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Mortality within Children's Literature: Fable versus Realism in the
Cases of *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia*

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Introduction

Mortality can be a difficult subject to talk about even among adults, yet such conversations need to be had with children in order to navigate the pain, anxiety, and questioning that comes along with a personal experience of death. The age and maturity of the child often serves as the most important factor to consider when attempting to bring these topics into conversation at home or in the classroom. Imaginative literature acts as a supporting tool for facilitating these harsh conversations and constitute a place where children can learn independently about mortality and grief with emotional freedom. The literature provides the student the option for interpersonal conversation and solitary processing which are both important when being educated on sensitive topics. While having the freedom of the latter is important, it's also important to have the presence of a trusted individual to assist with grief and questioning. Both the literature and the conversations must be present in order for children to fully grasp this concept. They are not as successful when independent from one another. Children's literature has become a resource for children and young teens to turn to for advice and comfort in knowing they are not alone in their experiences. This literature can help answer questions that children have about mortality or be an outlet for learning how to grieve the death of a beloved pet, friend, relative, or close household family member. Reading this literature takes the focus away from the child and places it onto a relatable character which can provide healthy and safe distances to process at their own pace.

Although many pieces of children's literature that contain elements of mortality have been very popular in homes and classrooms for over half a century, teachers and parents are still

in the process of learning how to use it at its full potential in educating students about mortality as a precaution or as a coping mechanism. Research on mortality in children's literature in the 1970s became extensive after the publication of *Charlotte's Web* (1952), but little attention has been paid to the distinctive importance of different literary forms for navigating these conversations with children. In what follows, this essay will build on the work of scholars in identifying important stages of child psychological development and the relation of these stages to children's ability to understand important concepts around death. I will then explore the relationship of the literary forms of fable and realism to these stages of intellectual and emotional maturity. Both pedagogical and psychological implications of these two forms, fable and realism, are explored in this essay using *Charlotte's Web*, the now classic fable formed novel of a young pig and a barn spider who saves his life due to her authorship, and *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977); a realistic fiction novel which focuses on the fantastical journey of two fifth graders. Both novels present plots which involve the death of a beloved friend to a young character and how the character left behind then grieves, but their forms and the way the novels are presented lend themselves to different ages of children. *Charlotte's Web* is typically first presented to students in second grade or ages seven and eight, while *Bridge to Terabithia* would not be presented until fifth grade or ages ten and eleven. This thesis will discuss why these texts are presented to these age groups and why the form and nature of the characters presented effectively designates the appropriateness. Understanding why these texts are psychologically suitable for different audiences is helpful for teaching pedagogy and parental approaches to the subject of death.

While both *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* belong in children's fiction, they differ in how they present grief and mortality. A fable dealing with a small death, like a spider, is much easier for younger children to digest. By contrast, a realistic novel that presents a human

death of someone the same age as its young readers provokes more complex feelings and requires a certain amount of maturity. The implications of the generic differences between fable and realism in tragic children's literature is an under-researched topic. However, it is one that is important for parents and teachers to understand when choosing such texts for their children. A comparison of the complexity of *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* reveals how the themes of grief and death can impact readers.

A Literature of Their Own: The History of Mortality in Children's Literature

In order to understand why *Charlotte's Web* became such an important text so widely used among teachers and parents, it is necessary to understand the history of mortality and tragedy in children's literature. This history shows how education about death for young children has evolved in the Western world in the last several centuries and shows the break the theme took and those implications. After the fifteenth century when books were being printed for the first time, children did not yet have a genre to themselves. Once this was established, children were then given the freedom to learn independently from supervision and understand ideas without the opinions of their parents or teachers. This history also explains why research in psychology and pedagogy of tragic children's literature did not develop until the 1970s and why there was a large spike in the publication of these texts at the time.

The concept of writing specifically to children for their enjoyment and education is a fairly new one considering the extensive history of all literary works. It was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that children became a targeted audience for literature. Ever since the emergence of children's literature, death has always remained a predominantly used and accepted theme. Before this, when children did not have literature of their own; all elements of death were learned from adult literature such as biblical or religious texts, fables, legends, and

folk tales, and most obviously, from the death happening around them (Butler 105). During this span of a few hundred years when authors found a need for children's literature, mortality rates were extreme, especially in children and infants. Writing to children in the Western world ensured that children who died young were educated in "Christian moral instruction," i.e., preparing children for a heavenly afterlife by educating them on death and how they should live according to biblical texts (Handy). Most books written in these earlier periods dealt with themes of death regularly due to its commonality, so it would not be uncommon to find children's novels and stories that contain tragic events. *The New England Primer*, which is recognized as one of the earliest written pieces of American children's literature in 1690, contained words for each letter of the alphabet.

X: Xerxes did die

And so must I

Y: While youth do cheer

Death may be near (Handy)

Even as children were learning their alphabet, the reality of mortality remained present. It was a common subject to be discussed and wondered upon, therefore, authors and parents used this literature often to teach Christianity. It is apparent that these older pieces of literature intended for young readers did not concern themselves as much with the emotional aspect of death seen in more current literature. This children's literature focused more on the spiritual aspects of death and was considered a common topic that was discussed often even among children (Handy).

While the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries held a lot of beautiful and classically renowned literature, "no one would say that children's literature was one of the era's glories" (Handy).

As the themes and plots of mortality progressed into the nineteenth century, popular

authors like Louisa May Alcott, Lewis Carroll, L. Frank Baum, and Charles Dickens created captivating and wondrous stories for young readers in the genres of fantasy, adventure, and realistic fiction. While these stories handle death scenes with more emotional responses, such as scenes of grief, than the Christian morality tales that preceded them, they were not typically written for the purposes of educating children about death specifically like we see many authors doing today; although, they were very relatable texts and could be used for coping. Since death rates were much higher, educating children about death happened by naturally experiencing it rather than having to read about it. Judith Moss argues that current writers of children's literature differ from writers such as Dickens and Alcott. She says this is because many writers from older periods often wrote with less care about the sensitivity and emotion that comes along with death due to the regularity of it as a "familiar event" (Moss 530). Although Moss's point regarding death as a familiar event in this period is true, it does not give these stories the credit they deserve. These novels and children's stories are still being read and enjoyed today at home and in the classroom. They were not necessarily written as teaching tools and do not contain the same extent of grief and acceptance, but they can be scaffolded in such a way with support to provide similar lessons that are taught with more recent publications. Scaffolding refers to supports set in place to move children towards learning how to learn on their own. If we correctly provide students with these skills by asking thoughtful questions they can begin to learn more independently with texts like these.

After the turn of the twentieth century, instances of death in stories written for children declined dramatically. Evelyn Swenson marks Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) as the last popular novel directed at young audiences to feature such detailed elements of death up until the 1950s or so (Swenson 402). However, this novel is not directed entirely towards young

children, rather children, teens, and young adults as a coming of age story. “Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder delineate the more personal passage from girlhood to womanhood; they show children how growing up is done, but from the inside, as story, not prescription” (Handy). While this text is the last designated piece of children’s literature containing mortality, that is not one of its main purposes. Its main purpose was to be a bildungsroman, not a mortality tale. Arguably, *Charlotte’s Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* also carry more themes and purpose than just education relating to death; nevertheless, until texts such as these, *Little Women* remained one of the last popular pieces of young adult or children’s literature to tackle such difficult content.

In the first half of the 20th century, children were still continuing to read about death, but there were not quite as many novels being published like they were in the previous century. Children would read from textbooks that contained poems or short stories about death in the classroom up until the 1920’s. The theme was beginning to slowly decline and in the late 1940’s all the way into the 1970’s the theme was nearly non-existent in new publications (Lamers 531). Authors and parents began to agree that children were simply “‘too young to understand’ that they ‘don’t think about such things anyway’” (Swenson 401). This odd drop in the themes of mortality reflected a lot of suspicions at the time as to whether or not children could handle these stories. Some possibilities of this drop could have been the result of a change in parenting style that emerged in the mid twentieth century.

During this period, new ideas of what childhood should look like were expanding, and parents began instating more protected and sheltered lives for their children. The thought of death was too brutal to expose children to and it would violate the innocence so many parents were trying to keep. Stories began reinstating ideas of death slowly by having scenes of orphans

or children who had a parent die before the story took place, but rarely did a story express the heartbreak the characters felt and have the reader experience the grieving process along with the character (Swenson 401). For this reason, E.B. White's publication of *Charlotte's Web*, targeting children ages six through nine, became a huge success and is now a classic piece of literature due to its originality in the theme that was not being published at the time. The publishers of *Charlotte's Web* initially refused to publish this text unless White allowed Charlotte to live and many reviewers criticized the novel when it was released for being inappropriate. However, it soon became and remained, an instant classic (Lamers 531).

Metaphor and the Return of Mortality in Children's Literature

Following the publication of *Charlotte's Web*, Margaret Wise Brown's picture book, *The Dead Bird* (1958), was published and is credited by John W. Stewig as the first published book to target very young children, ages three through five, on the topic of death and "broke publishing ground" (Gibson and Zaidman 232). Following White on the trend of educating children about mortality, Brown targeted an even younger audience with a very simple story about children burying a bird they find in a park, finally accepting its death, and ultimately forgetting their sadness. *The Dead Bird* and *Charlotte's Web* both deal with concepts of death through animals as a way to explain the death of all creatures. While *Charlotte's Web* does this through metaphorical fable and *The Dead Bird* uses an animal realistically, they both use this technique of animal characters. Such animal stories like these used metaphorical ways to reintroduce the long-neglected subject of death back into children's literature.

Metaphors and extended allegories have both been used in literature to tell a factual story within a fictional story. Traditionally, this writing was often used as a way to simplify a larger problem in society or humanity into a more enjoyable format. Using representations through

metaphor or allegory can often present better to children because the fictional story is relatable and entertaining, but the story itself can provide life long lessons and deeper themes beyond surface level. After children's literature went through a long and unexplained lull with including death in narrative, authors had to find a way to slowly bring it back into the picture. These authors were able to get their books recognized because they were able to hide the tabooed subject of death within animal stories, and in the case of *Charlotte's Web* particularly, behind a kid friendly fable. Authors like these and people who followed them with representations of homosexuality or dystopian societies broke barriers of what could be acceptable for children by representing them with metaphors (Nikolajeva 222-223). This concept of using metaphors for young children has become somewhat of a norm for how to explain difficult topics to young children. It is important to note, however, that such texts often need scaffolding by parents or teachers so students can understand the metaphor behind the text -- Charlotte does not have to refer to spider deaths, but can represent our friends or loved ones who leave us. Without lessons and scaffolding, young children may miss these helpful and important aspects of the text. If children's literature is used correctly in a classroom, it can be a gateway tool to talking about any issues students may be facing. Students can learn from a character's methods of coping, grieving, and confrontation through such texts (Swiss 691-694). In order for students to learn from these texts, they must first be given texts which are not deemed appropriate by reading level alone, but also by the form and content so it can meet their developmental demands. The form of a text will be one key indicator of what level of maturity it is suitable for.

Child Psychology and the Conceptualization of Death

When deciding how a text like this should be used for the reader, there are many factors to address before teaching it or deciding which texts are actually appropriate for students

regardless of reading levels, but based on emotional maturity. Children experience multiple components of comprehending mortality before it fully develops in late childhood or early teen years. Every child will experience five components at different points in their lives depending on maturity, culture, cognitive ability, and exposure, but they remain relatively similar for a majority of people (Kenyon 7). These five components include: universality, irreversibility, non-functionality, causality, and personal mortality (Kenyon 1). Along with the components, there are also emotional responses and actions that occur as a child matures and begins to understand life versus death more clearly in an overall sense.

Universality refers to understanding that all things that live must eventually die and that the process of death is inevitable. This component is most typically grasped when a child is between ages five and seven (Kenyon 65 & 68). Before this earliest component is acquired and a child lacks all components entirely as a toddler, the only understanding they have is that people are leaving them. The act does not seem permanent as people will typically return and toddlers do not have any of the five listed components (“Stanford”). Even with experience of deaths in their family, toddlers are not able to conceptualize the idea in much capacity. Age three is the earliest a child will begin to develop the basic concept of death as a changed state, but without having any of the components.

Non-functionality seems like a common sense aspect of death to an adult or even to a child who has developed each component, but to the children who are still learning it, it can be frightening and confusing. Non-functionality refers to the understanding that all functions that existed in life must cease once one has passed away (Kenyon 65). This component fluctuates quite a bit throughout childhood and even into adulthood and is dependable upon culture; it is most commonly developed between ages five and seven. Children as young as three years old

have been known to understand that you no longer walk and talk after you die, but as they mature, many ideas of non-functionality are influenced by religion and culture having to deal with the afterlife. If the component is addressed and fully developed before a child has religious understandings, it is easier for them to separate the physical body and its functions from a spiritual body (Kenyon 71).

Along with the previous two components, irreversibility also develops between ages five and seven for most children. When a child gains this component, they can comprehend that once dead, living things cannot come back to life. This is the permanence component which very young children typically lack and it often develops through experience. At this age when children have established this component, they often struggle with it because they sense guilt from within about why people die. This guilt stems from lacking one of the later components, causality. As children enter the pre-school and kindergarten age they begin to see some permanence in death, especially if it happens around them. Sadly, these young children often do not understand the phenomenon and blame themselves or feel guilty. A lack of understanding causality produces guilt--understanding what causes people and other living beings to die. This age is perfect to bring in texts such as *The Dead Bird*, which will help children understand how death is no fault of their own; it can also be an introduction to universality if the child still lacks this component. Reading this text involving the death of a bird can bring to light the universal concept of death, meaning it is the fate for all living beings, but the way it happens in the story proves that the children had no control over its cause. When using this text in the classroom, simple discussions and activities that help evolve a deeper understanding of how this text can relate to real life and it can begin to mature their existing understanding of components.

As previously stated, causality is a component that, until matured, causes children to blame themselves for death. This is due to the fact that causality is understanding what causes death (Kenyon 65). Children and adults alike can fluctuate in their understanding of this component, and it is one that typically develops later on in childhood between ages eight and ten (Kenyon 68). Because there are so many possibilities as to why people die, it can be difficult for any person to grasp why the person has died. This component deepens in complexity when dealing with culture as well, similarly to non-functionality. Often, in various religions, people believe in a higher power of sorts and they tend to question the spiritual meaning behind death instead of a biological one. This component is not typically handled in depth in young children's texts due to its maturation in development.

The final component which develops at a later age is personal mortality. Personal mortality simply means that the child understands that they, along with every other living being, will also die (Kenyon 65). Since this component stems from universality, a child must have a clear understanding of universality before they can comprehend personal mortality. With that being said, this component is dependent on understanding universality and can be obtained anytime after it has developed regardless of age. This is typically between ages six and eight, but all of the components vary between children and it is possible that this component could develop as late as age ten along with causality (Kenyon 68).

To begin introducing these components and continuing to develop them at home and in the classroom, literature that handles multiple components at a time will work well for seeing how they all coincide. Using literature will help create a deeper understanding and allow for critical thinking. The ages where children begin to naturally develop the concepts of universality, irreversibility, and non-functionality are appropriate for texts such as *Charlotte's Web* to be

introduced to ease fears that may arise and begin teaching grieving processes and acceptance. This novel is targeted at ages six through nine. Beginning this text in the second grade, as many teachers have done, allows for students to naturally mature certain aspects of these first three components, but they will have a lot of room for growth at this age which can be achieved by exposure through literature. This text also contains a basic introduction to causality in certain places. If these instances are made aware to students, they can start the process of comprehending this component as well. By scaffolding the text and using it to its full potential, students can grasp all of these three components earlier than they might with everyday occurrences and media and begin on a more mature component.

The Safe Space of Metaphor: *Charlotte's Web's* Use of Fable to Explain Mortality

Charlotte's Web takes its reader on a journey throughout the first year of life for a spring pig in a classic fable form. Wilbur was born a runt and the first lines of the book are telling for what struggles he will face as the reader proceeds with his opening year. It begins with dialogue: “‘Where’s Papa going with that ax?’ said Fern to her mother as they set the table for breakfast. ‘Out to the hoghouse,’ replied Mrs. Arable. ‘Some pigs were born last night’” (White 1). These lines indicate the death this pig should have experienced, one that would have been very natural and common due to his state of birth. Wilbur represents the commonality of death and the casual attitude shown by all of the adults in the novel exhibits this commonality clearly. On the other hand, the character of Fern, an eight-year-old who fights her father on killing the pig, shows a sense of humanity and how we as society perceive death as something frightening and unjust. The casual reactions to slaughtering a pig exhibited by the adults reflects the naturalness of the event and promotes the components of universality and causality. The contrast in emotion given

by adults versus children provides both sides of understanding death and that these reactions should work with one another to properly comprehend it.

White evokes universality through the fable form and expresses that all living creatures will eventually pass on. Readers can see this component in the near-death of Wilbur, in the eventual death of Charlotte, and even in the goose egg that never hatches. Causality is expressed in the explanation Charlotte gives for her own death when she says “After all, what’s life anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die... By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle” (White 164). Her explanation that death happens naturally after one has lived a while and that we must make the best of our lives is an indicator of causality. Another example of causality presents through the goose egg that turns out to be a dud. None of the animals or the mother goose seem to be concerned that this egg has been kept warm and safe by the mother all this time and yet still doesn’t hatch like its siblings. Some may consider this a lost life, but the animals, with their human-like personalities yet animal-like behaviors, seem to disregard it entirely showing that it cannot always be explained why certain things die or are never born, but that it is natural, nonetheless.

The novel further shows the differing levels of understanding death between adults and children. Fern’s determination for saving the life of a weakling is demonstrated when she confronts her father, “‘Control myself?’ yelled Fern. ‘This is a matter of life and death, and you talk about *controlling* myself’” (White 2). Fern is first introduced showing compassion and empathy for a life just as most young readers would if they were put in such a situation. This act of slaughtering or killing a runt pig would especially be challenging for young children to comprehend, but it is notable that White includes many instances of how ordinary the process is for farm life. This teaches readers two lessons in just the first few pages: firstly, that death is a

natural and everyday process that everyone and everything will experience. Secondly, it is natural to feel sad and want to change the course of action. Readers will soon learn over time that while Fern and Charlotte both played a role in saving a life, there is nothing that stops the inevitable process of mortality.

The novel can also be used to explain non-functionality and irreversibility if it is discussed with children. These two components often mature between first and third grade, so accompanying this maturation with a text as support can help children with their development on the topic (Kenyon 68). Some children may be looking for a happy ending to the novel where Charlotte magically returns to the barn, but in reality, such does not occur. The novel does a wonderful job of expressing how people's memory can live on within us through memories and others, but they will not return (irreversibility) and do not have functionality once they die (non-functionality). There is no miraculous resurrection or appearance of Charlotte after her death, which solidifies these concepts.

The fable form of this tale with its use of metaphor and fantasy makes it appropriate for children of this age to be introduced to what was considered a taboo topic at the time. Francelia Butler, who found the journal *Children's Literature* in the 1970s, makes a convincing argument as to why these folk and fable stories work best for young children. In the first volume of the journal, she discusses the history of adult literature being formed for children by including fantasy and fable-like elements to express complex ideas. Butler asks the question, "How is it best to introduce a child through literature to the idea of death?" and answers:

Folk literature, the amalgam of human experience, and some of the great fantasies seem to indicate that the honest and warm human approach is best--not talking down to the child because of his age, for death knows all ages, but simply telling him what we know,

what we don't know, what we fear, and what we hope. We find this approach in folk literature. (Butler 71)

Her explanation for this use of folk literature, including fables, is proven by the popularity authors gained when they began using such forms in the eighteenth century for children. Metaphors provide a safe space for children to experience the introduction to sensitive subjects, including death. The metaphorical aspect of a fable provides truth in meaning while still giving the child relatability in the characters and the plot. As pointed out by Butler, folk literature generally tends to apply a basic approach to storytelling, making it ideal for young children's comprehension. Today, we still see many books, television shows, movies, and games for children that use fable and fantasy elements to produce the “limpid simplicity form to make it easier to see into the depths, even of death” (Butler 1).

In order to use texts effectively that include metaphors that need to be understood by the students for comprehension, discussions and meaningful activities must be present as they read. For children in upper elementary school and middle school, *Charlotte's Web* can be more easily accessible to students in their understanding that metaphors seen in fable forms can relate to real life. These students may see the friendship between a pig and a spider to be symbolic of all wholesome friendships, and that sometimes, your friends are your family. When making such connections, they can compare this to their own lives and learn as they read, how to deal with such events, and the true meaning of empathy. This is a direct line to begin talking about metaphors more generally in the classroom and expanding upon the idea of how one thing is like another. When students learn to understand these metaphors independently from teacher support, they can begin to see how a text can be metaphorical for their own lives without explicitly saying so, which is the goal for this type of reading. In earlier stages of development, metacognitive

development is needed to reach such goals of comprehension and to build a strong foundation so students can do these readings on their own. When students participate in discourse with other students and teachers, they begin to look deeper than the physicality of the text and answer questions like ‘how do you know?’ and ‘what makes you say that?’ Students should always be asked what they have understood from reading a text, how such a text can relate to their or someone else’s lives and explain what they have gained from reading (Kuhn and Dean 270).

Growing Up: *Bridge to Terabithia*’s Use of Realism to Expand on Mortality

After stories like *Charlotte’s Web* and *The Dead Bird* gained traction in the 1950’s and 1960’s as childhood favorites and teacher favorites for pedagogical tools, the topic of emotional learning flourished. Scholars and psychologists began publishing research on the benefits of grief and death education which caused a rise in its popularity (Swiss 690). In the 1970’s when research was at its peak for this topic, articles like “Coping with Death in the Family”, were published and well received. This article “examines the responsibility of being honest in discussing death, the role of the child in situations involving death, and personal adjustment to a death in the family” (691). Another article published in 1975 by Gretchen Mills, “Discussing Death: A Guide to Death Education,” researched different strategies of how to implement death education into language arts depending on age levels. She also found students could learn this material through novels, short stories, poems, and plays (691). This research and popularity with the genres use in the classroom, encouraged authors to join in and create more tragic fiction stories for young readers. “During the nineteen-seventies and eighties over 200 fiction books were written for children with death as a major theme” as a result of research compiled during this decade (Lamers). One of the texts produced during this era of research and dedication on the topic was the realistic fiction novel, *Bridge to Terabithia*.

Bridge to Terabithia's use of realism as a way to express themes of death and grief instead of a fable form causes the need for the emotional maturity of the reader to be more developed. This is due to the fact that this text includes components of causality and personal mortality which are both delayed in development compared to the previously discussed three components, universality, irreversibility, and non-functionality. It is more difficult to express personal mortality in a folktale or fable because of the metaphorical language and it is expected by children to be a fictional story. This form makes the text more difficult to see oneself in, however, a text like *Bridge to Terabithia* which directly emphasizes the death of a girl the same age as the target audience can explicitly show this component.

In a survey given to students of varying ages, researchers found that all of the students were able to understand personal mortality by age eight. While no one has answers to what happens spiritually when we die, children should at least comprehend that eventually they, as well as all living beings, will someday die. This age range is certainly not true for every student as it is dependent on maturity in intelligence, emotions, and anxiety (Kenyon 76), but the researchers found that students should grasp this concept no later than age eight and should be comfortable with all components collectively by age ten (Kenyon 65). Exposing students to such a text before their ability to grasp all of the components are in place may prove to be meaningless and may actually be confusing or harmful. This is why a text dealing with personal mortality is more fitting for children who have matured to reach all components of understanding mortality; children without these need education through fable stories to help them build lower-level components because they can express difficult topics in a comfortable form, while older children thrive from understanding the fourth and fifth components seen in realistic fiction. This text is tied so closely to personal mortality because the child who passes is the same age as the target

audience, compared to other texts who include deaths of parents, friends, or pets which only builds on universality. While *Charlotte's Web* tackles four components to understanding death: universality, irreversibility, non-functionality, and some introduction to the more difficult component of causality, *Bridge to Terabithia* approaches all of the components.

Bridge to Terabithia shows a more expansive side to causality than is achieved by *Charlotte's Web*. This is due to the fact that Charlotte literally explains to Wilbur, and the reader, why she is dying and that it is natural because of her age. This allows children some warning before the actual death and gives a clear explanation. The explanation that Charlotte gives is that "we're born, we live a little while, we die" (White 164) which is a perfectly acceptable way to explain the death of a grandparent, but does not work so well in the case of Leslie Burke, who dies at the age of ten from a tragic drowning accident. *Bridge to Terabithia* gives little foreshadowing about her death, other than some brief mention of the characters wondering what happens to them when they die. The abruptness of Leslie's death and for it seemingly having no cause at all, can be a developing tool to understanding causality. While White provides an explanation for the death of Charlotte, Leslie's death is given no explanation, which is likely what Paterson is trying to teach the reader. That oftentimes we cannot provide causality because we do not understand it even as adults. The closest thing we can get to causality in the case of Leslie and many like her is simply acceptance, which Jess eventually shows through crowning his sister as the new queen in Leslie's honor. This is why causality is one of the most developed and complex components, because it cannot always be explained.

While *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* differ in form, one being realistic and one being fable, and they do not share the same target audience, these texts do share a common theme that promotes understanding of certain components of death, as well as the theme of

friendship. They both contain elements of fantasy within them, the effect of death within friendship, and are both helpful tools for expressing how to properly handle death of a loved one at a young age. *Bridge to Terabithia* follows main characters, Leslie and Jess, who are fifth graders in a very remote town. Jess comes from a poor family with a lot of familial issues regarding his treatment compared to his four sisters and does not have any real friends at his school. When Leslie moves to town, who is from a well-off family looking to simplify their lifestyle, she and Jess quickly become close friends as she teaches Jess to use his imagination and show his true self. They create an imaginative world across a dried-up stream in the woods and spend their afternoons running the fantastical land they call Terabithia, as its king and queen. This bond is created to represent the two more as close family rather than just friends. Leslie's introduction to the story and the way she shapes Jess' life even after her death shows a certain mentor relationship which is nearly identical to the one shown by Charlotte to Wilbur (Misheff 132).

In both stories, it is clear that the female protagonist creates safety and security for the male protagonist. In Wilbur's case, Charlotte and Fern both save his life quite literally, but it is Charlotte who acts as the final savior. In the case of Jess, while his life is not saved to the extent of Wilbur's, Leslie shows him how to have an imagination and boosts his emotional intelligence, as well as how to have confidence in himself. Similarly to Wilbur, Jess is characterized as being shy, lonely, and overlooked by others. Jess feels as though he is left out of his own family by being dominated by so many sisters and seems to have some built up hatred for having them. He is an outcast in school and even by his own family, just as Wilbur is an outcast when entering the barn. Jess' father and mother ignore him and he is the only one made to do chores on their farm. He is bullied at school, much like Wilbur by some of the other barn animals. The introduction to

a friendship with Charlotte and Leslie in these two texts helps the male protagonists to find the purposes behind their lives and how to best live them. The death of the mentor expresses how fragile life is, and allows both male characters to recognize that they should be taking advantage of the time they've been given for their youth. Once the male protagonists are safe, secure, and happy "there is an ultimate demise of the female while the male is left to live through the process of grieving" (Misheff 132).

These female protagonists create safe places for themselves to dwell and invite the male protagonists to join them in hopes that they too will benefit. For Charlotte, her web is her home and her way of life, but she sacrifices its uses in order to benefit Wilbur. The web is their safe place. More literally, the safe place for Jess and Leslie is actually a place created first in the mind of Leslie, and soon incorporated into Jess' imagination as well. These characters receive a mutual relationship building off of one another until the male character is at his highest potential in the novel, brought up from the depths by his new friend. The departure of these characters through death allows both Wilbur and Jess to recognize the impact they left and understand how they can now become a caretaker and mentor to others (Misheff 133). Wilbur begins to care for Charlotte's children in the barn as she had done for him, and Jess shows his sister the magic of Terabithia and crowns her as the queen. This message given to the children who read this text can help them in the grieving process; they can understand that once an important person has died, that the best way to keep their memory alive is to now teach all the lessons they have learned to someone else who may need them. Wilbur becomes the mentor figure to Charlotte's children, and Jess becomes the mentor to his sister.

The relationship between Jess and Leslie in *Bridge to Terabithia* and between Wilbur and Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web* makes the death in the novels much more impactful for the readers.

It is made apparent that these friends are alone without each other so the reality of death in the plots create a sense of reality that many do not want to face, but they are important to understand so young children can learn how to properly deal with the grief and feeling of loss that accompanies tragic events. *Charlotte's Web's* use of the full fable form is perfect for young readers, while *Bridge to Terabithia* creates a stepping stone between fully realistic fiction and fantasy with its use of both forms. Both Leslie and Jess seem to be aware that their world is fictional, but this fictional pretending helps them cope with bullies and family life and it even helps them understand the kinds of issues certain people may be facing that are not at surface level. The troll that they imagine as the older bully from school becomes friendly to Jess once he understands her tragic home life of abuse, and the dark master they imagine turns out to be a side to his father he never understood. The fantastical elements within the story help Jess to understand the world around him and its motives. The change that happens in *Terabithia* after Leslie dies where Jess recognizes all of his fears as just ordinary things, such as the troll just being a bully, manifests his development as a "reader" in many ways and experiencing the metaphors he has created in his own mind.

Conclusion

Charlotte's Web and *Bridge to Terabithia* both successfully teach components of death and are helpful tools for learning about grief and acceptance. They tell a story of true friendship between characters who benefit from one another's company and how the remaining characters deal with the death of their one and only safe place. These texts teach different components because of the audiences targeted to read them and through the form the authors chose to use. The use of metaphors in a fable text for young children is effective because of this forms ability to be simplistic and relatable to children, while remaining functional for obtaining realistic

topics. The use of realism in a text provides the child with a more direct approach, meaning the reader should be mature enough to handle this perspective on a difficult topic, such as death. It teaches children how to develop their own reading skills so that the fantasy world that has become their safe space can be defanged slowly. Moving on from the safe space of the fable and the elements of fantasy requires a more mature, complex kind of reading and self-understanding. These two pieces of children's literature target the audience that best fits the forms of their texts, and within them can be found some individual components that are most suitable for the targeted audience.

While these two texts are prime examples of how children's literature differentiates form in order to meet the target audience and how the form expresses different components about mortality, many other texts have been written about mortality as bridges between the fable and realistic forms. Moreover, mature texts for teens and young adults provide more explicit ideas of death and cut out all fantastical elements all together that texts like *Bridge to Terabithia* still hold on to. Texts have even been written for young children whose age suggests they have yet to develop any of the components, but these can still be helpful in creating a place to begin conversations about it.

The Dead Bird is one of the first fictional texts a child may be exposed to regarding death. Many children read "self-help" type books given to them or read to them by their parents when they are very young and a significant person dies, and while these can be helpful, fictional stories are often much more engaging and provide the same lessons. The story follows young children who find a dead bird in the park as they provide a funeral service for it. It is a touching story and a great introductory text for loss designed for children who are still too young to have developed any components in full.

Following *Charlotte's Web* and preceding *Bridge to Terabithia* is an acceptable time to begin bringing in realistic fiction novels where the death does not address personal mortality. Giving students the opportunity to experience realism, without having to have the full components of causality and personal mortality, is a time to have them read texts such as *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961). This text is also heart wrenching because of the bond between a boy and his dogs, so many children may find it just as difficult to read as *Bridge to Terabithia*. While it may be just as sad of a story and helps build many components, it does not have them approaching their own mortality yet, which can usually cause more fear than sadness. The text's use of realism but still using animal deaths allows it to perfectly fall between *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* in psychological maturity.

After children have developed all of their components in full, they are prepared to read adolescent literature and young adult literature that contain themes of death. Authors such as John Green, Laurie Halse Anderson, and Sharon Draper are adolescent literature authors who write about death for their teenage audiences in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They do so in such a way that teens have a way to cope and grieve by following actions of a character and learning to move forward. More advanced texts like these for older readers may deal with long illnesses such as cancer affecting characters the same age as the target audience as seen in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). These texts cause a great deal of empathy to be built in readers. More mature texts also may contain deaths that resulted from suicide such as Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* (2007). These texts take personal mortality to an even greater extent and often teach readers the delicacy of life and the emotional toll we take on one another, especially as teenagers.

As parents and teachers search for novels to suggest to their children, it is vital that they consider the content and form of the text as well as the psychological approach it takes and pair the text with discussion. Parents should try to become aware of how developed their child is in the components of mortality and provide books that best fit these as well as their emotional maturity. Children with less developed components will be more successful to read metaphorical and folk literature, while high level components can move into realistic fiction involving animal or distant deaths, and finally moving into stories that deal with character deaths of their own age. No matter our age, humanity continues to be fearful about death, and often confused. While literature can never fully answer all of our questions, it is the perfect place to start searching.

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