Abstract
This essay examines how the portrayal of death and grief in children’s literature changed between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. It looks at fictional work from each era: *Tuck Everlasting* and *Bridge to Terabithia* from the twentieth century and “The Little Match Girl” and “The Happy Prince” from the nineteenth century. Each text is explored in the context of the society in which it was written. This essay draws upon prior research conducted by scholars such as Anne Scott Macleod, Jack David Zipes, and Andrew Melrose, to name a few.

The stories written in the nineteenth century do not shy away from the topic or from depictions of death; instead, they use it to make a social commentary. “The Happy Prince” was written to shine a light on the materialistic and insensitive conduct of the upper classes while “The Little Match Girl” was used to inspire empathy for poor and mistreated children. The stories written in the twentieth century, however, are very careful in their depictions and references to death. Children were then viewed in a completely different way and were thought to be too emotionally delicate to handle such subjects. *Tuck Everlasting* was written so that children might understand the concept of death by depicting it as inevitable and as a necessary part of life while *The Bridge to Terabithia* dealt with emotional reactions to the death of loved ones.

The differences in children’s roles within society and the way children were treated changed dramatically from one century to the next, mostly due to the improved financial positions of the lower classes and the emergence of the middle class. These changes resulted in children being overly protected and distanced from unpleasant experiences such as death, which, in turn, led to the creation of a new literary genre called children’s literature.
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

The Importance of Dying in *Tuck Everlasting* ................................................................................... 1

Grief in *Bridge to Terabithia* ............................................................................................................... 5

Twentieth-Century Culture .................................................................................................................... 7

Death in the “The Little Match Girl” ..................................................................................................... 10

Death and Cultural Commentary in “The Happy Prince” .................................................................. 11

Nineteenth-Century England ............................................................................................................... 13

Comparisons ......................................................................................................................................... 15

Differences Between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century .................................................... 17

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 20

Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................... 22
**Introduction**

Death is a very popular topic in literary works. In today’s world, however, the subject of death is often considered too complex or too dark for young children to understand or handle. That has not always been the case, for as time passes, and cultures evolve so do the morals and values of society.

This thesis examines the changes in the views and the portrayal of death in children’s literature between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. This essay looks at four different children’s tales that focus on death, two of which were written in the nineteenth century and the other two, in the twentieth century.

The stories under consideration in this essay are *Tuck Everlasting*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, “The Little Match Girl”, and “The Happy Prince”. To begin, each story will be analysed separately, starting with *Tuck Everlasting* and then *Bridge to Terabithia*. Both were written in the twentieth century, so there will be an analysis of the literary culture of that period immediately following. After that will be a review and analysis of “The Little Match Girl” and “The Happy Prince” with an analysis of the nineteenth century literary culture following directly. Finally, all four stories will be compared and contrasted with one another before finally reaching the conclusion that the portrayal of death in children’s literature changed dramatically between the nineteenth and twentieth century due to changes in society’s view of what is considered appropriate material for children.

**The Importance of Dying in *Tuck Everlasting***

The novel *Tuck Everlasting* was written by Natalie Babbitt in 1975. It teaches children to accept getting older and dying as a big part of living. The story follows the protagonist, a young girl named Winnie Foster who lives a very protected and structured life. Her world changes dramatically when she is given the choice of everlasting life. She meets the Tuck family when she runs into the woods on her parents’ property and discovers that should she choose to drink water from a certain spring, then she too would stop ageing and become immortal. The Tuck family is very carefree and happy in contrast to the strict and lonely life Winnie has with her own family, making the thought of living with them permanently very appealing. However, each Tuck family member has a different view on their existence,
which gives Winnie and the reader pause to consider all the ramifications of everlasting life, both the positive and the negative. The Tuck family consists of four people who all have contrasting ideas on immortality.

The head of the family is Angus Tuck; he is the father of the two boys and Mae’s husband. He is very depressed about his inability to die and to be part of the natural circle of life. He likens life to a wheel that keeps turning and is supposed to constantly move, not stand still. This causes the character to become antisocial and standoffish. Being immortal, his family is no longer a part of that circle anymore; they are unnatural. He no longer wants to be part of society as he feels incredibly sad when it evolves and grows without him. He considers the family to be only spectators of life instead of participators as he says to Winnie: “‘You can’t have living without dying. So, you can’t call it living, what we got. We just are, we just be, like rocks beside the road’” (Babbitt 64). His meaning being that because they are not moving or evolving, then they are the same as inanimate objects.

While Angus continues to try to dissuade Winnie from drinking from the spring, it becomes clear that dying is one of the only subjects that he is passionate about anymore. Most of his dialogue is when he is trying to talk Winnie into accepting her own eventual death. In one such instance, he uses water as a metaphor for life:

“Life. Moving, growing, changing, never the same two minutes together. This water, you look out at it every morning, and it looks the same, but it ain't. All night long it's been moving, coming in through the stream back there to the west, slipping out through the stream down east here, always quiet, always new, moving on”. (Babbitt 61)

This quote is reminiscent of a much older analogy made by an old Greek philosopher named Heraclitus who said that: “‘you cannot step into the same river twice for other waters are continually flowing’” (Plato 1439). This can be interpreted in two ways though the sentiment is the same in both instances. Firstly, the river is constantly moving so a person cannot find the exact same water again. Secondly, the individual him or herself has changed. S/he has aged and gained experiences that have made him or her become a different person from the one who first stepped into the river.
Clearly, life is and should change and develop instead of remaining stagnant like the Tuck family. However, not all members of the Tuck family view their situation in the same manner.

For her part, Mae Tuck is a very sensible character and is much more optimistic regarding the family’s situation than her husband. Mae’s view is that it does not matter how long or how short their life is; they should live in the moment and deal with whatever comes their way. She believes that “Life's got to be lived, no matter how long or short. We just go along, like everybody else, one day at a time. Funny—we don't feel no different. Leastways, I don't. Sometimes I forget about what's happened to us, forget it altogether” (Babbitt 54). Mae feels that an individual should just accept that which s/he cannot change and simply make the most of whatever comes his or her way. It does not matter how long or how short a person expects to live; the only thing that truly matters is what s/he does with the time s/he is given. The Tucks’ personalities and emotions have not been altered, and Mae still considers the family to be normal human beings that are capable of having normal human experiences. Although this is a very positive way to look at their lives, there are characters other than Angus that also struggle to accept their fate.

Miles Tuck is Angus’ and Mae’s oldest son, and he seems to be the most responsible of the Tucks despite the fact that he lost the most due to the family’s inability to grow older. His wife left him and took their children with her because she believed that he had made a deal with the devil in order to gain eternal life when she noticed that he was not ageing with her. He agrees with his father on the importance of the circle of life and reiterates to Winnie the importance of following the natural course. When Winnie shares with him her wish for nothing to die, he very sensibly points out the overcrowding that would occur if nothing ever died: “If you think on it, you come to see there'd be so many creatures, including people, we'd all be squeezed in right up next to each other before long” (Babbitt 85). Evidently, he believes that the old must give way for the new because there simply is not enough space in the world for everyone to live forever. His only disagreement with Angus is that he does not think they need or should isolate themselves
from society. Miles believes that they should make the most of what they have been given and that they should be useful to others and help where and when they can.

Miles’ brother, Jesse Tuck, is the youngest of the family as he was only seventeen years old when he drank from the spring. Jesse is the only character who seems to be not only physically frozen in time but psychologically as well. He hints at this fact himself when he states: “But you see, Winnie Foster, when I told you before I’m a hundred and four years old, I was telling the truth. But I’m really only seventeen. And, so far as I know, I’ll stay seventeen till the end of the world” (Babbitt 41). Although this statement could simply be a reference to his never-changing physical appearance, it becomes apparent that his temperament is also that of a seventeen-year-old boy. His eternal youth allows him to enjoy his life, and he sees no problem in trying to get Winnie to drink the water when she turns seventeen, so they can marry and live together forever. The fact that he is the only Tuck to be completely fine with living forever suggests that the fear of growing up might be a stage in the development of children and young adults that they eventually grow out of. The only sign of a desire for something more grownup is his pleading for Winnie to join him and be his wife, suggesting that he feels a bit of lonely, a feeling that she is familiar with.

When we first meet Winnie Foster, the novel’s protagonist, she is a bored, lonely girl with no independence. This changes when she meets Jesse Tucker. She is suddenly free of the structured daily schedule she lived by in her family home, and her days suddenly become interesting, exciting, and new. She has her first crush on Jesse, and the thought of avoiding death and being with him forever is very appealing to her. However, after speaking with all the family members and after witnessing the look of longing and envy on Angus’ face when Mae shoots and kills a man to protect the spring’s secret, it becomes clear to her that the allure of eternal life would not last forever. What she and the reader learn throughout the story is the importance of being a part of the wheel of life. Death is just as important and necessary as birth. When the book was adapted for the screen, the narrator condenses the author’s entire point into two sentences: “Don’t be afraid of death, be afraid of an unlived life. You don’t have to live forever, you just have to live” (Russell).
This emphasizes the message that we are meant to be born, to live our life to the fullest, and then to die. To be afraid of that progression can lessen or even ruin the life that a person has in front of them. When Winnie decides not to drink from the spring, it is clear that she understands this reality and has let go of her fear of death.

**Grief in *Bridge to Terabithia***

Katherine Paterson wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* as a way to make sense of the death of her son’s friend, an eight-year-old girl, who was struck by lightning (Carratello et al. 6). The book revolves around a young girl named Leslie Burke and her neighbour, a young boy called Jesse Aarons. They become very close friends as they are both outcasts at school. Leslie creates an imaginary world called Terabithia for them to play in and encourages Jesse to use his imagination. The only way to access Terabithia, however, is to swing across a creek on an old rope that is hanging from a tree. One day, Jesse goes to Washington with his teacher after school, leaving Leslie by herself. She decides to go there alone, but as she swings across the creek, the rope snaps, and she falls into the water and dies very suddenly. Jesse comes home after a very happy outing to the news that his dearest and only friend is dead. The rest of the story revolves around him going through stages of grief and, in the end, accepting her death and learning to carry on.

Despite receiving the John Newbery Medal in 1978, as well as the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and the Le Grand Prix des Jeunes Lecteurs and the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award for being a great addition to literature for children, and despite the author being praised for writing a children’s novel that helps children cope with what was considered to be an adult situation at that time, the story was still the ninth most frequently criticized children’s book between the years 1990-2000 (Thomas 17). Some critics condemned or even banned the book because they objected to Leslie’s death, considering it inappropriate for children as the grieving process in the story is portrayed in a very realistic and grownup manner (Thomas 17).

Leslie’s death was very random and sudden, but it reflects the unpredictability of real life and death. Jesse’s realistic response to his friend’s death is also very likely a reflection of the author’s son’s emotional reaction when his own friend died. Jesse took Leslie’s death
very hard and went through stages of doubt and denial: “No...It's a lie Leslie ain't dead” (Paterson 156), before anger and grief overtook him. He became not only angry at the fact that she died but also at Leslie herself as well, asking her: “You think it's so great to die and make everyone cry and carry on. Well it ain't” (Paterson 169). Paterson herself has commented on the anger that Jesse goes through in the book and defended the story’s suitability for young readers:

I feel that Bridge is kind of a rehearsal that you go through to mourn somebody’s death that you care about. It’s very normal to be angry when someone you love dies—even angry at the person who dies... I’m always a little worried when somebody gives Bridge to somebody because someone has died, because I always think that it’s too late. They should’ve read it before that. (Thomas 17)

The story is intended to help children understand the process of grief and prepare them for the eventuality of a loved one’s passing. In Children’s Literature: An Issues Approach, Masha Rudman discusses Bridge to Terabithia as an example where characters do not respond to death with the typical storybook heroism. She describes it rather as a useful depiction of a normal child, passing through all the real and natural stages of grief. Children themselves seem to agree. After discussing the book with a few fifth-grade girls, the girls all seemed to feel positively about the story, stating that the book would likely help them through the grieving process should they ever lose a friend (Cullinan 9).

To shield children from experiencing difficult emotions can cripple their emotional growth and cause them greater emotional pain later. Jesse becomes frustrated by his own confused emotions and becomes angry at the adult’s behaviour: “He looked around at the room full of red-eyed adults. Look at me, he wanted to say to them. I'm not crying” (Paterson 168). Eventually coming to terms with his friend’s death, Jesse comes to the realization that the impact she had on his life and the lives of other people does not disappear or get invalidated by her death: “She wasn't there, so he must go for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him
in vision and strength” (Paterson 188). By continuing on, he could demonstrate the effect her life had on his and, in a way, that would keep a part of her alive.

**Twentieth-Century Culture**

The middle classes became more prominent in the twentieth century and with that came a lot of debate regarding the censoring of material designed for children. The rise of middle-class families brought a lot of change in how people viewed the general family dynamic, especially regarding the role of parenting (Macleod 175). Due to financial as well as other societal changes that emerged with the middle class, families were more able to run their households without having to depend on their children working (Macleod 175). This led to parents being able to provide children with a much safer, more relaxed, and comparatively easy childhood. Instead of having to work, children were allowed to use the time to learn and properly prepare for adult life (Macleod 175). This preparation steadily became synonymous with a formal education (Macleod 175). The middle classes kept getting increasingly concerned with ideas of what childhood should be and continued to lengthen that period, which they now referred to as childhood, as well as further restricting children’s exposure to certain materials (Macleod 175). This could be seen as a reaction to the atrocious behaviour and lack of care society had in regard to the children in previous centuries. However, soon thereafter, any contact children might have with matters such as violence, sex, coarse humour, death, vulgarity, and brutality became taboo in children’s literature (Macleod 179). These topics were all considered adult materials and were separated from the material considered acceptable for children, both in labelling and in location (Macleod 175).

In the early 1900’s, special children’s rooms were set up and added to many public libraries. That way, parents could be sure that their children would not come into contact with reading materials that were considered to be inappropriate. By the year 1915, children’s literature was being taught as its own subject in most library schools and teachers’ colleges (Macleod 178). Specialists in the subjects started to emerge as librarians became experts in the genre, and authors started to write either adult or children’s stories exclusively (Macleod 178). This separation lead to a clear line being drawn between those
materials that children were and were not allowed to read. The censorship of children’s literature was so unified that there were no in-depth academic discussions or arguments regarding the subject between the years of 1920 to 1960. Almost every parent seemed to be in agreement as to the necessity of censorship and therefore simply complied with whatever regulations were put in place as they were said to be for the protection of the child and a way to guard and teach them the correct values (Macleod 179). Though children’s literature was gaining popularity, there were still a lot of critics and scholars who did not see any value in studying it and looked down upon those who did engage with the topic.

Some critics of the academic study of children’s literature like to dismiss the genre completely. They think that the study is: “claiming a complexity or difficulty for something that is regarded, by definition, as simple, obvious and transparent, and, moreover, as valuable precisely for being so” (Lesnik-Oberstein 1). In other words, they considered the material to be self-evident, and that the only qualification required to be an expert in the field was to be an adult (Melrose 7). Therefore, they deemed the academic study of the topic to be a useless occupation. Others, such Professor Jacqueline Rose, questioned if it was even possible for such a thing as children’s literature to exist, as she stated:

Children’s fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense) but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which rarely speaks. This is the impossible relation between adult and child ... Children’s fiction is clearly about the relation between adult and child, but it has remarkable characteristics of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. (Melrose 8)

In this statement, she is addressing the fact that the adults clearly have all the power over deciding what is considered appropriate for children and control what the latter are allowed to know and see. Through the creation of children’s literature as a genre and in having authors that specialize in writing children’s stories, it has established a clear power structure that gives the adults all the control and the children have little-to-no power. Adults
cannot truly understand the child’s mental and emotional capacity as they have forgotten their own adolescence and tend to underestimate them. Children are also unable to truly analyse their own capabilities and covey it to adults. Therefore, there will always be space between them. Indeed, Maria Nikolajeva concurs:

The child-adult imbalance is most tangibly manifested in the relationship between the ostensibly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character... essentially, nowhere else are power structures as obvious as they are in... the culture adults produce for children... all of which are created by those in power for the powerless. (Melrose 6)

This imbalance of power between children and adults is natural, and it is meant to be for the latter’s protection. However, whenever there is such an imbalance of power, there is room for a certain amount of abuse of power that can go unnoticed. Children are increasingly being defined by the culture that has been created by adults around childhood, which has led to “adult-given, children-centric commodification” (Melrose 6). Children are clearly different from adults, but it has been discovered that they think and use reason in the exact same manner as adults do from very early on (Melrose 8). The reason that they seem less able to use logic is because they are “easily misled in their logic by interfering variables” (Melrose 8) and have a harder time containing information and using it in a logical way (Melrose 8). Children seem to be treated by adults as something very different from them, something “other”; they are different but only in regard to the fact that they lack the experience that adults have acquired over time (Melrose 9). Adults, for their part, get to decide when, and if, children are given access to certain information or experiences. Yet many parents seem to agree and be happy with the creation of the new genre, children’s literature, and the limitations it places on the child’s experience.

This general consensus in parental views seems apparent because even though there was a clear distaste for the preoccupation that the nineteenth century had with the moral lessons depicted in books during that era, twentieth-century publishers, writers, and reviewers were all interested in depicting what they called “values” in children’s literature (Macleod 179). There were a few instances of outrage against certain comic books or other
material that was considered to be tacky and below standard. These works included the stories of *Nancy Drew* and the *Hardy Boys*. Such material was only found in select stores and most libraries refused to buy or stock them. Parents seemed to agree on the evils of exposing such material to children, and few parents seemed to point out the clear censoring of the material made available for children (Macleod 178).

After the Second World War ended in 1945, there was a sudden increase in the interest relating to the study of children’s literature and the criticism of children’s books. This was part of the general increase in the study of popular culture that emerged after the war (Lesnik-Oberstein 1). The increased academic interest in the subject created its own undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses dedicated to children’s literature. Textbooks were published, and conferences held, and new job positions were created at universities as academic teaching on the subject and research positions became available (Lesnik-Oberstein 1).

Although some taboo subjects were kept strictly for adults, there were some that could be presented in specific ways. Not all restrictions were followed to the letter in the 1960s, such as violence or death. Violence was allowed in many cowboy stories such as the very popular series of *Lucky Luke*. In these stories, however, it is always the bad men that got hurt. Similarly, death was restricted to the child’s peripheral vision. It was something that happened off stage, either in the past or away from the protagonist’s or narrator’s visual perspective. If a character was killed in a children’s story during the twentieth century, it was a character that was disliked, and s/he was killed in such a way as to be either funny or done in such a way as to not cause distress to the reader (Macleod 179).

**Death in the “The Little Match Girl”**

“The Little Match Girl” is a short story written and published by Hans Christian Andersen in 1845. The story follows a nameless young girl who is so poor that she has neither a hat on her head nor proper shoes on her feet and must sell matches on the street in the dead of winter. Her father is abusive, which makes her afraid of going home empty-handed as she has not sold any matches and does not have a single cent on her. The story takes place on a cold New Year’s Eve in the 1840s and paints a dismal picture of the poor who must sit by
and observe the festivities around them. When she is freezing to death, she tries to light the matches in order to warm herself, but she starts to hallucinate happy things when she stares at the flames. The reader gets a clear foreboding that she is dying when she sees a shooting star and the little girl thinks: “Someone is just dead!” (Andersen 5). The reader is immediately left with the knowledge that the one that is dying is she. The little girl sees her grandmother who has died standing before her, and she begs her grandmother to take her. Her grandmother, looking both beautiful and bright, takes the little girl into her arms, and they fly away to the afterlife as the girl dies from hypothermia. Contrasting the beautiful image that the girl creates of her own death, the reader is immediately thereafter given a severe and brutal image of the little girl’s dead body that was left behind in the street.

The story portrays the life experience of the little girl as painful misery while depicting her experience of death as both beautiful and happy. The moral of the story is twofold. On the one hand, it inspires empathy towards those less fortunate, teaching children to show kindness towards those around them whilst also shocking adults into doing the same and inspiring the public towards social intervention. On the other hand, it also portrays death itself as a very positive experience. Thus, it goes beyond Tuck Everlastings’ moral of accepting death as the eventual progression of life by depicting death as something beautiful and something to look forward to in a way. It can be debated whether the ending is happy or not. The modern reader experiences the death of the little girl as a very unhappy ending to an unhappy tale while the character itself experiences it as a relief from a gloomy life.

**Death and Cultural Commentary in “The Happy Prince”**

Written in 1888 by Oscar Wilde, the short story “The Happy Prince” is about a prince who was always very happy because he was kept in ignorance and sheltered behind palace walls for his whole life, earning him the nickname The Happy Prince. After his death, which is never explained and is simply stated as a matter-of-fact occurrence, the people in charge decide to build a beautiful statue in his likeness on a high column overlooking the city below. The statue is covered in golden leaves; it has beautiful sapphires for eyes, and there is a ruby attached to the hilt of his sword. The statue is considered to be quite beautiful due
to the jewels adorning it. Everybody loves the statue, but because of the view from the top of the pillar, for the first time, the prince is able to view the misery and poverty-stricken society outside the palace walls.

The once-happy prince becomes very sad and begins to cry. A bird passing by is touched by the prince’s willingness to help others and delays his flight to Egypt. The bird helps the prince by plucking off all the jewels and the golden leaves and distributing them to the poor people in order to alleviate some of their pain. After the bird has exhausted itself helping the prince, he realizes that he has stayed too long. He did not want to leave the prince because he loved him. With a kiss goodbye, the bird falls down at the prince’s feet and dies from exposure, having decided to help the prince instead of flying away to a safer and warmer climate: “It is not to Egypt that I am going,” said the Swallow. ‘I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?’” (Wilde 11). The prince feels so sad that his friend is dead that his lead heart breaks. When the people in charge notice how the statue has been stripped of its wealth, they decide to take it down as it is no longer considered beautiful. When they melt the statue in order to make another, the broken heart refuses to melt and ends up being thrown away with the dead body of the Swallow. In heaven, God commands one of his angels to go down and retrieve two of the most precious things from the city. The angel retrieves the swallow and the broken heart, and God says: “‘You have rightly chosen,’ said God, ‘for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me’” (Wilde 11).

This view that God has of the bird and the prince contrasts with the materialistic and shallow view of the upper-class people in the town and depicts death as a happier ending than it would be if left out.

In this story, Wilde uses the fairy-tale format in order to give a social commentary. The main topics in this story are social injustices and sacrifices, death being the highest price that is paid. The prince gives away all that he has, including his eyes in order to help those that he sees suffering. The bird does the same as he gives up his life, not because he expects any payment or praise but because he enjoys the warm feeling that comes after helping someone and because he loves the prince and does not want to leave him. There are
some critics, however, who say that the story is not about sacrifice but mercy (Griswold 103).

Bruno Bettelheim, a psychologist known for working with emotionally disturbed children, published an article in 1973 where he suggested that mercy is the moral of the story, not sacrifice, because mercy encompasses selfishness while sacrifice includes some special benefit (Griswold 103). He asserts:

the virtue of children's literature lies in the lessons it teaches about sacrifice. A clear understanding of the idea of sacrifice as a kind of self-discipline that provides for future rewards is essential to a critical reading of Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince" because the tale deliberately advocates mercy as an alternative to sacrifice. (Griswold 103)

In some ways, this story is a reference to Jesus’ word: “Go learn the meaning of the words—What I want is mercy, not sacrifice” (Griswold 103). In his view, the prince and the bird are thus not sacrificing anything but showing mercy on the less fortunate and therefore receiving the grace of God, something that the council people will not get due to their self-serving ways and their lack of mercy.

The materialistic people in charge take down the statue once it is stripped. According to them, “As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful” (Wilde 11). Therefore, they are no longer interested in the prince and do not care about him. Only his outward appearance matters to them, and once he is no longer attractive, he is no longer worth looking at or remembering. They also care little for the dead body of bird and are outraged that the bird had dared to die there, proclaiming: “We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here” (Wild 11). Both the death of the prince and the death of the bird are of no concern to anyone in the story except God and his angels, for they value the beauty within.

**Nineteenth-Century England**

Death in nineteenth-century literature was, in general, viewed to be more of a preserver of life rather than its destroyer. When people died in Victorian literature, especially in those
cases where those that died were children, their death was usually depicted in such a way as to be: “clean, quiet, immobile and permanent” (Plotz 3). They thought that the best way to respond to death was to reinstate presence: “Only a restored presence can restore meaning” (Plotz 21). The depiction of the death of children in particular was a way of immortalizing them to free them from the tragedy of real life in the nineteenth century (Plotz 32). By that reasoning, death became not a representation of absence but that of a restored and increased presence (Plotz 21, 32). The subject of death was very important during this time:

Not only is the theme pervasive in some of the most important works of the first golden age of children's literature, but also the high tide of cultural concern with death is contemporary with the emergence of children's literature as a recognized genre. Literary representations of childhood death are part of the enabling conditions for creating and recognizing children's literature (Plotz 3-4).

This social view on death during the nineteenth century explains the depiction of death in children’s literature at that time, which modern society now considers to be graphic and inappropriate for children. It was a reflection of society’s belief of how death was to be regarded as well as a social commentary, which, during that time, was not a pleasant thing for the lower classes. Mary Louisa Molesworth, who was a writer of children’s stories in the nineteenth century, argued that to be a successful writer for children, the children’s stories could not be free of pain and conflict:

underlying the sad things, and the wrong things, and the perplexing things … there must be a belief in the brighter side – in goodness, happiness and beauty – as the real background after all. And anyone who does not feel … that this ‘optimism’ is well-founded, had better leave writing for children alone (Sutphin 53).

This argument suggests that the stories should contain some kind of resolution and eventual comfort after painful or harrowing situations (Sutphin 53). Therefore, children’s stories were often used as social commentary by drawing upon the real situation of the poor.

Many authors such as Oscar Wilde and Hans Christian Andersen used their stories to make social commentary in the hope of creating a reaction that might inspire social
change. The story of “The Happy Prince” very accurately depicted the lack of care and empathy the upper classes showed towards the lower classes while the story of the “Little Match Girl” accurately reflected the deplorable situations and sufferings many poor children were subjected to during Victorian times. Stories in this era rarely depicted children as carefree (Sutphin 52). Prior to the passing of the Children’s Charter in 1889, there was no law that protected children from neglect. Parents or guardians were only punished under the charge of assault if the health or life of the child was in great danger (Flegel 1). Theorists such as Lloyd DeMause stated that the social progress of a society was something that could be viewed by examining its progress in the humane treatment and handling of children (Flegel 10).

Comparisons
The German professor, Hans-Heino Ewers, who has done extensive research into the history of children’s literature, argues that children's literature has always been related to educating them on the world (Plotz 4). That certainly seems to have been true throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Literature was, and still is, a very powerful way of educating children (Plotz 21). The view of childhood and the educational aspects of telling or reading fictional stories has always been considered to be very important for the development of the genre of children's literature (Plotz 21).

Deciding what can be classified as a children’s story however has only been under careful consideration since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Plotz 21). What is, or should be, appropriate material for young children has been debated and argued over ever since (Plotz 21). That is, however, usually a matter of personal opinion and changes significantly depending on where the person lives, the society, and the prevalent view on childhood at any given time.

Between the years 1800 and 1950, children held a very different cultural position from what came both before and after that time (Plotz 4). This is reflected in what was written and selected as suitable material for children at any given time. Some scholars have come to the conclusion that children's literature may merely be a recommended list of stories for adults, who then decide what material they wish to introduce to their children
(Nikolajeva ix). Others question the academic study of children’s literature as a valid research:

even though academic courses and publications in the field now have a considerable volume and history, it is also still unclear even within the field itself, and despite extensive debates on the issue, what exactly constitutes an ‘academic’ study of children’s literature and its criticism as opposed to, say, educational or librarianship courses and publications on children’s fiction. In fact, it is disputed whether such a separation is either possible or desirable. (Lesnik-Oberstein 1)

The most basic way of describing the study of children’s literature is that it aims to find a way to make informed choices regarding the materials and their possible emotional or psychological consequences (Lesnik-Oberstein 3). Professor Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, who was, among other things, the director of the Graduate Centre for International Research in Childhood, argues that it does not matter how a person views the subject, for no matter how an individual defines it, it comes down to the same thing:

this aim or goal – the choosing of good books for children – does not change from critic to critic, no matter how much they claim that they will be doing things differently, or applying new approaches or methodologies. The problem, I suggest, that they see in prior or other criticism is that, somehow, the wrong books are being selected for children, in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons, and the role of the new or recent theory, as they will define and use it, is to show how and why to make the right choices instead. (Lesnik-Oberstein 5)

This suggests that even though critics argue over prior research in the field, or the validity of researching the subject itself, the goal of the study does not change. What does change is the way in which academics regard the views and the conclusions of prior studies. A good
example of the changes in the topics listed as unsuitable for children can be seen in the classification of Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince”.

**Differences Between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century**

Even though “The Happy Prince” was originally published in the nineteenth century as a children’s story and was noted by experts such as professor Jerome Griswold, as having a very good moral influence on children, it was published again in 2003 and yet again in 2016 in a new edition filled with other short stories as *Bedtime Stories for Grown-ups* (Griswold 103). This implies perhaps that, by that time, the story was no longer considered to be appropriate material for young readers. “The Happy Prince” is a sad story and gives a very stark and unpleasant view of society, but it includes no graphic details or scary monsters intended to frighten children; it is, however, likely to make them feel sad.

Similarly, the story of “The Little Match Girl” by Andersen does not have any great, scary, or gruesome depictions either, other than the brief description of the little girl laying dead in the street at the very end. The people around the girl seem cruel and uncaring as they ignored her before she died and dismissed her afterwards. This was, however, the author’s intention in order to cast light on the very real societal injustices at that time. The question then becomes: does the manner in which a character dies affect a story’s perceived suitability for younger readers, or is it simply the presence of death, in general, no matter how it is presented, that affects its appropriateness? Is it death that is considered unsuitable, or is it the emotional reaction that follows, namely, sadness?

The response to *Bridge to Terabithia*, which was published in the late twentieth century, seems to indicate that its depiction does not truly matter; instead, it is the emotional connection and the response of the reader to death that is considered unsuitable. The death of the girl in *Bridge to Terabithia* is not described or portrayed in any way; the reader is not privy to it. It is only the character’s reaction to the news which is depicted and even that was received with criticism due to the truly emotional reaction of the young boy. This seems to indicate that the mere depiction of real sadness or grief was not considered appropriate material for young children. When earlier stories from the nineteenth century did not fit the new restrictions placed on the children’s reading material, they were either
moved to the grown-up section of libraries, or the story was changed and republished in a more appropriate form.

A very good example of how stories were rewritten and republished to fit the new restrictions could be seen in 1944, when Gustaf Adolf Tenggren, who was a Swedish-American illustrator who worked as chief illustrator for the Walt Disney Company in the 1930’s, published a re-interpreted version of Hans Christian Andersen’s story, “The Little Match Girl.” He deleted both the mention of the domestic abuse the little girl suffered at the hands of her father as well as the death scene at the end. The story was changed so that it ended with the little girl waking up from a dream in a comfortable bed, instead of freezing to death in the street (Nelson 106). This not only eliminated any negative emotional reaction a reader might have but also took out all of the social commentary, which was the story’s original intent. Not only does this completely change the author’s message, but it also could be seen as a clear case of censoring.

It has been said that to overly manage childhood is to place restrictions on children’s knowledge and that this, in turn, stops them from seeing certain aspects of society (Grenz 177). This can be mirrored with the image of the prince in “The Happy Prince” before he died. The prince is protected behind the palace walls and kept happy only by his ignorance of real life. The story clearly conveys that enlightenment is preferable to ignorance regardless of the negative emotions that may come with it, or the age of the individual. This provides an example of the change in how society perceived the role and the capabilities of children between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Much of that change seems to be in the way adults view children’s emotional growth and perceived capabilities:

the sentimental death scenes of the nineteenth century were certainly out of favour in the twentieth century, and it is clear that children’s book people were concerned that the subject might be harrowing to children unless carefully handled. For this reason, children rarely died in children’s books, and the death of parents, if it occurred at all, took place off-stage or in the past. (Macleod 179)
Although death was mentioned in some children’s stories during the twentieth century, it was only deemed acceptable if it did not emotionally impact the reader in any way. Therefore, the most common depiction of death was usually that of the parents of the main characters that died before the beginning of the story, such as Harry Potter’s parents in the eponymous series. Bridge to Terabithia portrayed the death off-stage, and therefore there is no description of it while Tuck Everlasting has one death scene where a very unlikable character is shot and killed. The depiction is brief and has no emotional impact on the reader. This is in stark contrast to the authors of children’s stories in the nineteenth century, however, who had no qualms about writing emotionally-challenging stories. They used sadness, grief, and anger in order to make social commentary and to educate children on moral virtues.

This censoring of death in children’s stories shows the general increase in restrictions placed on children in the twentieth century as Jack Zipes states:

I have always written with the hope that childhood might be redeemed, not innocent childhood, but a childhood rich in adventure and opportunities for self-exploration and self-determination. Instead, I witness a growing regulation and standardization of children’s lives that undermine the very sincere concern parents have for their young. (Zipes 5)

Zipes, who has studied and published research on folklore and fairy tales, made this statement in 2001. He suggests that there has been such an extreme and abrupt change in the way adults view childhood between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that society has now gone beyond that which might be considered a healthy level of protective concern and has overcorrected itself, going from one extreme to another. These restrictions hinder children’s exploration of their own emotional capabilities, therefore hindering their emotional growth. This could result in young adults or grownups being unsure of how to deal with negative emotions, therefore causing greater trauma later in life.
**Conclusion**

When studying a controversial theme in children’s literature, it is important to take into consideration the social context in which the stories under consideration were written. Death is a natural process of life. However, how societies regard it has gone through tremendous changes between the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Death was considered to be a normal everyday occurrence in the nineteenth century, and depictions of death in popular literary works were the norm. The separation between adult and adolescent literature did not come into place until the twentieth century. Consequently, death figured in many children’s stories before that time. It was during this later period that society began to consider and categorize what was considered suitable for children and young adults. This was also influenced by the change in how childhood in general was perceived.

Society’s view on childhood in general went through great changes with the rise of the middle classes. Gradually, the length of time in which children were considered minors or under age was extended as parents became increasingly protective of their children and better able to financially provide for them and offer them a more leisurely childhood. That extra time was dedicated to educating and preparing children for adult life instead. Though formal classrooms and educational texts became the main source of what was and is still considered education, society has always used fictional stories to school children on the world and to instil in them what was and is considered good values or moral judgement.

Both “The Happy Prince” and the “Little Match Girl” are children’s stories in which death is depicted in a frank manner, reflecting the norm in the nineteenth century where it was common for children to be overworked and abused. In contrast, both *Tuck Everlasting* and *Bridge to Terabithia* reflect the changes in society’s views on death. When these books were published, the topic had become taboo in children’s literature, and its depiction was only considered acceptable if it was portrayed with enough emotional distance from the reader so as to not cause any negative emotion. Although some consider this censoring of material acceptable as a way to protect children, prolong their childhood, and keep them
happy, others argue that society has overcorrected itself and that these restrictions on portrayal of death may only be hindering the emotional growth of children.

Regardless of one’s opinion on the subject, it is clear that the general views on the topic of death in children’s literature have changed dramatically between the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Both the social and financial changes in society caused literature to be separated between material that was deemed appropriate for children and content that should be exclusively available to adults. This effectively reduced the presence of death and the effects of dying in the children’s stories.
Guðmundsdóttir 22

Works Cited


