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**A CHILD'S REALISATION OF DEATH AS AN EXISTENTIAL  
PROBLEM IN MODERN WESTERN EUROPEAN DRAMATURGY  
(LITERARY AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ASPECTS)**

**УСВІДОМЛЕННЯ ДИТИНОЮ СМЕРТІ  
ЯК ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІЙНА ПРОБЛЕМА  
В СУЧАСНІЙ ЗАХІДНОЄВРОПЕЙСЬКІЙ ДРАМАТУРГІЇ  
(ЛІТЕРАТУРНИЙ ТА ПСИХОТЕРАПЕВТИЧНИЙ АСПЕКТИ)**

**Yuhan N. L.**

*Doctor of Philological Sciences,  
Associate Professor,  
Professor at the Department  
of Oriental Philology and Translation  
Luhansk Taras Shevchenko  
National University  
Poltava, Ukraine*

**Юган Н. Л.**

*доктор філологічних наук, доцент,  
професор кафедри  
східної філології та перекладу  
Луганський національний  
університет імені Тараса Шевченка  
м. Полтава, Україна*

The concept of a child's death as an existential problem holds significance in modern psychoanalytical and humanistic psychology, as well as in psychotherapy and psychocorrection, as explored in classical works by Z. Freud, K. Horney, I. Yalom, and others. However, despite its relevance, this topic remains a societal taboo and is not openly discussed. Discussing death with children is particularly challenging, evoking fear, misunderstanding, protest, and intense emotions such as anger, aggression, depression, deprivation, and self-isolation [1]. Nevertheless, the acceptance and understanding of death represent crucial stages in childhood development, without which the further process of harmonious growing up is impossible.

Psychological research on this topic delves into various aspects, including the dynamics of the development of death existentiality in children, the nuances of perceiving the concept of death within the context of pain, and, most notably, the fear of pain in children with cancer. An essential focus of psychotherapy revolves around addressing the challenge of providing psychological support to children coping with the grief of losing parents, relatives, sisters, and brothers [2–5].

Playwrights also explore this theme in their plays that depict the death of children, focusing on their realization of impending doom, the experience of the transitional process, and the perception of children 'leaving' by their parents, siblings, and others in their surroundings. These plays, presented on global theater stages and studied in educational institutions [6], serve to break

the taboo surrounding this sensitive topic. They impart lessons of kindness and mercy, providing audiences the opportunity to collectively experience a spectrum of emotions alongside the actors and gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

In our research, we analyze the psychological aspects surrounding the issue of children's death as portrayed in the works of the French and Belgian writer Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, particularly in 'Oscar and the Pink Lady' (written in 2002 and adapted for the stage in 2003), and the German playwright Jens Raschke's 'Do Fish Sleep?' (2012) [7–8].

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's 'Oscar and the Pink Lady' revolves around the story of Oscar, a 10-year-old boy residing in a hospital due to leukemia, who discovers that he has only 12 days left to live. The author provides a poignant portrayal of the palliative ward in a French children's clinic, dedicated to treating children with severe and incurable diseases. Within this setting, some children recover and return home, while others face the inevitable outcome of their illnesses. Specially trained teams of doctors, nurses, and other specialists collaborate to provide comprehensive care for these young patients. Notably, in the French hospital, nurses wear pink coats, leading Oscar to affectionately name his attendant, with whom he forms a unique emotional bond, Grandma Rose.

By choosing the palliative children's ward as the setting for his work, the playwright confronts yet another societal taboo, shrouded in myths and maintained by a pervasive silence [9]. Even among medical professionals, the phrase 'palliative care' can evoke discomfort, as there exists a prevailing belief that those in white coats should always strive for a cure. When faced with a young patient bearing an incurable diagnosis, doctors are often hesitant to confront the reality. Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt authentically captures this dilemma in his play, where Dr. Dusseldorf tenaciously fights for Oscar's life. However, when Oskar's condition fails to improve following an unconventional brain transplant, Dr. Dusseldorf grapples with profound mental anguish. Oskar, labeled as an 'uncomfortable' patient, finds himself isolated, as doctors, nurses, and orderlies struggle to discuss his impending death directly, avoiding eye contact. Interestingly, it is Oskar who eventually finds the right words for Dr. Dusseldorf, relieving him of the burden of responsibility for 'cure' and easing the heartache of a children's doctor who doesn't always emerge victorious in the battle against death.

The only person who finds the strength to reveal the truth to Oscar and support him is Grandma Rosa. She saves him from despair by suggesting that he write letters to God (so that he will not feel so lonely) and to address him every day with one wish. She makes up a legend for Oscar about twelve magical days, each of which will equal ten years. Thus, the hero lives through childhood, youth, adolescence, maturity and old age, gradually realising what life and death are, discovering God and gaining self-awareness. The

elderly nurse manages to establish a psychological connection between the boy and his parents, who find themselves in a state of despair and hopelessness, struggling to communicate with their child and find the most necessary and sincere words. (Oscar therefore considers them traitors, cowards).

It is interesting that E.-E. Schmitt created this story during his own illness. After his recovery, he “wanted to write a book about illness, talking about how one should be sick and how one should treat death”. However, the writer confessed that his exploration of death serves the larger purpose of emphasizing the beauty of life [10, p. 326].

Jens Raschke's monodrama play, 'Do Fish Sleep?' delves into the theme of accepting death and dispelling its perceived terror. The author articulates profound thoughts through the voice of a ten-year-old girl, offering more than just a recollection of the vibrant and challenging days in Jetta's life. Instead, the play unfolds as a philosophical monologue exploring the intricacies of life, death, and memory.

Jetta often goes to the cemetery to visit her six-year-old brother, who died of blood cancer a year ago, and recalls all the details of her tragedy. Her monologue is punctuated by the kind of questions that typically occupy a child's mind: Are fish asleep? Do they count sheep to fall asleep? What dreams do they have? But at the same time, she also has to answer some very difficult questions: Why, if God is merciful, did he take her little brother? How to cope with the loss? How do we deal with the feelings it evokes? And what happens to us when we die?

The girl shares the story of her life with her brother, remembering moments with her parents, the funeral, and slowly accepting the truth about death and the fact that life goes on. Jetta's parents are deeply affected by the loss of their son, leaving the girl to navigate her own emotions, search for answers, and ultimately find them on her own.

Similar to "Oscar and the Pink Lady", in this challenging situation, the child comes to the realization for the first time that parents aren't as all-powerful and all-knowing as they may have seemed. In this case, it's the sister who takes on the responsibility of finding the right words before her brother's death. Despite her childlike naivety about the process of dying and death, she selects a white coffin and proposes that the children and relatives paint and write farewell words. Later, she attempts to grapple with the pain of loss on her own.

The playwright encourages readers and viewers to contemplate the journey of the resilient young heroine, who, a year after her brother's funeral, endeavors to rebuild herself within the confines of the adult world. Raschke prompts reflection on the significance of memory, exploring what provides the strength to endure the pain of loss and how to assist those close to us. The

play delves into the process of rediscovering oneself and embracing the realities of life and death.

At the end of the drama, Jetta ponders whether the black storm clouds in her drawings can ever become lighter. Denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance are the five stages through which each reader and viewer of the play “Do Fish Sleep?” goes through. The crucial insight lies in the assurance that, despite the thick clouds hovering over Jetta, they will eventually disperse, and sunlight will once again illuminate everything around her.

The works of E.-E. Schmitt and J. Raschke pose existential questions that are very difficult for a child to answer. There is no right answer, and after reading the texts the reader realises that the answer the child finds in the tests is better than his own. Despite all the tragedy and hopelessness of the situations described, these are lucid texts. Oskar concludes that the most intriguing questions in life remain open-ended, carrying a mystery, while only dull questions have a straightforward answer. And for life, there is one and only one solution – to live. Jetta was able to survive her family tragedy and made her only decision – to start living again.

The humanistic emphasis and psychotherapeutic value embedded in dramas exploring children's perspectives on death make them valuable tools for psychological counseling and family psychotherapy when dealing with the loss of children. These works can be particularly impactful in supporting children undergoing palliative care and those in hospice wards.

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