality of death must ultimately be faced but that it is the fear of this confrontation which causes the greatest psychological burden. Hence, here both novels thus do not represent death, dying and bereavement themselves as threatening and harming but the fear of it and the avoidance of the topics as a consequence thereof.

In *Ways*, too, stylistic devices such as metaphors play an important role in the linguistic rapprochement of the topic of death and dying. For instance, when the narrator states that his father 'doesn't talk about [him] being ill' (17), this can be interpreted as an analogy to society's denial and refusal to talk about mortality and about the loss and sorrow which result from it. Furthermore, the boy's fervent wish to fly an airship is a metaphor for the fact that his illness gradually deteriorates and that he often already feels as if he is in an intermediate stage between life and death. His description of the airship flight voices this flotation between earth and a possible afterlife: 'It was as if you were looking at a picture, except you weren't outside the frame. You were still there. You were just looking at it all from a different angle, from very far away' (169). After this experience, the protagonist starts imagining a flight to the moon and the increasing distance of his journeys

symbolises his increasing disengagement with worldly questions (cf. 177). Therefore, in *Ways* metaphors and analogies are used to demonstrate the protagonist's growing acceptance of his approaching death and thus represent death and dying as comprehensible only by means of comparison with familiar aspects of life.

The most prominent narrative device in *Ways*, however, is the use of scientific knowledge contrasting the uncertainties of the narrator about death with empirically verifiable evidence. Since for Sam '[g]oing to die is the biggest waffly thing of all' (6), he aims at fighting this insecurity by providing the readers with ascertained facts. For example, he explains the natural cycle of life as follows: 'So we're all made of bits of old star. But it's a cycle. Because after millions of years the new star gets old and tired too and it explodes and new baby stars get born' (93). By this means, the protagonist not only tries to 'find out the answers to all the questions that nobody answers' (7) but also actively fights his fears relating to his dying. Nevertheless, as the writer and narrator of his own story, Sam realises that a discussion of the serious subject demands a balanced approach including both scientific knowledge and creative imagination in order to fill all gaps. This already becomes apparent in his short inscription which introduces the diary as 'a collection of lists, stories, pictures, questions and facts' (n.pag.). Ultimately, by contrasting fantasy and reality already in the conception of the book, *Ways* represents death and dying as complex issues which can be dealt with only by drawing on a variety of approaches, as conflicting as they might initially seem.

Likewise, reality, truth and imagination are contrasted in *Invisible*. Already the first sentence of the novel, 'Once upon a time, in a magical kingdom, far, far away, I was a normal kid' (2), presents normality as a tale which cannot become one's own truth but can merely serve as a point of reference. In a similar manner, referring to his alleged menacing invisibility the narrator states that the workings of the mind in its understanding of and reaction to death 'remain a huge mystery' (67). Although his father has died from natural

causes, he finds nothing natural in this loss and challenges this truth by imagining alternative realities. Nevertheless, by providing the readers with lists of facts such as, for instance, the chapter 'Firefly factoids' (162), the narrator also strives for a representation of death, dying and bereavement as rationally explainable and intelligible. Describing his father's funeral, Finn assesses that '[i]t was all too real and unreal at the same time' (177). Therefore, the contrasting of reality, truth and imagination in *Invisible* can be understood as an analogy for the ambiguity which is associated with the elusiveness of death and dying and for the insecurity resulting from loss and grief.

In *Monster*, imagination does not only oppose reality and truth but outright challenges them. After the monster visits Conor for the first time in what the boy initially believes to be a dream, the protagonist finds 'short, spiky yew tree leaves' (26) on his bedroom floor. When this experience is repeated, he starts to question his judgement and asks: 'Am I dreaming or not?' (85). In light of death and fear the distinction between reality and imagination thus becomes blurred, what had been the boy's conception of truth and fantasy cannot sustain anymore. Furthermore, the monster defies Conor in his search for an unambiguous answer and asks: 'Who is to say that it is not everything else that is the dream?' (49). It states that 'many things that are true feel like a cheat' (84) and by implication argues that in such cases fantasy can reflect reality better than the truth. Consequently, in *Monster* the use of imagination and fantasy explicitly matters in the dealing with death, dying and bereavement which also becomes apparent from the monster's claim that '[b]elief is half of all healing. Belief in the cure, belief in the future that awaits' (135).

In *Monster*, imagination and fantasy are thus attributed power and a possible healing effect. Accordingly, the same goes for the role of writing and storytelling in the novel. When the monster explains to Conor that '[s]tories are important. [...] They can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth' (168), this is to be understood as a case for the significance of storytelling as a possible and powerful approach to death, dying and

grief. Therefore, this importance also accounts for Conor's anger when his friend Lily shares the news about his mother's illness with other children in school. The boy feels the need to share his story himself and to thus be able to control the narration. Moreover, in the book stories are described with animalistic attributes representing them as autonomous, difficult to manage and potentially dangerous. The monster claims that they 'chase and bite and hunt' (51) and depicts them as 'wild creatures' (69). In his attempt to engage with a story and to interpret its meaning, the readers or, as in the case of Conor, the listener become an active part of the narrative and can by this means make every story their own. This becomes apparent in the example of Conor who is invited to take part in the monster's third tale. The fantastic creature prompts the protagonist to act out his anger and fear: 'Await your command, boy' (136). With that said, here storytelling can be interpreted as a tool for healing and for a regaining of control in the face of death while the novel's plot undoubtedly emphasises that fact that, as the monster points out to Conor, 'stories don't always have happy endings' (162).

Without question, this last realisation is also an essential aspect of *Ways* since the narrator anticipates his own inescapable death already on the first page of the text. Furthermore, as described above the novel discusses the contrasting of reality and fictionality. This is also of importance for the analysis of the role of writing and storytelling as Sam's diary, initially conceived as 'a proper scientific study' (13) about death and dying, is eventually primarily a literary work. One example for this can be found in the fact that many of the protagonist's questions such as 'How do you know that you've died?' (11) or 'What does a dead person look like?' (126) are followed by attempts at an explanation in the form of an episode of Sam's life rather than in the form of empirical data. This not only demonstrates science's incapability of clarifying all open questions with regard to death and dying but also offers fiction and imagination as possible solutions for this problem. Moreover, by means of his own writing, Sam's remains in a unilateral dialogue with his readers

even after his death. Writing is thus presented both as a tool for the discussion of death, dying and bereavement and as a method to at least partially resist it.

In *Invisible*, too, writing and storytelling are associated with the possibility to moderate death's destructive impact on the lives of everyone involved with it. It is understood as a way to remember the deceased and to revive their stories. As a surviving dependant, Finn feels the obligation to preserve and share the memory of his father. He makes this explicit by writing: 'I am the keeper of my father's story. I need to share everything I know.' (158). The protagonist follows the perceived obligation even though his loss makes it difficult for him to express himself and he feels as if the 'words jump and twist and flip' (92). That he views this responsibility as essential, becomes apparent when he declares that 'none of the dead can share their stories anymore so it's up to us to tell those stories or remember them or imagine them' (122). Hence, he promotes the use of fantasy and imagination in order to fill gaps in a dead person's biography. This can be interpreted as an explicit reference to the great importance of writing and storytelling in the approaching of death, dying and bereavement. Ultimately, the strong connection between the medium and the topic is stressed when Finn assesses: 'Death is when you are no more, like a notebook that runs out of pages. Toward the end [...] I will write very small and in all of the margins. Keep it going. And when I get to the last page I will ask for a new book to write in.' Living is here thus equated with writing which represents death as the ending of a long book and implies the possibility for a symbolic extension of life as long as someone is still telling your life story.

In summary it can be said, therefore, that all three contemporary novels are comparable in terms of their use of narrative devices, their implications about the relationship between reality and imagination and about the role of storytelling and writing, their created distance between readers and text and ultimately in terms of their literary representation of the subjects of death, dying and bereavement. All three texts highlight the importance of

engaging the readers in the process of interpretation and by this means provide them with possible approaches rather than with unambiguous explanations. The subsequent comparison will allow for a contrasting of both analyses in order to determine similarities and differences and to identify a possible literary tendency as far as the representation of these topics is concerned.

3.3 Comparison and Discussion

The analyses of both the pre-1980 and contemporary children's novels which are concerned with the subject of death, dying and bereavement led to valuable insights into the texts' literary representations of these themes. All six books are comparable inasmuch as they thematise death and loss in close connection to life as well as to love. The bonds between the protagonists and the dead or dying characters are close in all six cases and the main characters are thus personally affected by their deaths. As Inglis argues, this linkage between death and love is both characteristic and essential for literature for a young audience as it intensifies the pain of loss and by doing so demonstrates the destructive force of death and dying (cf. 1981: 289). Moreover, what all six analysed novels share is, as Reynolds demands for all children's literature concerned with these serious topics, the fact that they 'end on a note of optimism, or at least hope' (2007: 89). While this positive note might be more evident in the pre-1980 novels where all three protagonists are capable of comprehending and accepting mortality as an essential and necessary aspect of life, it is also noticeable in the contemporary texts. Even in *Monster* and *Ways*, although both books end with the death of the terminally ill character, the readers are offered closure and therefore the possibility of facing the painful reality of the limitedness of life.

Furthermore, the six novels coincide since none of them purport to be a complete and unambiguous representation of death, dying and bereavement. For example, as demonstrated above, *Blackberries* stresses the fact that ‘some questions do not have answers’ (62). Likewise, in *Bridge* Leslie says that ‘[y]ou never know ahead of time what something’s really going to be like’ (43) and Finn claims in *Invisible* that ‘[s]ome very important things can stay a mystery forever’ (198). This corresponds with the fact that, as has been argued above, neither death nor dying are ever fully knowable and a representation of both aspects can thus solely provide possible approaches to the discussion of plausible answers.

However, there are also evident differences between the pre-1980 and the contemporary novels. In terms of plot, it is noteworthy that in the older texts death is abrupt and arbitrary. This observation bears out Inglis’s claim from 1981 that ‘[i]n our times, perhaps this is the best a novelist can do. In a novel which addresses itself directly to a now-rare experience, the death of a child, the novelist can do little [...] but write of the loss as a sudden severance’ (285). While his statement is supported especially by the sudden deaths of Jamie and Leslie in *Blackberries* and *Bridge* but also by Wilbur’s inability to understand the immediacy of Charlotte’s dying in *Web*, it is questioned and negated by the fact that in all three contemporary children’s books death is a predictable, painful and yet omnipresent reality in the plots although the characters all die before their time. This even holds true for *Invisible* although the death of Finn’s father comes suddenly for the protagonist. Since the readers are told the ‘story about losing something’ (1) in retrospect and the narrator openly addresses the serious subject at the beginning of the novel, the reading is influenced by the constructed awareness of the impact of death, dying and grief. The pre-1980 and contemporary texts thus contrast due to the fact that in the older books life is breached and halted by death whereas the newer novels stress the perpetual coexistence of life and death.

With regard to the books' structures, narrators and perspectives one can determine that in general the contemporary novels create a stronger involvement of the readers in the texts and thus provide a more individual and subjective approach to the representations of death, dying and bereavement. By means of a coherence of both their formal and temporal structure, *Web*, *Blackberries* and *Terabithia* do not create ambiguities concerning their portrayal of the topics but rather refer to the concept of a natural life cycle as an explanation for mortality and loss. Consequently, they clearly highlight their main subject but do not allow for a distinctly individual approach to or discussion of it. While *Ways* shows a similar tendency to present the readers with a clearly defined form, both in *Monster* and in *Invisible* the structure of the text is less transparent and coherent. Symbolically, death disrupts the prevailing order and the readers are faced with the task of restructuring the texts to be able to interpret the plot and thus to create meaning. This supports Seelinger Trites's argument for a growing importance of the 'relationship between death as subject and death informing narrative structure' (2000: 123), as has been explained above.

A comparison of the six novels' narrators reveals a similar tendency. The impersonal third-person narrator in *Web* and the largely unambiguous representation of the protagonist's view in *Bridge* by means of a limited third-person narrator result in a seeming objectivity and thus a secure distance between the readers and the main subjects of the novels. The same is true for the first-person narration in *Blackberries* although James argues that this choice of narration 'encourages audiences to share a narrator's view, and thus to adopt a stance which is identical to the focalising character' (2009: 75). While one could assume a proximity between the readers and the protagonist's subjective experience of loss, the unnamed narrator of *Blackberries* distances himself from the events as well as from the readers of the novel by not providing any information concerning his person as well as by initially dissimulating Jamie's death.

In contrast to this, both first-person narrators in *Invisible* and *Ways* explicitly seek contact to the readers of the books by means of questions and by references to their own writing processes. This creates a familiarity between the readers and the protagonists and results in a close proximity and hence in a possible subjective interpretation of the books. Likewise, the readers gain insight into the thoughts, actions and feelings of *Monster*'s protagonist and at the same time remain challenged for their own understanding of the text since the relationship and degree of trust and knowledge between Conor and the limited third-person narrator is left ambiguous. Ultimately, the different choices of both formal and temporal structure and narrator types result in a tendency of an objective distance in the case of the pre-1980 novels and a rather subjective proximity in the contemporary books. The latter challenges the readers to organise, interpret and engage in the plot.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of the six books' use of narratological devices. They show distinct parallels with regard to the portrayal of the dead or dying characters inasmuch as, except for Charlotte, for none of them death is the expected end of a long and fulfilled existence. Rather, in a strikingly similar way Leslie and Jamie as well as Finn's father and Sam are portrayed as often careless and predestined for minor accidents but are like Conor's mother in no way prepared for their abrupt and untimely deaths. As the narrator and protagonist of his own book, Sam stand out from this list as he offers the readers an unusually immediate perspective on the subjective experience of dying.

As far as the use of other narrative devices such as metaphors or a distinct syntax is concerned, however, the pre-1980 novels differ noticeably from the contemporary books. This is noteworthy since, as stated above, Stewart argues for 'fiction's inherent need to account for death in idioms and metaphors drawn from life' (1984:11). In the earlier texts, these idioms and metaphors confine themselves to a large part to the representation of death and dying as essential parts of the natural cycle of life. As has been demonstrated

above by means of a close reading of the novels, the deceased return to the bereaved in form of objects or other characters after their deaths. This is portrayed as a natural, expectable but nonetheless disturbing aspect of life, the latter of which is illustrated by use of a disrupted syntax and repetitions in all three pre-1980 novels.

Contrasting with this, the use of metaphors and other stylistic devices is significantly more diverse and of explicit relevance in *Invisible*, *Monster* and *Ways*. They are pointed out to the readers or become apparent by the discussion of their ambiguity in the characters' direct speech. The readers are thus required to independently interpret their meaning and to critically employ them to their own reality. Consequently, while the earlier books support the academic claim that, as has been discussed above, pre-1980 children's literature about death, dying and bereavement tends to stress its function as an 'attitudinal and emotional guidepost[]' (Delisle and Woods 1976: 683) rather than its narrative possibilities, the contemporary books again demonstrate a tendency to engage the readers in the literary process and by this means challenge them to autonomously make use of the offered approaches to the discussed subjects.

A further aspect which has been analysed in all six texts is their contrasting of reality, fantasy and imagination. It is a relevant object of investigation since it has been argued above that due to the unknowable nature of death and dying a distinction between reality and fantasy cannot easily be drawn in the representation of these subjects. Here, it became apparent that the pre-1980 novels demonstrate a high degree of realism and objectivity, a fact which is most notable in *Blackberries* as in this text the literary discussions of fantasy and imagination are not aspects of the plot. In *Web* and *Bridge*, on the other hand, they are relevant parts of the protagonists' lives but ultimately cannot uphold their importance once death and grief enter the main characters' lives. In the imbalance between reality and imagination, reality eventually prevails over the latter as a result of the destructive effects of death and dying.

In the contemporary books, however, the dichotomy between reality and imagination is explicitly selected as a theme. Both in *Ways* and in *Invisible*, scientific evidence is contrasted with the process of writing and in *Monster* Conor openly favours imagination over reality when he assesses the monster's nature and states: 'Or maybe it wasn't a dream. Which would actually be worse' (90). Ultimately, the contemporary novels thus not only argue in support of an imaginative and creative approach to death, dying and bereavement, they also confirm many scholars' claim for a close interconnection between fantasy and mortality as argued above. When James states that in children's literature 'death's role is to blur the boundaries between reality, dream, and the supernatural' (2009: 113) and Forster argues that 'fantasy asks us to pay something extra' (2002: 76), the findings in the three newer books support the critics in their evaluations.

Moreover, the use of embedded texts, writing and storytelling as possible approaches to death, dying and bereavement has been discussed. This is of particular importance as novels as such are themselves written manifestations of storytelling and, as has been argued above, incorporate both a reminder of and a resistance to death and dying by means of their closed form. In the case of the pre-1980 novels, storytelling plays an important role both in *Web* and in *Bridge*. However, its relevance is questioned when in both books the female storytellers die and leave the protagonists without further tales to help them in their grief. By contrast, in all three contemporary texts writing and storytelling are discussed as well as demonstrated as possible tools for healing and for a regaining of control in the uncertain time of death, dying and bereavement. Additionally, parallels are drawn between writing, storytelling and living. Therefore, they function as a possible resistance against death inasmuch as a deceased person remains unforgotten as long as his or her written works or stories are shared.

In summary, it can be stated that both the earlier and the more recent children's texts about death, dying and bereavement use a wide range of narratological devices to represent

the themes in their respective ways. James's claim that in the 1970s fictional texts there is 'insufficient examination of its function in discursive, ideological, and rhetorical forms' (2009: 3) can therefore not be confirmed in the analysed examples. However, a comparison between both the pre-1980 and the contemporary texts demonstrates a tendency towards a decreasing distance between the readers, the narrator and the plot and thus between the readers and the discussion of the topics of death, dying and bereavement. This leads to the conclusion that the readers are more extensively engaged in the interpretation by means of almost all presented aspects of narratology. Instead of being presented with different explanations for and approaches to mortality and loss, they are thus supported in developing their own understanding of the subjects. This is best expressed in *Monster* when the fantastic creature encourages Conor: 'You are the one with the answers to these questions' (204).

Ultimately, as opposed to the older books, the contemporary novels demonstrate that possible explanations and interpretations are numerous and that it is less the finding of the right answer to all unresolved issues but rather the reflection on and discussion of death, dying and bereavement which proves the most valuable approach to these very topics. While for now this cannot be more than a clear tendency, it nevertheless indicates an increasing trust in children's literary capacities and in children's novels as literary rather than educational works. This perception is also supported by the author of *Monster*, Patrick Ness, who in an interview about the novel stated that in writing for a young audience there were no longer limitations 'to subject matter [...] or seriousness or literary quality' (Jones 2012: 1:38-1:43).

4 Conclusion

This project has been concerned with the question of a possible tendency or development in the literary representations of death, dying and bereavement in children's literature. The paper's initial claim was that both in pre-1980 and contemporary children's literature form, perspective and narrative devices play an important role in the representations of the subjects of death, dying and bereavement. However, in the recent novels the readers are stronger engaged in the texts as the books create a closer proximity between the readers and the plot than is the case for the earlier novels. By this means, the readers are increasingly encouraged to interpret the plot autonomously and apply it to their own experiences and knowledge. This thesis could be verified through the conducted literary analysis since a distinct tendency away from a commented multitude of possible approaches and towards an independent understanding of the topics became evident. This allows for conclusions not only about other texts which were published around the same time as the six sample texts but also about a further development in the future, possibly towards an even stronger focus on narratological devices which integrate the readers into their own reading experience.

However, I am well aware of the fact that this paper can only ever depict a small amount of what could possibly be analysed with regard to the literary representations of death, dying and bereavement in children's texts. The novels which were selected for examination represent just a small percentage of those written for a young audience both in the cases of pre-1980 and contemporary books. Furthermore, the choice of focus on the Anglophone literary tradition implies that others had to be left aside. The relative brevity of this paper did not allow for a wider research both in terms of the literary corpus and the cultural spaces. Consequently, I make no claims for absolute or definitive conclusions but regard this paper as a first indicator for possible further research and critical discussion.

Nevertheless, it has proven to be a relevant project inasmuch as critical works both about the literary representations of death, dying and bereavement and about children's literature are still rare. Although promising, the space in which both fields meet is thus yet largely unexplored and I hope for this paper to make a small contribution to its gradual gain in scholarly attention.

As James points out, '[r]egardless of the extent to which death is subjected to analysis, it will always remain an enigma' (2009: 175). Consequently, objectively answering the question of what death or dying are can be the aim neither of this project nor of any literary text. However, analysing the literary representation of both topics as well as of bereavement allows for insight into a culture's understanding of death, its attitudes towards dying and its approach to grief. As such, these analyses function as indicators for 'the systems of order, governance, value, and meaning of the culture itself' (James 2009: 177). And looking at the other side of the literary process, the writing of death, dying and bereavement, the dealing with the topics enables both the writer and the readers to approach the omnipresent themes by means of fantasy and imagination rather than through painfully real experiences. To return to the introductory quotation from *Peter Pan*, literature therefore serves as a medium in which to die can indeed be 'an awfully big adventure' (Barrie 2012: 123).

Bibliography

Primary Texts

- Barrie, J.M. 2012. *Peter Pan* (London: Vintage)
- Buchanan Smith, Doris. 1988. *A Taste of Blackberries*, illus. by Mike Wimmer (New York: Harper Trophy)
- Green, John. 2012. *The Fault in Our Stars* (New York: Penguin), ebook
- Kuhlman, Evan. 2008. *The Last Invisible Boy*, illus. by J.P. Covert (New York: athenaeum)
- Nicholls, Sally. 2015. *Ways to Live Forever* (London: Scholastic Children's Books)
- Ness, Patrick. 2011. *A Monster Calls* (London: Walker Books)
- Paterson, Katherine. 2015. *Bridge to Terabithia*, illus. by Peter Roberts (London: Puffin Books)
- White, E. B. 2014. *Charlotte's Web*, illus. by Garth Williams (London: Puffin Books)

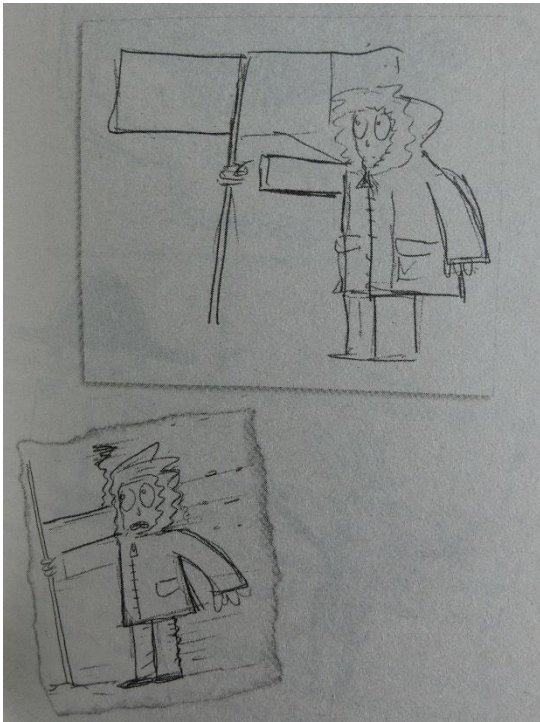
Critical Works

- Alvarez, Alfred. 1990. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: Norton)
- Andriano, Joseph. 2013. 'Monsters of the Fantastic: Fusions of the Mythical and the Real', in *Critical Insights: The Fantastic*, ed. by Claire Whitehead (Ipswich: Salem Press), pp. 273–294
- Armitt, Lucie. 1996. *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Hodder Arnold)
- Bal, Mieke. 1997. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press)
- Bradbury, Mary. 1999. *Representations of Death* (London & New York: Routledge)
- Chaston, Joel D. 1991. 'The Other Deaths in Bridge to Terabithia', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 16.4: 283–241
- Delisle, Robert G. and Abigail S. Woods. 1976. 'Death and Dying in Children's Literature: An Analysis of Three Selected Works', *Language Arts* 53.6: 683–688
- Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis 2011*, 'Der letzte unsichtbare Junge', <http://www.djlp.jugendliteratur.org/2011/kinderbuch-2/artikel-der_letzte_unsichtbare_ju-124.html> [accessed 15 April 2017]
- Falconer, Rachel. 2010. 'Crossover Literature', in *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. by David Rudd (New York: Routledge), pp.158–160
- Forster, E. M. 2002. *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Rosetta Books)
- Gilman, Sander L. 2015. 'Representing Dead and Dying Bodies', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 149–162
- Goering, Sara. 2014. 'Using Children's Literature as a Spark for Ethical Discussion: Stories that Deal with Death', in *Ethics and Children's Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp. 233–246
- Goldreich, Gloria. 1977. 'What is Death? The Answers in Children's Books', *The Hastings Center Report* 7.3: 18–20
- Grenby, M. O. 2009. 'The Origins of Children's Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 3–18
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (New York: Sage and Open University)
- Hunt, Peter (ed.). 1999. 'Introduction: The World of Children's Literature Studies', in *Understanding Children's Literature* (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 1–14
- IMDb, 'A Monster Calls', <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3416532/>> [accessed 15 April 2017]

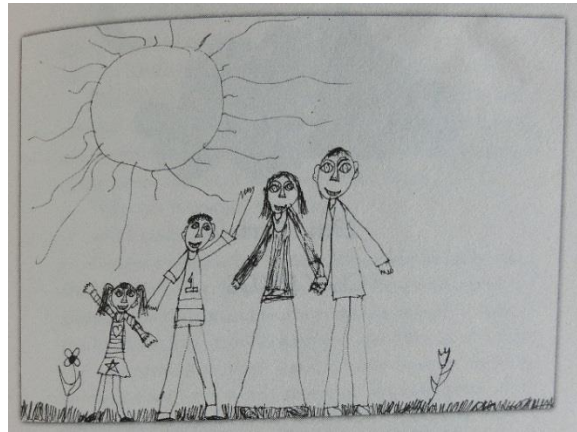
- , ‘Ways to Live Forever’, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1446208/>> [accessed 15 April 2017]
- Immel, Andrea. 2009. ‘Children’s Books and the Construction of Childhood’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Children’s Literature*, ed. by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 19–34
- Inglis, Fred. 1981. *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1981. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen)
- James, Kathryn. 2009. *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (New York: Routledge)
- Jones, Nicolette. 18 April 2012. *Writing for Teenagers: Patrick Ness, Author of A Monster Calls*, online video recording, YouTube < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e87jgtO9hHA>> [accessed 7 May 2017]
- Keenan, Hugh T., ‘Doris Buchanan Smith’, in *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers* <<http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&disableHighlighting=false&prodId=BIC1&action=e&window-state=normal&catId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1663000396&mode=view&userGroupName=nyp1&jsid=3ce48fd1879e2c4e7ba70c5f5862ea9a>> [accessed 1 April 2017]
- Knoepfmacher, Ulrich and Mitzi Myers (eds.). 1997. ‘From the Editors: “Cross-Writing” and the Conceptualizing of Children’s Literary Studies’, in *Children’s Literature*, vol. 25 (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP), pp. vii–xvii
- Knoepfmacher, Ulrich. 2009. ‘Children’s Texts and the Grown-up Reader’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Children’s Literature*, ed. by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 159–173
- Koutsompou, Violetta-Irene and Anastasia Kotsopoulou. 2015. ‘The Concept of Death as Depicted in Fairy Tales’, *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 1.2: 154–157
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1997. *On Death and Dying* (New York: Scribner Classics), ebook
- Lerer, Seth. 2008. *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press)
- Lesnik-Oberstein, Karin. 1999. ‘Essential: What is Children’s Literature? What is Childhood?’, in *Understanding Children’s Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 15–29
- (ed.). 2004. ‘Introduction. Children’s Literature: New Approaches’, in *Children’s Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1–24
- Luper, Steven. 2014. ‘Death’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta < <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/death/#Bib>> [accessed 4 March 2017]
- Lyon Clark, Beverly. 2003. *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children’s Literature in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP)
- Maybin, Janet and Nicola J. Watson (eds). 2009. ‘Introduction’, in *Children’s Literature: Territories and Approaches* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan & Milton Keynes: The Open University), pp. 1–7
- Meek, Margaret. 2004. ‘Introduction: Definitions, Themes, Changes, Attitudes’, in *International Companion: Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 1–12
- Metcalf, Eva-Maria. 1995. ‘Leap of Faith in Astrid Lindgren’s “Brother’s Lionheart”’, *Children’s Literature* 23: 165–178
- Mills, Claudia (ed.). 2014. ‘Introduction’, in *Ethics and Children’s Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate), pp. 1–12

- Misheff, Sue. 1998. 'Beneath the Web and Over the Stream: The Search for Safe Places in "Charlotte's Web" and "Bridge to Terabithia"', *Children's Literature in Education* 29.3: 131–141
- Moore, Timothy E. and Reet Mae. 1987. 'Who Dies and Who Cries: Death and Bereavement in Children's Literature', *Journal of Communication* 37.4: 52–64
- Nikolajeva, Maria. 2004. 'Narrative Theory and Children's Literature', in *International Companion: Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 166–178
- Nikolajeva, Maria and Carole Scott. 2006. *How Picturebooks Work* (London & New York: Routledge)
- O'Sullivan, Emer. 2005. *Comparative Children's Literature*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London & New York: Routledge)
- Porter Abbott, H. 2002. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- Publisher's Weekly*, 'The Last Invisible Boy', < <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-41695797-3> > [accessed 17 April 2017]
- Reynolds, Kimberley. 2007. *Radical Children's Literature*, (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Romero, Carol. 1976. 'Children, Death and Literature', *Language Arts* 53.6: 674–678
- Rudd, David. 2004. 'Theorising and Theories: The Conditions of Possibility of Children's Literature', in *International Companion: Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London & New York: Routledge), pp. 29–43
- Seale, Clive. 1998. *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)
- Seelinger Trites, Roberta. 2000. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press)
- Sims, Michael. 2011. *The Story of Charlotte's Web: E.B. White and the Birth of a Children's Classic* (London: Bloomsbury)
- Stewart, Garrett. 1984. *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP)
- Stevenson, Deborah. 2009. 'Classics and Canons', in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. by M. O. Grenby and Andrea Immel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), pp. 108–123
- Varner, Gary R. 2006. *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature: The Re-Emergence of the Spirit of Nature from Ancient Times into Modern Society* (New York: Algora)
- Wall, Barbara. 1991. *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Whitehead, Claire (ed.). 2013. 'On the Fantastic', in *Critical Insights: The Fantastic* (Ipswich: Salem Press), pp. 1–20

Appendix



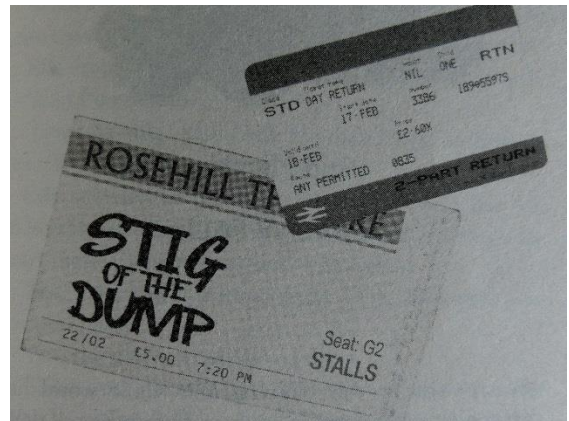
A: Dad's Cartoon (Nicholls 2015: 155)



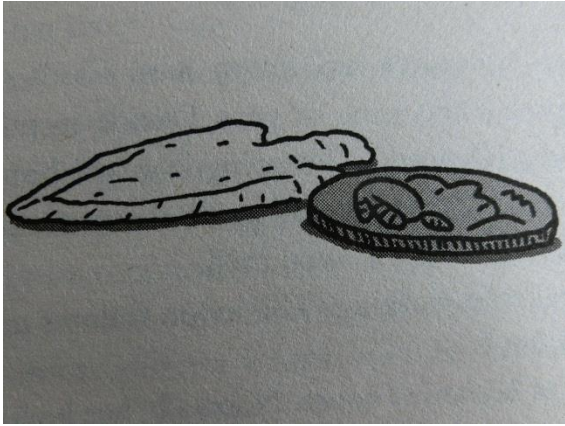
B: Ella's Picture (Nicholls 2015: 187)



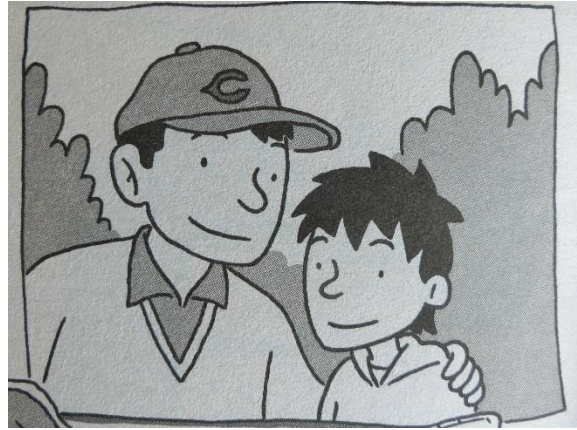
C: Derek's Drawing (Kuhlman 2008: 125)



D: Tickets (Nicholls 2015: 141)



E: Coin and Spearhead (Kuhlman 2008: 219)



F: Photograph (Kuhlman 2008: 234)