

MA in Children's Literature - Coursework Coversheet

Module Title : Origins and Developments of Children's Literature

Module Code: CHL020LD05S

Good Deaths and Bad Children: The Conflicting Representations of Death in 19th Century Children's Literature

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Death in children's books today is typically handled sensitively, with a view to helping young readers accept and understand a natural and inevitable part of life. In 19th century children's literature, death was a constant, foreboding presence, reflecting the high mortality rates of the era: at a time when around one child in three died before adulthood¹ due to poor sanitation and widespread disease, there was no escaping death even in fairytales and nursery rhymes. Though life expectancy gradually increased towards the end of the century, the Victorian fascination with death steadily developed; the invention of the daguerreotype process in 1839 instigated a trend in post-mortem photography, a brutal murder in 1842 led to the creation of London's first detective force, and Queen Victoria turned mourning into an art form in 1861. Alongside this growing curiosity, Evangelical ideals were becoming dominant in Victorian society, which resulted in clichéd deathbed scenes in books and journals, teaching readers how to live well and die a 'good death' –

¹ Statistics provided by the Colton History Society website

that is, a death free of earthly sin, doubt or resentment, guaranteeing a blissful entry to the afterlife. Thus death was a powerful motif in didactic 19th century children's literature. Writers simultaneously presented death as a punishment for bad behaviour and a reward for leading an exemplary, Christian life. This essay will examine how representations of death in the home, primarily sentimental deathbed scenes, differed from those in the public sphere, and what impact these scenes were expected to have on young Georgian and Victorian readers.

The Victorians' rather morbid fascination with the 'good death' can be traced back to medieval England and the *Ars Moriendi*, books published in the 15th century with the intention of teaching readers – both clergy and the public – how to die; specifically, they should live well, repent their sins, resist temptation and fully welcome their fate as Christ did on the cross. The devastating effect of the Black Death in 1348, which killed a third of the European population, meant life felt more fragile than ever, and since it was painfully understood that death could come knocking at any time for anybody, the need to prepare for one's final moments was crucial. Meanwhile, the emerging Christian focus on man's individual judgement by God, rather than an ultimate day of reckoning that would judge humanity as a whole, meant people needed to take responsibility for their own fate. This led to a religious focus on ensuring a happy afterlife; by not only living a good life but also dying a good death they would pave their way to heaven. This idea of dying well fell out of favour eventually but was resurrected by the Victorians thanks to the rise of Evangelicalism. Flourishing from 1789 to 1850, the Evangelical tradition came to dominate everyday life in England and preached "piety,

discipline and duty” (Jalland 1996). With this arrived a rejuvenated interest in preparing for death, and the deathbed scene became a staple of 19th century children’s literature.

As it occurs outdoors and miles from home, Judy Woolcot’s death in *Seven Little Australians* (1894) is, strictly speaking, a public one, though the passage upholds the conventions of a typically melodramatic Victorian deathbed scene, with Judy’s family in attentive silence as she slowly passes. On the surface, Judy’s death seems noble; she sacrifices herself to save her baby brother’s life and graciously insists she feels no pain despite her broken back. She even begs her sister Meg to recite a hymn in her final moments. But still the 13-year-old is not rewarded with the revered good death. In *Death in the Victorian Family*, Patricia Jalland lists the criteria of an Evangelical good death as dying at home while still lucid, bidding long farewells to each relative, welcoming pain as a final test and completing all “temporal and spiritual business” (26). In other words, the death should not be sudden but drawn out so as to give the patient sufficient time to prepare, accept their fate and receive final communion. Had Judy’s demise been a result of her tuberculosis she may have eventually come to terms with her lot, but by curing her illness and subsequently ending her life with a tragic accident, Turner denies her a traditional deathbed scene and leaves her terrified and far from resigned: “Oh, Meg, I want to be alive! How’d you like to die, Meg, when you’re only thirteen? Think how lonely I’ll be without you all” (185). This scene, then, is plainly not intended to demonstrate to young readers how to die well, but rather how to avoid a bad death brought about by bad behaviour. Of course to a modern audience, Judy Woolcot is a perfectly normal child: loving, thoughtful and a

little mischievous. What 13 year old would not be tempted to choose a care-free day at the aquarium over looking after her baby brother? But the exacting moral standards of most Victorian parents, particularly fathers, would have demanded absolute obedience, making Judy's defiance unacceptable. Surprisingly though, Lois Keith in the fascinating *Take Up They Bed and Walk* (2001) does not believe that Turner was punishing Judy for her behaviour, denying that she subscribed to the "simplistic view that she is either 'too bad' and needs to be punished or 'too good' and destined to be one of God's children" (191). This of course was the common distinction in 19th century literature; children died young either because they lacked discipline or because they were so virtuous they had already earned a place in heaven. Therefore it is difficult to accept that Judy's death is simply a plot device. Keith points out that in other children's novels of the period such as *What Katy Did* (1872) and *Heidi* (1884), the protagonist must undergo a transformation and learn to conform before their illness or disability can be cured. When Katy Carr falls and damages her spine, she becomes a miserable recluse until cousin Helen teaches her she must be patient, cheerful and neat – in other words, become a better person – if she hopes to walk again. And sure enough, after four years, she does. We have already been told that Judy is destined to become a daring young woman, something not often permitted in Victorian literature, and so she must be either corrected or killed off. Her bout of tuberculosis would have been the perfect beginning to a good death, but unlike her American counterpart Beth in *Little Women* (1868), naughty Judy does not yet deserve a pious, happy passing. When she recovers, she is again "full of nonsense and even mischief" (131). If her illness was a test, she

has not passed. Perhaps Turner felt the only way to save Judy's soul now was to martyr her, that final act of sacrifice her last chance at redemption.

In *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984), Carpenter and Prichard rightly label Catherine Sinclair's 1839 *Holiday House* an "almost revolutionary novel" (256), as Sinclair's portrayal of children as naturally naughty, mischievous and boisterous is far more realistic than the common Victorian representation of the 'ideal child'. Brother and sister Harry and Laura Graham are forever getting into trouble: they set the house on fire, host a rowdy tea party without permission and fall into rivers in their clean clothes. The deathbed scene here, however, is not bestowed upon the rebellious Harry or Laura but rather their well-behaved, dutiful older brother Frank. When sailor Frank is wounded in action he returns home to his deathbed where, in contrast to Judy Woolcot, he dies a "holy death, piously exhorting Harry and Laura to reform and become sober and dutiful" (Carpenter and Pritchard 257). Where Judy fails to appeal to God during her final moments other than to request a reassuring hymn, Frank talks confidently of his faith and the afterlife: "there is no courage or fortitude like that derived from faith," (Sinclair 248) and "God's will be done!" (250). Even his final words, something considered extremely significant to the Victorians, declare his belief that he will meet his sister again, and the book's illustrations depict angels by his side. It is easy for Frank to have such faith; he knows he is dying and has time to prepare. He sorts through his possessions and announces who should get what, and counts it "a blessing to have such hours of solitary thought, for preparing [his] heart and establishing [his] faith during this moment of need" (246). Perhaps it is this Christian faith that allows him a good death in contrast

to Judy's sudden, tragic accident, or simply that he has led a decent life free of mischief and disobedience. In the previous chapter, nurserymaid Mrs. Crabtree proclaims that Frank "was always too good for this world" (220) whereas Judy's mother "had often said she trembled for her future" (28). Possibly Turner's less idealistic death scene reflects a changing attitude toward death; child mortality rates had marginally improved by the end of Queen Victoria's reign thanks to improvements in healthcare, so without such strong need to teach children how to die correctly authors like Turner might have treated death with more realism. After all, very few actual deaths are likely to have been as tranquil as those depicted in scenes such as Frank's, considering the crippling infectious diseases many would have suffered from.

Truly public deaths in 19th century children's literature are presented in a very different light. By 1815, over 200 crimes were punishable by death in England (*The Daily Mail*), with the capital punishment laws earning the nickname 'the bloody code'. It is believed that over 10,000 people were sentenced to death during the 1800s, including children. With public executions such a common feature of Georgian and Victorian life, it is little wonder that they became a source of entertainment drawing huge crowds, some of whom would pay a small fortune to rent a room with a good view of the proceedings. More surprising, though, is that children were taken to the gallows on school trips in an attempt to teach them a lesson in morality: look what happens to naughty boys and girls – don't end up like them! This approach is typical of the 17th century Puritan view that children were inherently depraved and in desperate need of education to correct their wicked behaviour, so while many 19th century writers chose to represent early

death as something that *could* be beautiful and noble, a large portion of children's literature, particularly Georgian, used death as a means to shock and scare readers into obedience. For instance, *Dangerous Sports, a Tale Addressed to Children Warning them against Wanton, Careless, or Mischievous Exposure to Situations from which Alarming Injuries so often Proceed*, published in 1808, cautions children against dogs, horses and pen knives and features unfortunate young rebels who meet painful, grisly ends when they fail to heed this advice. *Tales Uniting Instruction with Amusement consisting of The Dangers of the Streets* (1809) sees Tom disobeying his father and accidentally killing him. But perhaps the master of macabre children's literature is Mary Martha Sherwood, an Evangelical author famous for her series of stories about the Fairchild family, published between 1818 and 1847. Amongst dozens of didactic tales of domesticity peppered with bible quotations and hymns, there are two stories in particular that illustrate attitudes toward death in the public sphere: "The Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents", to which we will return shortly, and "Story on the Sixth Commandment". In this tale, Mr. Fairchild is distressed to find his three children, Lucy, Henry and Emily, bickering over a doll. When the situation escalates and the girls begin biting and scratching one another, Mr. Fairchild resolves to correct their behaviour, not only through whipping and withholding meals for the day, but by showing them something "they will remember as long as they live" (55). As is characteristic of the Georgian attitude to childrearing, he resolves to scare them straight by taking them to view a rotting corpse hanging in a gibbet, accompanied by the story of how this terrible man met such a fate. Naturally, he and his brother were "wicked,

proud and stubborn” (58) children who argued relentlessly, until one finally stabbed the other to death. To ensure his point is truly taken to heart, he drives it home: “these brothers, when they first began to quarrel in their play, as you did this morning, did not think that death and hell would be the end of their quarrels”(59). Mr. Fairchild assures his children that hope is not lost; though we are full of hatred “by nature” (59) – a popular Puritan idea about original sin – we can turn this hate into love by having faith in God. Not only does this story highlight death as an instrument for scaring children into good behaviour, it also illustrates how public execution “can be utilised as a means to ensure social order” (James 27). The sight of the hanging corpse is inevitably disturbing to the Fairchild children: “Whilst Mr. Fairchild was speaking, the wind blew strong and shook the body upon the gibbet, rattling the chains by which it hung” (57). Their father’s explanation for the spectacle paints an even more gruesome picture: “When a man commits a murder, he is hanged in iron chains upon a gibbet, till his body falls to pieces, that all who pass by may take warning by the example” (57). So just as 19th century writers appropriated death as a tool for improving children, capital punishment was held up as a threat to anybody considering a life of lawlessness. This is also reflected in Henry Sharpe Horsley’s *The Affectionate Parent’s Gift, and the Good Child’s Reward* (1828), a book intended to “lead the tender minds of youth in the early practice of virtue and piety”. In the poem “A Visit to Newgate”, a father, evidently in cahoots with Mr. Fairchild, takes his two sons for a walk through death row in Newgate prison, “just for example’s sake” (134). Hoping to convince the thieving Jack that crime does not pay, he

subjects them to the shuddering sighs, chilled calls and frantic tears of prisoners “doom’d to die” (137).

Not everybody felt that witnessing capital punishment could teach a useful lesson in morality; several Victorian authors joined the fight against public execution, helping to bring about its ban in 1868. Charles Dickens, horrified by the raucous public reaction to a hanging he attended, wrote a letter to *The Times* stating:

I am solemnly convinced that nothing... could work such ruin as one public execution, and I stand astounded and appalled by the wickedness it exhibits. I do not believe that any community can prosper where such a scene of horror and demoralization... is presented at the very doors of good citizens. (British Library archives)

Writers William Thackeray and Douglas Jerrold also lent their celebrity status to the cause, but it is the response of children’s author Lewis Carroll that is most significant here. Though he never explicitly joined the debate, Michelle Ann Abate convincingly argues in *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children’s Literature* (2013) that Carroll was an opponent of public execution and used *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to induct children into the conversation. As an enormous admirer of Charles Dickens and *Punch Magazine*, both staunch opponents of public hangings, Carroll was likely sympathetic to their agendas, and there is no denying that “capital punishment as both a legal policy and civic practice permeates [the book]” (77). Cries of ‘off with her head’ pepper the text, and no less than three characters threaten the residents of Wonderland with execution: The Duchess, The King and the Queen of Hearts. Abate even suggests that Alice Liddell, who in reality was ten at the time, is written as a seven year old in

order to underline the age of criminal responsibility, as seven year olds could be prosecuted as adults and hanged. Throughout the story, Carroll presents execution as “silly and even ridiculous” (Abate 83) as death sentences are dished out indiscriminately and even the vanishing Cheshire Cat, who at the time is *just* a head, faces a beheading. This surely must reflect Carroll's view of capital punishment as a ludicrous practice, particularly if we consider the absence of any actual executions in the story. Though almost every character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is sentenced to death at some point, they all manage to evade the chop. Abate sees this as a comment on the haphazard way in which capital law was enforced in Victorian England; wealthy or powerful criminals and even those who demonstrated literacy could usually escape the gallows. In fact, it is Alice's constant rebellion in the face of the Queen's execution orders that saves so many lives: “the young girl's activism saves not only a handful of characters from annihilation, but, ultimately, herself” (87). Not only does Alice protect the playing cards when faced with beheading, she completely demolishes Wonderland itself when she refuses to be sentenced to death herself. “‘I won't!’ said Alice.” (141) This suggests that Alice is a strong, independent child with the ability to effect change, but interestingly it was the view of children as inherently innocent and in need of protection that “played a significant role in arguments calling for the abolition of public execution” (88). By the mid-nineteenth century, antigallows campaigners believed that subjecting a child to the traumatic, grisly scene of a hanging should no longer be seen as educational; children were impressionable and should be shielded from such horrors. It is difficult to accept that Carroll subscribed to this romanticised view of children as needing

to be sheltered from reality; *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a complex, surreal novel with meaninglessness, death, mathematics and subversion as its themes, and Alice is presented as a rather willful child, wise beyond her years. In this light, perhaps Alice stands for abolitionists, young and old, who refused to accept the nonsense that was the bloody code. But if we consider another theme of the book, the loss of childhood innocence as manifested in Alice's physical growth, and Carroll's wish that young girls, particularly Alice Liddell, could stay "pure and divine" forever (*The New York Times*), it is easy to see how Alice might symbolise the childhood innocence that the gallows threatened to destroy.

A far less gruesome though equally public aspect of 19th century death was the art of mourning. Even before Queen Victoria lost Prince Albert in 1861 and went into her famous forty-year mourning period, all social classes were expected to observe certain death etiquette. Throughout the 1800s, widows were required to remain in full mourning for at least a year, wearing head-to-toe black (typically crepe) along with a bonnet, gloves and veil. They should distance themselves from society, abstaining from social occasions lest they be seen as unfeeling. Funerals were expensive, extravagant affairs with formal written invitations and specialist outfitters. When Victoria herself went into lifelong mourning, the country grieved with her and those few lucky enough never to have experienced death in the family now knew what it was to uphold the rituals of death. With bereavement such a visible practice in the 19th century then it is unsurprising that children's authors appropriated it as a means to instruct readers. Mrs. Sherwood's story "Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents" tells of a wayward girl who dies "in agonies" (156)

after being trapped in a fire, a direct result of disobeying her elders. The moral is not a subtle one: “Had this poor child been brought up in the fear of God, she might now have been living” (170). But Augusta Noble’s demise is not deterrent enough; Sherwood goes on to describe her funeral at length in order to truly frighten young readers into redemption. Her depiction of the hearse is especially chilling, with its “long close coach, without windows, used for carrying the dead from their houses to their graves” (157). Everything is “dismal”, “sorrowful” and “dark” and the children cannot help “crying very bitterly” (158) throughout the service. This is of course an accurate representation of such an unhappy day, but Sherwood is dwelling on the gloomy details deliberately. This story warns: act like the wicked Augusta and you may soon be that body covered in white velvet, placed in a vault.

Turner handles the Woolcot family’s mourning rather more sensitively in *Seven Little Australians*. After Judy dies, Meg’s appearance at church – “the little figure in sorrowful black... the wistful sadness of the blue eyes” (190) – is juxtaposed with her old friend Aldith, “light-souled as ever, dressed in gay attire” (189). It is not clear how long the siblings spend in mourning – etiquette dictates around six months – but Meg is undoubtedly deeply affected by her sister’s death and will perhaps never be the same again. Meanwhile Bunty no longer tells lies, the General is loved and appreciated more than ever thanks to Judy’s sacrifice, and the Captain’s children have become “dearer to his heart” (192). Just as in “Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents” where Harry and Laura vow to be better children after Frank dies, this depiction of mourning shows us how death impacts those left behind. For the most part,

Judy's family has changed for the better since her accident, illustrating how death can save not just the dying but also their families.

In conclusion, the representation of death in 19th century children's literature is something of a contradiction. At once, dying is presented as a reward for virtuous behaviour and a punishment for disobedience. A young reader attempting to make sense of the private deaths in *Seven Little Australians* and *Holiday House* would be forgiven for feeling baffled; will being a model citizen lead them to an early grave like Frank, and if so, should they aspire to die young rather than live a full life? Deaths in the public sphere teach a far less ambiguous lesson: break the law and you will die a painful, undignified death with no chance of redemption. Earlier authors like Mrs. Sherwood had no hesitation in deliberately frightening readers with graphic, distressing scenes that left little doubt as to their message that bad children die bad deaths. It seems that as the century progressed and death rates gradually fell, some authors (though certainly not all) began to take a softer approach and shifted the focus away from the threat of hellfire to the promise of a peaceful, welcomed passing. Regardless of the morals behind each death scene, it is indisputable that bad children and good deaths were at the heart of children's literature throughout much of the 1800s and that, as Avery claims in *Nineteenth Century Children* (1965), representations of death in children's books almost always "tended to be linked with the themes of punishment and reward" (212). Death was undeniably a tool used by authors to frighten, threaten, influence and preach, and very rarely intended to comfort, support or explain to children as it typically is today.

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