It is a cliché to say that nowadays, due to the dominant presence of modern information access tools, more and more children are confronted directly or indirectly with the reality of violent incidents or deaths. Nevertheless, the way in which the subject is presented to children has changed a lot. As research has shown, the fear of death is already present in childhood, it is considered as highly important to deal with this fear and to reconcile children with the inevitable reality of death. The need for children to understand phenomena associated directly or indirectly with death at a very early age is underlined by several scholars. Titles such as Death Talk (Fredman), Talking About Death. A Dialogue Between Parent and Child (Grollman and Avishai) and Death Is No Stranger (Lasher) are characteristic of the contemporary tendency to talk frankly to children about death. This practice is mirrored in literature that directly addresses the topic of death, and is furthermore used to “provide opportunities to make death a part of everyday conversation” (Corr and Balk, 283). Those children’s books are to be read either by or with children, in an attempt to help them understand death and death-related topics. Lois Gibson and Laura Zaidman emphasize the advantages of learning to cope with death. According to them, covering a variety of approaches, from picture books to young adult fiction, [the books] all show that when a character dies, another learns a little more about how to live. (233)

Furthermore, the series of annotated bibliographies on death and death-related literature for children and adolescents makes it clear that this kind of literature discusses topics such as scary situations, loss, bereavement, grief, and mourning in a variety of ways (see Corr, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). Between these works, some emphasize in various ways the
importance for the young readers of asking questions, as the process of questioning helps towards coping with death and loss (see Corr 2003–2004, 340–341). In other words, those books may guide children to seek answers on their own as a way of facing their fears and losses. Besides, Katherine Paterson, author of *Bridge to Terabithia*, argues that effective literary works don’t give children “packaged answers”, but invite them “to go within themselves to listen to the sounds of their own hearts” (35).

The focus of this article will lie on visual representations of death in its various manifestations, instances, impacts, and effects. Since a picturebook is a literary form in which verbal and visual elements are inextricably linked, illustrations make valuable contributions to the created meaning and carry an important part of the narration. Eventually, when talking through images, the unseen, immaterial, and abstract concept of death takes a concrete form by means of visual techniques and choices. Thus, the aim of this article is to find out what images in picturebooks can tell us about death, by examining how they address challenging issues by their own means. Furthermore, we shall examine some of the ways in which pictures pose questions that lead to no specific answers, mainly because in death-related topics completely satisfying answers cannot be obtained.

The study object will be Kitty Crowther’s three picturebooks dealing with the topic of death in various forms such as suicide, dying, and loneliness. The Belgian author, rewarded with the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2010, does not avoid portraying these difficult subjects. Instead, she finds them challenging opportunities. Crowther herself affirms that she authors picturebooks in order to communicate her own questions and feelings and that she does not try to make pleasant books but stories that deeply interest her (Crowther in Foulquier). All images are “polysemous” (Barthes 1977, 38–39) – they allow more than one possible interpretive position. In Crowther’s books, this is taken to the extreme. Besides the written narration, the visual narration is characterized by gaps and ruptures in order to deliberately allow room for questioning and personal interpretation.

The three books to be analysed are *La visite de Petite Mort* (Little Death Comes Calling), a review of which can be found in this *interjuli* on page 96, *Moi et Rien* (Me and Nothing), and *Annie du lac* (Annie of the Lake). Death constitutes the central theme in *La*
visite de Petite Mort. The story is about the mystery of death: what it feels like and what happens to a person after they die. Petite Mort, a young girl who comes to take dying people, meets Elsewise, a dying girl who, instead of showing the fear that Petite Mort is used to, welcomes her as a friend and playmate. Loneliness and personal shortcomings resulting from the death of the mother are a recurring theme in both Moi et Rien and Annie du lac. Both books treat the topics of consolation and recovery but in different situations. Moi et Rien evokes the absence of the mother. Lila, the protagonist, makes up an imaginary friend, called Rien (Nothing) in whose company she develops and surpasses the pain. Annie du lac describes the events that lead Annie to a suicide attempt and her eventual regeneration. Annie lives near a lake with three large islands that look like mountains. One day, when the sadness from the loss of her mother is overwhelming, she decides to throw herself into the lake. However, those three islands are the hats of three aquatic giants who live in the lake and who need Annie’s help to find their way to the sea.

The main themes present in these three books are death itself, dying, suicide, loneliness, and absence, visually represented by the use of several techniques. More specifically, in this study we will try to examine how images project stages of grief and recovery, how they depict death and the transcendental trip to it, and how those depictions create a space for the readers to find their own answers according to their experience and within their own personal interpretive and emotional limits.

Grief and Recovery

Dealing with grief constitutes the initial situation in each of the three books analysed in this paper. Whether the characters grieve for their deceased loved ones or for their own death, no details are given for the cause of death. This is because the primary purpose of the books is to help young children to understand what death is, what happens after death, and ways in which they may react to the death of a beloved person. The process of coping with grief is reflected in the clothing choices, referring to the custom of wearing mourning clothing during the mourning period. In Crowther, clothes express grief, loneliness, and insecurity. Indeed, as a code, clothing and fashion can have denotative and connotative meaning (see Barnard 86). The clothing code communicates
meaning because clothes are symbols. According to the semiotic approach, fashion is a visual language and therefore organized systematically like one (see Barthes 1983, 30). Furthermore, clothing exhibits conventionalization, as elements of clothing can be related to elements of meaning (see Davis 6). In *Moi et Rien*, Lila experiences her mother’s loss. She is depicted wearing her father’s large coat, which contrasts her small body. Lila wears his coat when he is not with her, but in his presence she takes it off. The coat thus functions in a symbolical way to represent a substitute of the father, who has – rapt in his sorrow – neglected his daughter. The coat is there to reassure Lila, but it also wraps her into the heavy silence of her grief. Furthermore, clothing, as the outer expression of an inner identity, often reflects mood. In *Annie du lac*, the eponymous protagonist has been feeling lonely and depressed since her mother died. Her long black dress mirrors her psychological condition. Up to a certain point, the dress also anticipates the suicide she is about to commit. Yet, she wears white the night before her suicide attempt. In *La visite de Petite Mort*, black is used for Petite Mort’s clothes, while white is used for Elsewise. White has traditionally been the mourning colour in some cultures, as for example in China and Japan, and also among medieval European queens. The symbolic black and white dualism can be associated with opposite concepts such as good and evil, pureness and impureness. In the same way as the double function of the coat Lila wears, these antithetical pairs can be perceived as complementary. Death and life coexist in one entity, inextricably linked to human destiny.

Anthropomorphism is widely present in children’s literature (see Nikolajeva 125 and Lukens 54). Kitty Crowther uses it to give a concrete form to abstract notions such as the absence of the deceased and the feelings that the loss causes. As Penni Cotton underlines, the semiotic patterning of visual texts, frequently using anthropomorphism, helps children understand at once that this is not simply a story but that it is saying something about life. (30)

In *Moi et Rien*, the absence of the mother is concretized through anthropomorphism. Lila makes up an imaginative friend called Rien (Nothing). Although in the text this “nothing” takes the figure of an invisible being, the image makes it visible, at least to Lila and consequently to the reader. Rien is personified in the figure of a straw puppet. As a “paradoxal repre-
presentation of vacancy” (Gaiotti 423), it appears to be a coping mechanism for Lila, who not only grieves for her mother’s passing but also has to face her father’s neglect, himself mourning for his lost wife.

The depiction of death and loss can be assisted by the colours used and the choice of the setting, both creating a special mood in a story (see Nikola - jeva and Scott 67 and Nodelman 60). Cultural heritage, at least in the western world, associates the colour black with death. Crowther uses black as a connotation of threatening and painful situations. For example, In Annie du lac, black is used to paint Annie’s home and various elements of the setting such as stones, trees, the floor, and the stove, thus underlining a depressive ambiance. In Moi et Rien, the black front door of the hibernating garden, the black crows inside it and the black windows of the house refer directly to the mother’s absence. Black is also the dominant colour of the picture showing Petite Mort going toward the dying person’s room to accompany them to the afterlife (see ill. 1).

Although Crowther uses black, she also opts for other colours. Touches of bright colours are used to remove the sinister ambiance, though still referring to death and loss. This is the case in Moi et Rien, where earthy and soft colours such as brown, ochre, and green are used that are associated with nature, implying funereal rituals related to the return to Mother Earth. Also, the extended use of white in the background, also considered as non-colour, symbolizes the pain from loss and absence.

Along with colours, the setting plays an important role in helping the reader relate to the character. It can influence the character and affect its mood (see Lukens 121). A characteristic example of how colour, setting, and character are interrelated is found in Annie du lac. Annie lives in the middle of a savage nature that amplifies her loneliness. In the beginning of the
book, gesture codes are used to depict her sadness and lack of spirit. She walks heavily through her garden towards her tall and enclosed house. The depressing ambiance is increased by the use of oppressive pages, dark colours, and darkened shadows. These techniques are used to let the reader enter into the mental universe of the young woman, into her existential daze. Annie’s home strongly resembles the sea bed. In the first presentation of the inside of her house, Annie sits on a chair looking melancholically out of her window. The walls are covered with drawings of marine plants, which intrigue the reader, who is, at this point, unable to explain their presence. Some pages later, the sea creatures will be depicted accompanying Annie during her suicide travelling towards the bottom of the lake. The reader is now able to connect with the sea-like decoration inside Annie’s home. The recurring motifs of the sea found in both Annie’s living room and bedroom have all this time been giving clues about her future suicide attempt. The artificial sea bottom decoration has now become real.

As far as the colours are concerned, they are monotone and lifeless, indicating the continuous despair Annie is falling into. The walls in Annie’s bedroom are white and blue, blue spreading to adjacent surfaces in the same way that Annie’s melancholic feelings keep spreading inside her mind and soul. The bedroom seems to enclose and swallow Annie in a claustrophobic way, which is accentuated by the lack of windows, the curved attic room wall, and cold blue colours. At this point, it looks like Annie is on an imaginary sea bottom (see ill. 2). This whole setting illustrates her inability to carry the progression of her despair; she is feeling overwhelmed. At this particular moment of Annie du Lac, the story has reached its climax. Similarly in the other two books, the culminating point occurs when desperate Lila
stands in front of the black door of the hibernating garden, and when Petite Mort, surrounded by the black, is getting on the stairs to take the dying person. At these crucial moments, the plot needs to move to its resolution.

And although the moment of death is either omitted, as in Moi et Rien, or appears as quick, easy, and painless, as in Annie du Lac and La visite de Petite Mort, the climax of despair is presented with clarity. The images mirror the unavoidable and the dead ends in life, dead ends that are not hidden from the reader but, on the contrary, are projected so that deliverance can follow later.

In literature, be it for children or adults, a way to talk about death is to refer to nature’s circle of life as an allegory to the perpetual cycle from death to rebirth. This practice is also used in Crowther’s books, where the fading of nature functions as a metonymy of death, while the blooming implies rebirth. For example, in Moi et Rien, winter is an allegory for the death of the mother and wife, the death of the relationship between daughter and father, while spring indicates a rebirth for Lila and her father, as both leave behind their mourning and pass on to the next stage of their lives. Also, spring means a rebirth of their relationship, since they find each other again. Furthermore, Lila focuses on planting seeds and watching them grow, actions that help her process her mother’s death, as this is something her mother did frequently. Also, the state of the earth, with its winter hibernation and its springtime rebirth is strongly associated with her father’s job as a gardener. Thus, depicting the family’s actions in nature puts the girl into a lineage. Planting seeds has a double effect on Lila. Apart from being a reminder of her late mother, it is a coping mechanism while the girl passes through the various stages of grief. During winter, Lila is depicted as alone. The cold season accentuates the loneliness and sadness of the little girl and makes her steps towards healing more difficult. Eventually, the arrival of spring signals a period of rebirth that refers not only to the rebirth of the earth but also the rebirth of Lila’s soul. She seems to have completed her grieving process, made peace with the passing of her mother, and from now on is able to move on with her life. At the same time, the blossoming of the Himalayan poppies – her mother’s favourite flowers – as well as the revival of the trees, symbolize not only life and rebirth, but also the transcendence of absence and death. Thus, in Moi et Rien, the magic of nature is accentuated; from a seed,
from almost “nothing”, a plant can grow. Characters have experienced loss and death and are now ready to continue their lives under new circumstances, bridging the two periods, before and after. The feeling of finality is substituted by the idea of continuity.

**Intericonical Relations: The Figure of Death**

*La visite de Petite Mort* is a book that makes death its central theme. In this book, death takes the figure of a young girl that is similar to the Grim Reaper. The psychopomp with the characteristic black hooded cloak and scythe is a well-known representation of death in western culture (see Aiken 176). Other similarities between the Grim Reaper and Petite Mort include her presence in the dying person’s room. The well-known scene of Death coming to call the person is reproduced in the pages of the book (see ill. 3). Also, like the faceless reaper, Petite Mort wears a white mask that underlines the supernatural and the immaterial nature of death. Crowther herself admits the attraction masks had on her and comments accurately on the particular influence of the “terrifying presence or non-presence” of the mask (Crowther in Foulquier).

However, the fact that Petite Mort is young and female contrasts the stereotypical depiction of death. This can be read as an attempt to familiarize and reconcile the young readership with the notion of death, utilizing subversive approaches. Firstly, death’s very image appears childish, easing the difficult subject of death down to the level of children. Secondly, the figure of death is female, softening the violence and deflating the aggressiveness of the death fact, characteristics that are stereotypically male. Thirdly, Petite Mort, as the immortal symbol of death, looks far more melancholic, lonely, and disdained than the dying, mortal Elsewise. Elsewise is the one
who takes initiatives and decisions during the modulation of her relationship with death by offering a hand of friendship. This attribution of characteristics turns over the roles by giving control to the mortal figure. The little girl epitomizes the subversion of death as a powerful force. Just as intertextuality in literature evokes relations to other texts in the reader (see Kristeva 146 and Genette 2), illustrations in picturebooks can evoke relations to other pictures in the young reader. This device – the netting of iconic signs related to one another – is called intericonicity. Intericonicity and intertextuality are frequently used in modern picturebooks in a challenging way and demand the dynamic participation of the reader in order to interpret the “text”, being the visual, the verbal, or the combination of the two (see Anstey and Bull 83, Pantaleo 29). In Crowther’s work, several intericonic elements weave powerful visual depictions rich in cultural references. The fireplace of Petite Mort’s palace for example is decorated with masks. The experienced reader will recognize signs from the Inuit culture, where masks are a means of communication with the spirits and represent the individual souls of the living and the dead. Masks are also related to shamanist beliefs in the invisible world of spirits, souls, and mythological entities (see Auger 35). According to shamanism, the world of humans and the invisible world are in constant interaction. The illustration thus shows a connection between life and death, it gives shape to the immateriality of death and symbolizes the transcendental trip.

Furthermore, several images from various cultures and myths are used as a metonymy of death. For example, Elsewise’s trip to the kingdom of death is in reference to Greek mythology. Lead by Petite Mort, Elsewise crosses a river in a small boat (see ill. 4). In Greek mythology, the deceased entered the land of the dead, ruled by Hades, by crossing the river Acheron, one of the
five rivers of the underworld. They were ferried across by Charon, the transporter of the underworld. Other intericonic elements are the key next to the door where Elsewise stands and her depiction as an angel, both referring to Paradise (see ill. 5). From a Christian perspective, the key, as an object with opening and closing powers, represents the power to enter into eternal life.

Crowther also uses animals as intericonic elements and places owls and snakes in her images. These animals have antithetical but also complementary symbolisms in different cultures, religions, myths, and legends around the world. The owl is considered a symbol of wisdom but also a harbinger of death (see Eason 71). Serpents have long been associated with both good and evil, representing life and death, creation and destruction. They are considered as guardians of the underworld as well as powers of rebirth and fertility (see Eason 19–25). In *La visite de Petite Mort*, owls and snakes decorate Petite Mort’s palace. Thus, the use of these symbols projects the palace as a place of an ending but also as a place of a beginning, a place that raises wisely the awareness of the inevitable facts of the life and death cycle.

All these iconic attributions are strong symbols. However, it is the reader who makes the intericonic connection and his participation in the decoding process is presupposed (see Nikolajeva and Scott 228). Not all the readers will make sense of the allusion present in an intericonic element, since much of the meaning is lost if the reader is not familiar with its anterior representations. But picturebooks have the ability to transcend boundaries between adult and child readerships (see Scott 99–109). Thus, at least for the experienced reader, iconic attributions concerning death are used to underline the common human destiny. These cultural and religious symbols offer multiple interpretations through their particular denotative nuances, while they invest death with
various meanings. However, all the above symbols and myths present a secular view of death, as they all refer to the souls of the dead as going somewhere else, including heaven. Crowther is not in line with other children’s books that avoid presenting traditional ideas of heaven. As Sadler explains, in these books, either there is a desire by the authors to avoid confusing young children, or they have concluded that the idea of heaven is accepted by only few people (247).

Of the books analysed in this article, perhaps the most chilling illustration is the one that shows Annie inside the lake, sinking to the bottom, with a large stone bound to her foot with a rope (see ill. 6). Crowther here illustrates a social taboo, and especially one of the biggest in children’s literature: that of suicide. Annie’s face is calm, her arms crossed over her chest, looking relieved as if she was sleeping. Furthermore, during Annie’s fall toward the bottom of the lake and consequently toward death, she is wrapped in a light yellow colour usually associated with cheerfulness in picturebooks (Nodelman 65). The deliverance and relief of the protagonist is thus insinuated. The image speaks frankly about suicide. For Crowther, suicide is part of life and children need to know about it. Besides, violent death and attempted or accomplished suicide are now very common in adolescent and young adult novels (see Apseloff).

Happy Endings? The Transcendental Trip

The end invites the reader to contradictory interpretations. Starting from La visite de Petite Mort, Petite Mort and Elsewise, as Death and Angel, hold hands and are now leading the deceasing people to death together. Elsewise has stopped living; yet her death looks like a hopeful transition to afterlife. In Moi et Rien, the last image shows the father giving a box containing a straw puppet to his daughter,
similar to Rien, Lila’s imaginary friend. The reader is surprised and left wondering about Rien’s identity. The question now is whether this doll is the representation of the imaginary. Rien represents the absence of the mother, which has evolved throughout the story: from nothing, and the heavy pain that stems from it, to a nothing full of rich memories. The absence of the beloved one now takes the form of a psychological presence, bridging the before and the after. Lila perpetuates her mother’s remembrance through Rien and manages to tackle daily life. Thus, Rien can be interpreted either as a symbolism of absence or as a transitional object – or both. 

Annie du Lac ends with a picture of Annie in the hand of one of the aquatic giants. But from another perspective, this happy ending implied in the book blurs the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Annie’s suicide attempt seems realistic, while from the moment she falls into the lake the story unfolds into an imaginary, fairy tale world. It is inside the lake that she finds reasons to live; she is no longer alone, she has made friends and found love. The reader is left with the question of whether Annie’s adventure with the aquatic giants represents her comfort from the end of an unwanted life or her real revival and rebirth. Those ambiguities, present in all the final images of the books examined in this article, are used by Crowther to perhaps insinuate that loss and pain could be persistent at times. She allows two views, one hard reality, the reality that the death of a loved one can have a tremendous impact on somebody’s life and be difficult to cope with, and another smoother and more positive aspect, that of surpassing the pain and going on with life.

Conclusion

In the picturebooks analysed in this article, visual techniques such as colours and shapes, as well as literary devices applied to images such as anthropomorphism, intericonicity, and allegory, offer alternatives to talking about death without using words. Furthermore, intentional gaps in the meaning created by the images advance the dialogue between the work that depicts death and the individual reader’s interpretation. At the same time, visual symbols with an intentional ambiguity project their bipolar characteristics. Their understanding depends on the abilities of each reader, and allows for multiple receptions.

Crowther exploits the above techniques and devices masterly and uses
them in an ambivalent way. Firstly, she provokes the reader by showing images depicting the hard side of death. Then, she conforms to the traditional approach applied in children’s literature according to which books must respect the emotional world of the children. Accordingly, she allows the readers to advance into the idea of death by creating conditions that invite questioning and thinking. She then guides the readers throughout their personal interpretations, helping them manage troubling issues according to their own experience and within their own comfort zone. This is particularly important since the intended readers of picturebooks are children.

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NOTES

1 All illustrations reprinted with the generous permission of Carlsen Verlag GmbH.

1 For example, Owen explores the manifestation of the fear of death in pre-puberty children aged from eight to nine years old. The fear of war in children from different societies is investigated by Tarifa and Kloep.

2 The image of Petite Mort does not clearly imply its gender, as the author chooses a neutral appearance for this character. We can conclude, however, that the character is feminine from the title of the book, *La Visite de Petite Mort*. In French, “mort”, or death, has a feminine gender.

3 Elwyn Brooks White’s *Charlotte’s Web* springs instantly to mind, since it overtly addresses the circle of life. Charlotte, a spider living on a farm, devotes her short life to save her friend Wilbur, a pig who is scheduled to be butchered. She dies, leaving him with a sac full of her eggs. The following spring, Wilbur befriends Charlotte’s children, and in the years that follow their children and their children’s children. Most clearly, in Misca Miles’ picturebook *Annie and the Old One*, the grandmother explains to her granddaughter that the dead grandfather has returned to the earth. As far as the adult readership is concerned, one can refer to classical literature, such as the myth of Demetra and Persephone, clearly a myth about the circle of seasons, life and death. The cycle of life is also referenced in the New Testament, e.g.: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:20–36).

4 As referenced by Lewis Aiken, many personifications of death can be found in mythology, literature, and cultural history. In Ancient Egypt, for example, Anubis is depicted as a jackal-headed god. The mythological winged Harpy depicts death in the Iliad. In Orthodox Christian iconography, death is often depicted as a skeletal figure beneath the victorious Christ. In certain cultures, death is described as a monster with multiple heads and hands using various weapons to attack humans. A humanlike entity dressed in black or red and carrying a scythe, spear, rope, or timepiece, can be found in both the Occident and ancient Oriental literature (see 176–177).

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