

***Duck, Death and the Tulip* in the triangle of fantasy, reality, and death in preschool education[#]**

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important concepts that children in preschool and primary school try to perceive and understand is “death”. Making the phenomenon of death comprehensible to a child is a very difficult and laborious process. The difficulty of defining death, which is an abstract concept, for a child, combined with the pedagogical fear (negative perception that this can cause in a child) and the inability to develop an appropriate discourse (destructive style), leads the adult and parents to an even greater impasse. There are different opinions, especially on whether the phenomenon of death can be included in children’s books and how and in what way this phenomenon should be expressed if it is to be included. One of the publications that successfully answer the question of how and in what way death should be explained to children is the children’s book *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch. In this work, the abstract phenomenon of death is made tangible for children with the help of fantastic elements, and death is characterized. *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, in which values such as “friendship”, “love” and “respect” between a duck and death are treated with pedagogical care, are of great importance for shaping and developing the concept of death in the minds of child readers. This study sought to examine how the concept of death is treated in Wolf Erlbruch’s children’s book *Duck, Death and the Tulip* based on embodiment, child psychology, and pedagogy.

Keywords: Death, fantasy children’s book, preschool education, embodiment, *Duck, Death and the Tulip*.

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INTRODUCTION

Children’s books are the primary source for children, who are the target audience for learning about life, making sense of situations and events, viewing life from different perspectives, and enriching their imaginations. Özdemirci’s (2000, p. 228) following observation about books is important: “Books are incomparable helpers in the efforts to bring children into society as knowledgeable, cultured, able to distinguish the good from the bad and the right from the wrong, useful to their country and nation, and a social value that loves them.” Rideout, Vandewater and Wartella (2003, p. 9) found in their research that almost all parents consider books to be very important for children’s intellectual development. Only through books is it possible for people to encounter unlimited situations and events in

a limited lifetime and to develop cognitively and emotionally. Children’s books, in particular, with their rich content, their contribution to language development, and their ability to convey different perspectives, are very valuable products for children. “Traditionally, book reading in preschools focuses mainly on narrative texts. Also, most research on the effects of book reading on vocabulary acquisition reflects the dominant use of narrative texts” (Watson, 2008, p. 5). Children’s stories are among the works that preschool children enjoy listening to and that bring them many benefits. “In early childhood (e.g., at kindergarten or home), storytelling is a means to support children’s development, to help them express and assign meaning to the world, to develop communication,

recognition, and recall skills, and to enforce their relationships with peers and adults" (Garzotto, Paolini and Sabiescu, 2010, p. 356).

Children's books for preschool children cannot always be expected to cover funny topics. "Unfortunately, in the society in which the child will live, there are many negative themes. From time to time, these negative realities also touch and involve children in the early years of their lives. For example, the death of a family member or the presence of a disabled person in the neighborhood who cannot see or walk." (Ural, 2013, p. 43). Death is "the permanent end of the life of a person or animal" (Collins Cobuild, 2018, p. 382). Merriam-Webster defines death as "a permanent cessation of all vital functions: the end of life." Also, Byock (2002, p. 279) defines death as a nonbeing, the antithesis of life, and chaos. Yıldız (2004, p. 130) states that children are aware of death as a part of life, albeit at various levels, that they see the death of various animals in their environment, watch death in television programs, and even play with death in their games. According to Semerci (2004), the child cannot realistically evaluate the event of death before the age of 5. Death is a kind of sleep and immobilization for him or her. Death, which is perceived only as separation from a loved one and anxiety between the ages of 0 to 2, is a reversible event for the child at the ages of 2 to 5. After the age of five, the child understands the irreversibility of death, and after the age of 11, he or she learns the concept of death in its entirety.

The child's view of death, which is egocentric in the preoperational stage, is quite limited and incomplete. Eripek (1998, p. 98) defines the operation as it is both a movement and a mental act. Combining, organizing, sorting, grouping, separating the whole into its parts, and reassembling are the main operations. An operation is a mental program to logically separates, combines, and transforms information into another form (Atkinson and Hilgard, 2012, p. 76). The preoperational stage covers the development of the function of the object's continuity, which is also referred to as the representation of the object in the mind or design (Yöndem and Taylı, 2007, p. 88). This stage, which also coincides with the years spent in kindergarten, covers the age range of 2 to 7 years. An important characteristic of the preoperational stage is that the child has a completely self-centered mindset. Children at this age believe that their view is the only possible view; they do not realize that others around them may have a different point of view than their own. For example, a five-year-old child thinks that everyone knows the color of his or her cardigan; if he or she does not like drinking milk, according to him or her, no one likes drinking milk, etc. (Erden and Akman, 2011, p. 65). Children between the ages of 5 to 7 are in the period of discovering their independence and trying to do things on their own. During this period, egocentric thinking is dominant in children; since they cannot put themselves in the place of others, they think that everyone sees the world as they do and

cannot perceive that people may think differently from them. Although they are prone to supernatural or imaginary thoughts, they think more concretely, and they think death is reversible (Bilir, Yaman and Kutan, 2021, p. 36). The influence of families and the environment on children's perceptions and reactions towards death is explained in the following sentences:

Yalom, an American psychiatrist with many studies on death, defines the fear of death as the greatest of the four basic human fears. The others are the "fear of freedom", "fear of loneliness", and "fear of not being able to give meaning to life". The fear of death is essentially the fear of disappearing, becoming nothing while existing. The entity that instinctively prevents this "nothingness" is the "children who will remain behind". The children will be the continuation of the parents; they will live on as proof that they have not disappeared. This can also be the instinctive impulse of parents to protect their children throughout their lives. Childlessness can therefore make people feel that their lives are incomplete and overshadow happiness. The "lasting works that give meaning to people's lives" are often seen as their children (Kivilcim and Doğan, 2014, p. 80).

Death is one of the most difficult subjects to talk about and experience. "In fact, death is always present in children's and adolescents' lives. In their early years, children generally become aware of death when plants, pets, and even people they know die. The death of a grandparent may be the first human death a child experiences." (Silverman, 2000, p. 2). Adults avoid talking to children and sharing their feelings with them because they think that this unpleasant phenomenon will be even more unpleasant for children. This is usually due to the fact that it is not known how children perceive death. It is important to know how death is perceived according to age and how it should be explained to children. This information is necessary to find out how to talk and behave with children who are suffering from a terminal illness, who have lost a relative, or who have witnessed death. To understand children who bring about death, you also need to know what they mean by the term "death."

In early childhood, death is not a very comprehensible concept for children, as their abstract thinking is not yet developed. At these ages "the child cannot comprehend that death is an end or the cessation of life functions. (...) Magical thinking is dominant at this stage. They are self-centered. Therefore, they may think, their thoughts or actions can cause what happens to themselves or others." (Bildik, 2013, p. 226). The death of a family member leaves scars on children. In early childhood, a child who loses a family member may experience extreme fear, crying, and mourning. "(...) childhood grief and loss can lead to 'dysphoria, depression, generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, PTSD [Post-traumatic stress disorder], behavioral problems, and other generalized symptoms" (Machajewsk

and Kronk, 2013, p. 445, as cited in Ferow, 2019, pp. 3–4). However, the child does not yet realize that this death is irreversible, because children at this age perceive time as cyclical. “Children think egocentrically at this time. This means that children think about everything that happens during this time in such a way that they put themselves at the center. (...) In the event of a loss, the child may therefore blame themselves and try to cope with intense feelings of guilt” (Atalar, 2017).

There are four elements related to children’s perception of the concept of death. “Irreversibility is the realization that the deceased will not come back and that the body cannot be revived; termination is the realization that all bodily functions end with death; inevitability is the realization that all living things will die one day; causality is the realization that physical and biological factors cause death” (Lewis and Schonfeld, 2002, as cited in Ürer, 2017, p. 135). The thought process of preschool children is prelogical and egocentric. At this time, children are not yet able to reason on the basis of a good cause-and-effect relationship. Since the concept of continuity is not yet cognitively developed, they cannot understand that death is irreversible and shows continuity. They perceive death as a temporary situation rather than one that ends life. They think, for example, that the deceased is somewhere else, underground, and that they need air and water. For them, everything is alive. They explain death with magical thoughts and express it with magical words. Sometimes they blame themselves with feelings of guilt. They can make statements such as “He died because I did not play with him.” They may express their feelings of longing, sadness, and helplessness with anger. They may be reluctant to go to bed at night, wet themselves, have

difficulty falling asleep, and have unfounded fears (Kıvılcım and Doğan, 2014, p. 82). School-age children can understand the three important characteristics of death: irreversibility, finality, and universality. They can think more concretely. They know, for example, that dead people cannot speak, move, or breathe and that their hearts have stopped beating. They begin to understand the biological processes in the human body. Their interest is focused on the process of physical decay” (MEB–UNICEF, 2001, as cited in Kıvılcım and Doğan, 2014, p. 82).

METHODOLOGY

This study is an analysis of Wolf Erlbruch’s *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, published in Munich in 2007 under the title *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* and translated into English by Catherine Chidgey and published by Gecko Press in New Zealand in 2008, and was conducted using document analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Document analysis involves analysing written materials that contain information about the phenomenon or phenomena under study (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005, p. 187). These materials may include articles, reports, diaries, letters, and other written sources. Researchers attempt to identify specific themes, trends, or patterns by reading these written materials in detail and supporting the findings with conclusions.

The subject of this study is Wolf Erlbruch’s *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, published by Gecko Press in 2008. The illustrations in the 32-page book were created by the author himself. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Front and back cover of the book, author (The photo of Wolf Erlbruch was taken from the following website. <https://www.wireltern.ch/artikel/wolf-erlbruch-kinderbuecher-der-kleine-maulwurf-interview-0318>)

This study analyzed how the concept of death is treated in Wolf Erlbruch’s children’s book “*Duck, Death and the*

Tulip” and highlighted the value of the book for preschool children. The question “How does Wolf Erlbruch explain

death to children in *Duck, Death and the Tulip?*” forms the problem definition of this study. The questions “What is the theme of *Duck, Death and the Tulip?*” and “Who is Wolf Erlbruch?” form the sub-problems of the study.

Before beginning this qualitative research, which is based on document and text analysis, the relevant literature on the subject was reviewed and the necessary resources were collected. The English and Turkish editions of *Duck, Death and the Tulip* were obtained and compared. The data collected during the study was analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. According to Wolcott (1994, p. 10), descriptive analysis is the presentation of data with direct quotations, maintaining the original form of the data while providing an explanation. Descriptive analysis consists of summarizing and interpreting the data obtained according to predetermined themes. This type of analysis aims to present the results to the reader in an organized and interpreted form (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005, p. 224). In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, Duck and Death’s friendship and their experiences were evaluated using quotes from the work.

RESULTS

Wolf Erlbruch (1948–2022) was a German illustrator and writer of children’s books who became a professor at several universities. He combined various techniques for the artwork in his books, including cutting and pasting, drawing, and painting. His style was sometimes surrealist and was widely copied inside and outside Germany. Some of his storybooks have challenging themes, such as death and the meaning of life. They won many awards, including the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis in 1993 and 2003. Erlbruch received the Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 2006 for his “lasting contribution” as a children’s illustrator. In 2017, he was the first German to win the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (Wikipedia).

Wolf Erlbruch’s fantastic book, *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, was originally published in German in 2007 under the title *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* and has attracted attention as an extraordinary children’s book that explains the phenomenon of death to both preschool and school-age children. Published by Gecko Press in 2008, the book is an important work that fills a gap in the literature on death in terms of form and content. *Duck, Death and the Tulip* “involves Duck, who acquaints a character called Death. As it turns out, Death has been following Duck for her whole life. The two become friends, discussing life, death, and what the afterlife might be like. At the end of the story, Duck dies, and Death carries her to a river, places Duck gently in the water and lays a tulip on her” (Huovinen, 2022, p. 18). Wolf Erlbruch is both the author and illustrator of the book, and in this work “the art is minimalist, with the cut-paper figures of Duck and Death modeled with soft colored pencil strokes and layered on ivory backgrounds; the pale neutrality of the palette is not going to draw

youngsters’ eyes, but there’s an appropriately quirky appeal in the ballet-like interplay between skull-headed Death (in a long checked coat) and gimlet-eyed Duck.” (Stevenson, 2011, p. 203).

In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, “Death appears as a character within the story. This book is not based on a folk tale but written as a contemporary picture book for children and, unlike most of the other books in this period, uses not just the ‘biological’ facts about death, but also combines the personified character of death” (Jackson, 2019, p. 63). The illustrations in the book, which embody the theme of death with the agents Duck and Death, are also successful. Erlbruch skillfully embodies Death for children, depicting him as a skull with a coat, shoes on his feet, and a tulip in his hand. Thus, the author softens the horrible face of Death and portrays him as a sympathetic being. Authors of children’s literature have to write and draw very carefully on such a sensitive subject as death. Erlbruch’s pedagogical sensitivity in the encounters between Duck and Death is remarkable. When Death, materialized as a skull with clothes and shoes, appears to Duck, “‘Good,’ said Death, ‘you finally noticed me. I am Death.’” (Erlbruch, 2008) is an example of a sincere and friendly introduction. Duck is surprised to see Death in front of her and asks him, “‘You’ve come to fetch me?’” (Erlbruch, 2008). Death’s answer to this question is quite thought-provoking. The author states that life and death are two complementary phenomena and that death is as natural as life is. Death tries to make readers realize that he is an indispensable part of life with the following words: “‘Oh, I’ve been close by all your life — just in case.’” (Erlbruch, 2008). Death’s sentence is important to show that death has accompanied people since birth. *Duck, Death and the Tulip* explains to children that death, like birth, should be recognized as both a necessity of life and a normal phenomenon. In this respect, the book is effective for children who have lost a relative due to sudden death. Children who have lost a parent face significant problems. Köseoğlu and Yıldız (2018, p. 92) state that children who have only one parent as a result of death are in a disadvantaged position because they cannot experience a healthy mourning environment, witness the mental problems of the surviving parent, receive adequate social support, and experience financial problems in the family. (Figure 2)

Sympathetic Death, loyal Duck

In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, Wolf Erlbruch introduces children to an extremely sympathetic figure of death. Death is portrayed in an extremely gentle and elegant role, with a tulip in his hand and a sweet smile on his face. Like a person giving a gift to a loved one, Death is portrayed as an extremely thoughtful being, hiding the tulip in his hand behind it. Death enters the lake with Duck by his side as a good friend. As Death becomes wet and cold, Duck

transforms into a loyal and benevolent creature. Duck embraces the cold Death, takes him under its wings and tries to warm him. The book cleverly manages to introduce children to values such as “friendship, loyalty, goodwill and kindness” by emphasizing them. In this way, the author

conveys the idea that death is not a bad thing and that children should not be afraid of it. The author’s statement, “*Actually he was nice, if you forgot for a moment who he was – really quite nice.*” (Erlbruch, 2008) is an allusion to the attempt to create sympathy. (Figure 3)

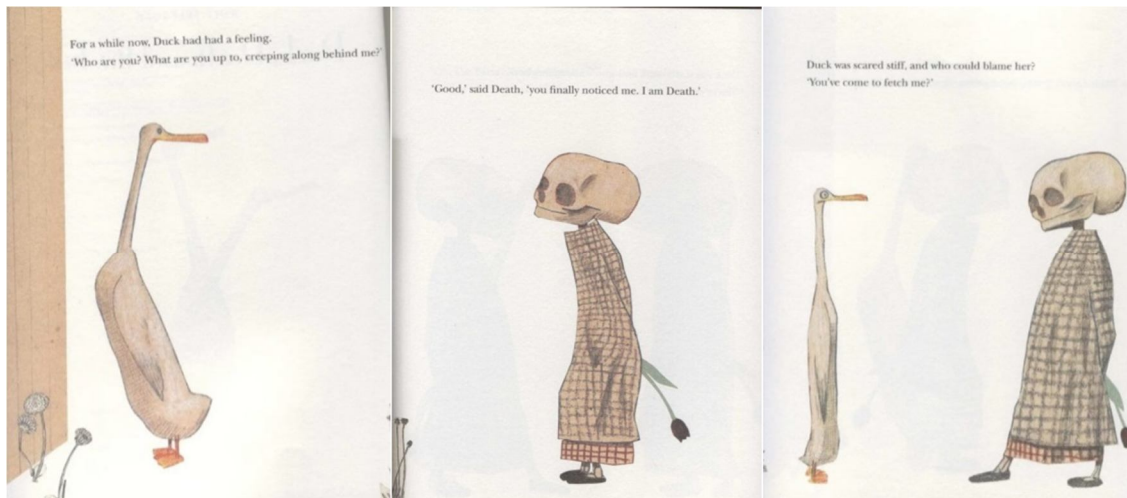


Figure 2. Meeting of Duck and Death.



Figure 3. Sympathetic Death and loyal Duck.

Death and the afterlife: Heaven and hell

In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, Duck searches for an answer to the question of what will happen to her after death. The work, in which life after death is the greatest unknown, leaves its readers with the question: “What will happen to us after we die?” In the book, Duck tells Death what she knows about heaven, and Death listens to her calmly like a therapist, reassuring her and agreeing with her: “*Some*

ducks say you become an angel and sit on a cloud, looking over the earth.” “*Quite possibly.*” Death rose to his feet. “*You have the wings already*” (Erlbruch, 2008). Death is extremely constructive, even when answering Duck’s difficult question in no uncertain terms. He states that Duck’s thoughts or belief about heaven may be possible. Duck’s idea of heaven is based on the reward of becoming an angel, ascending to the sky, and watching the earth from there. In contrast to heaven, where the good ducks

go, in the idea of hell, there is an underworld and punishment for the bad ducks. In the book, this opposition is expressed in the following words: “*Some ducks say that deep in the earth there’s a place where you’ll be roasted if you haven’t been good.*” “*You ducks come up with some amazing stories, but who knows?*” (Erlbruch, 2008). Death gives uncertain answers to Duck’s questions about heaven and hell. In this way, the author tries to show readers the unknowability of the afterlife. (Figure 4)

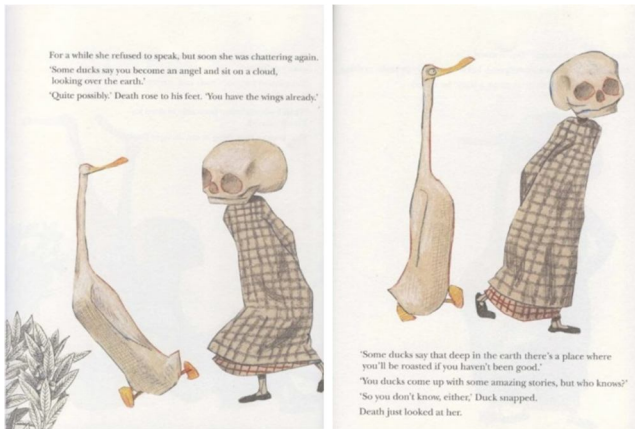


Figure 4. The idea of heaven and hell.

One of the most striking events about the aftermath of death in *Duck, Death and the Tulip* is Duck’s contemplation of her surroundings after her death. Duck is saddened to think that after her death, her beloved lake and the world will be all alone. Considering the preschool child’s connection with the environment and objects, this is an indication of childish naivety and the child’s self-centeredness. In the face of this sensitivity and empathy developed by Duck, Death’s words, “*When you’re are dead, the pond will be gone, too – at least for you.*” (Erlbruch, 2008) is quite calming and guiding. (Figure 5)

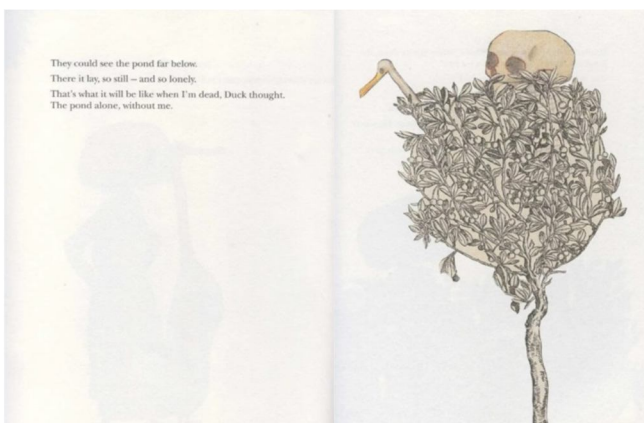


Figure 5. Things left behind after death.

The friendship of Duck and Death

In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, Wolf Erlbruch creates an intimate friendship between the characters Death and Duck. Death and Duck get along well; they play together, empathize and have a good time. For the sake of his friend Duck, Death even enters the water he hates. Duck tries to warm her friend Death by hugging him when she thinks he is cold. This is behavior that Death has never witnessed before. The friendship between Duck and Death grows. However, with the coming of winter, Duck starts to feel cold. This time it is Death’s task to warm his friend by closing in on her. Death crouches beside his friend Duck’s body, which is not breathing and waits at her bedside. Death does not leave his friend alone on this last journey. Through the friendship between Duck and Death, the author shows his readers that death is not so bad and not to be feared. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Duck and Death, two good friends.

The death of Duck

At the end of the book, Duck’s death is presented to the readers in a sad, but not so romantic, way. After Duck’s death, Death acts with great sensitivity and care, doing his last duty to his beloved friend. He caresses and straightens her feathers, puts the tulip on her chest, leaves her in the river that she loved so much, sends her off to eternity, and looks after her with sadness. The Tulip held by Death fulfills its function at the end of the story. Stevenson (2011, p. 203) underlines that Tulip, which is never mentioned in the text, is Death’s beautiful accessory, hidden from Duck while she is alive, but adorning her body as a sweet farewell touch as she floats down the river. In the face of

Death's great pain, the author's statement, "But that's life, thought Death." (Erlbruch, 2008) is remarkable in that it

gives children a sense of the reality of death and the continuity of life. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. Duck's death and Death's farewell.

CONCLUSION

One of the most important concepts that children of preschool and primary school age try to perceive and understand is "death." The child's perception of the phenomenon of death involves a very difficult and laborious process. The difficulty of defining death, which is an abstract concept, for the child, combined with pedagogical concerns (negative perception it can provoke in the child) and the inability to develop an appropriate discourse (destructive style), leads the adult and the parents to another impasse.

There are different opinions on whether the phenomenon of death can be included in children's books and, if so, how and in what way this phenomenon should be expressed. One of the publications that successfully answers the question of how and in what way death should be explained to children is Wolf Erlbruch's children's book *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. In this work, the abstract phenomenon of death is made concrete for children with the help of fantastic elements, and death is characterized. *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, in which values such as "friendship," "love," and "respect" between a duck and death are treated with pedagogical care, is of great importance for shaping and developing the concept of death in the minds of child readers.

Wolf Erlbruch's *Duck, Death and the Tulip* closes an important formal and substantive gap in the perception and understanding of "death" by preschool and primary school children. The value of this book is even greater when one considers the difficulty of explaining the phenomenon of "death" in a concrete, pedagogical way, without lies or

embellishments. First of all, the author and illustrator Wolf Erlbruch has treated death with great sensitivity in *Duck, Death and the Tulip*. Starting with the friendship that develops between Duck and Death, an attempt is made to suggest that the reader embodies death, sees it as a natural part of life, and accepts it. In this respect, the book is of great value due to its successful handling of the phenomenon of death.

In *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, which shows that it is more important how children's books explain than what they explain, abstract themes are made concrete. This book is an example of how even topics that are difficult to understand and comprehend can be successfully dealt with in children's books.

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