Exploring the Agential Child in Death-Themed Picturebooks: A Comparative Analysis across Cultures

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Abstract: The status of adults and children in children’s literature is a complex, long-debated issue. Marah Gubar introduced the kinship model, challenging the notion of children as voiceless and emphasizing their agency as human beings. This study argues that the model can serve as a fruitful framework for examining the representation of children in death-themed picturebooks because the phenomenon of death places children and adults in a relatively equal position and implies similarities between them. It analyzes 11 picturebooks featuring agential child protagonists and published in the UK, the US, Japan, and Taiwan. The analysis is directed at four representations: the independent child, the atomized child, the helpful child, and the analogous child and adult. Each exploration describes whether and how the texts illustrate the model’s key points: (1) a child’s voice and agency; (2) the relatedness, connection, and similarity between children and adults; and (3) the gradual, erratic, and variable nature of development from childhood to adulthood. The findings highlight the heterogeneity of agential children across cultures and suggest that scrutinizing childhood requires engagement with adulthood. This perspective inspires us to reconsider the adult-child dichotomy and expand our imagination of what children can be across cultures.

Keywords: Marah Gubar’s kinship model; death-themed picturebooks; childhood; comparative children’s literature; agential child

1. Introduction

The status of adults and children in children’s literature has been a long-standing and complex issue—one that is scrutinized in this study with a focus on death-themed picturebooks given the unique perspective that death offers. Death has been addressed by scholars in discussions of childhood and adulthood. For example, Neil Postman argues that adulthood is marked by a sense of shame, containing secrets that adults withhold from children. One such secret is death, and others include secrets related to sex, money, violence, illness, and social relations. Postman also contends that adults retain specific words, knowledge, and books related to these topics (Postman 1994, p. 49). However, several scholars have disagreed with Postman’s arguments (Hoikkala et al. 1987; Marsh 2002; Vanobbergen 2004). Jackie Marsh, for instance, indicates that Postman’s positioning of the child is “based on a particular version of childhood in which minority-world, middle-class values become the taken-for-granted norm”. She contends that childhood is, instead, “a historically mediated concept, located in specific sociocultural and economic contexts that frame its meaning” (Marsh 2002, p. 133). In other words, Marsh believes that childhood is far from a homogeneous experience in which all children have access to the same encounters. Some children may be exposed to the “secrets” of adult life that Postman identifies, but it would be implausible to disqualify them as children because of such knowledge. Nevertheless, many also share Postman’s view that death is an adult theme. One such scholar is Csaba Osvath, who states that many cultures tend to shield children from conversations about death and dying (Osvath 2021, p. 71). Similar views have been put forward by scholars from a wide range of fields (Ariès 1974; Becker 1973; Faulkner 1997).
I argue that death is far from a topic meant solely for adults but is instead a cross-generational one. In “Picturebooks with Cross-Generational Themes,” Sandra L. Beckett notes that many picturebooks deal with what are often considered adult themes when they are, in fact, “cross-generational topics of interest to readers of all ages” (Beckett 2012, p. 209). Beckett identifies death as a cross-generational matter, and she introduces several death-related picturebooks that serve as counterexamples to Postman’s (1994) claim that adults keep books related to death from children (p. 42). Beckett’s observations were made considerably later than Postman’s argument, but death is nonetheless ubiquitous in the history of children’s literature (Clement and Jamali 2016, p. 5; James 2009, p. 2; Nikolajeva 2013, p. 320). Scholars have also pinpointed a number of literary devices used in picturebooks to mitigate the difficulty of dealing with death, such as animal characters, humor, and fantasy (Beckett 2012; Jackson 2020). The use of these devices implies that death is a challenging theme for children to deal with (which may also be true for adults). More importantly, they highlight death as a critical issue to read about and reflect on, even for children, since it is “part of the human condition, no matter what our age” (Beckett 2012, p. 249). Of course, children’s understanding of death and their grief reactions are dependent on their “individual development” (Wiseman 2013, p. 2). Through maturation, education, and life experiences, children’s comprehension of this life stage deepens and becomes more accurate (Osvath 2021, p. 72). The point is, children are not immune to encounters with death.

Shared encounters with death may place children and adults in a relatively equal position. Bronfen and Goodwin stress that “as human beings, we are uniquely able to reflect on our death” (Bronfen and Goodwin 1993, p. 3), suggesting that children are not excluded from the reality of death because they are also human. To this insight, they added the following explanation: “The most obvious thing about death is that it is always only represented. There is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it, no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse surrounding it” (Bronfen and Goodwin 1993, p. 4). Again, this is true for both adults and children. It sheds light on an apparent property of death that contrasts with those of the other “adult secrets” that Postman mentions, such as sex and illness. To illustrate, adults cannot generally claim that they know more than children when it comes to experiencing death. By around age nine, most children are able to understand death as permanent, irreversible, inevitable, and universal, a state to which no one is immune (Clement 2013, p. 4). Beyond this age, children arguably have the same potential as adults to grasp and reflect on the end of life. Adults may have more life experiences and knowledge, but they have no advantages concerning familiarity with death. They are not better positioned to answer questions such as “what happens after death?” This lack of authority makes adult authors’ presentations of child and adult characters confronting death particularly intriguing. Death-themed picturebooks serve as a unique platform in which to reveal and reconsider the relationship between children and adults regarding death, as well as ideas of childhood and adulthood in different cultures.

2. The Kinship Model

The unknowability of death to both adults and children exemplifies Marah Gubar’s (2013, 2016) kinship model, which is premised on the idea that the aforementioned individuals are fundamentally “akin to one another... neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar” (Gubar 2013, p. 453). The model emphasizes that children should not be considered “voiceless or non-agential” (Gubar 2013, p. 453)—a dehumanizing tendency. No single moment initiates a sudden transition from childhood to adulthood, with younger and older selves being multiple and interconnected rather than wholly separate identities (Gubar 2013). That is, children and adults are distinguished merely by “differences of degree, not kind” (Gubar 2013, p. 454). The model also underscores the development from childhood to adulthood as “gradual, erratic, and variable” (Gubar 2013, p. 454).

The kinship model concentrates predominantly on the production of children’s books, emphasizing the role of children as co-creators and co-enactors of such literature. I assert
that the model also benefits the examination of child and adult characters in death-themed picturebooks because the implications of the theme as regards similarities between children and adults echo the perspectives put forward in the model. As Beauvais explains, the kinship model of children’s literature “proposes to pay attention to those moments of shared emotions and comprehension” between adults and children (Beauvais 2017, p. 268).

Agency is a complex and debated concept that should be clarified when discussions involve children (Lesnik-Oberstein 2011, p. 10). In keeping with the kinship model, child agency is defined in the current work according to a question raised by Gubar: “How much power and autonomy can young people actually have?” (Gubar 2010, p. 5). Gubar, however, forgoes her own account of children’s agency, suggesting only that both children and adults possess it, although aging may limit its “form or degree” (Gubar 2016, p. 300). Thus, in line with this perspective, my assertion of an agential child character does not necessarily imply full autonomy or independence. Moreover, because the model focuses largely on both children and adults rather than solely on children’s agency, the relationships of secondary adult characters with child protagonists should be examined with consideration for context, plot, genre conventions, and the didactic origin of children’s literature. Agency must be contextualized within the spatial and temporal settings that surround it to better understand its manifestations (Spyrou 2018; Sutterlüty and Tisdall 2019). This not only aligns with my consideration of context but also underscores how exploring picturebooks in various spatial and temporal settings across different cultures can enhance our understanding of childhood.

3. Corpus Selection and Methodology

This study centers on death-themed picturebooks from the UK, the US, Japan, and Taiwan that feature agential child protagonists to explore their potential to illuminate the relationship between adults and children on the basis of the kinship model. Among materials published in Western nations, those from the US and the UK are selected because their books inundate global markets (Van Coillie 2020, p. 151), including those of Japan and Taiwan. Meanwhile, Japanese picturebooks are known for their rich exploration of death and have gained significant popularity in the Taiwanese market. Despite these achievements, however, Japanese and Taiwanese picturebooks are discussed considerably less frequently than their American and British counterparts in international studies. I compare depictions in the aforementioned books to foster international academic dialogue on under-researched issues.

The selected books are those published from 1990 to the present to facilitate a fair comparison since picturebooks became popular in Taiwan after 1990, later than in other countries (Hsing 2012, p. 33). Only books featuring agential children were chosen because not all death-themed picturebooks in the four cultures where they are published have such characters and because they can uniquely reveal and drive a reconsideration of the relationship between children and adults. Finally, I selected books positively received in each culture by reviewing reader responses or evaluations to offer insights into different cultural perspectives on childhood because they tend to be more widely read.

More specifically, the selection involved two steps. First, I chose 16 picturebooks that enjoy positive reception in the UK, the US, Japan, and Taiwan (four from each).1 Analyzing these books revealed trends in publication times and led to the identification of four representations: the independent child, the atomized child, the helpful child, and the analogous child and adult. Second, in consideration of length constraints, I narrowed the selection to 11 books that best reflect these representations for a detailed multimodal analysis (e.g., Kress and Leeuwen 2006; Painter 2017) of visual and verbal texts.

The selected books are as follows:

- **UK:** Nicholas Allan’s *Heaven* (Allan 1996), Oliver Jeffers’ *The Heart and the Bottle* (Jeffers 2009), and Wendy Meddour and Daniel Egneus’ *Tibble and Grandpa* (Meddour and Egneus 2019)
I first define each of the four representations and explain why certain stories fall under them. Then, I examine how the texts demonstrate the three key assertions of the kinship model: (1) a child’s voice and agency; (2) the relatedness, connection, and similarity between adults and children; and (3) the gradual, erratic, and variable nature of progression from childhood to adulthood.

4. Initial Analysis of the 16 Picturebooks

Exploring the 16 picturebooks reveals that three of the five instances of the independent child appear in the US texts and that three of the four examples of the atomized child are found in the UK books. Examples of the helpful child are found in all the books, but three of the six appear in the Taiwanese texts. The analogous child and adult are highlighted in a Japanese text.

Cultural differences based on years of publication seem to emerge. The earliest examples are Heaven (Allan 1996) in the UK, 1000の風1000のチェロ (1000 Winds, 1000 Cellos, Ise 2000) in Japan, and 親愛的 (My Dear, Hsing and Yang 2013) in Taiwan. In the US, the earliest published example is from 2018, with subsequent texts published annually. This suggests that themes of death, children’s voices, and agency were accepted later in the US than in the UK, Japan, and Taiwan. Although picturebooks spread later in Taiwan than in the US, differences in their traditions may explain the delayed acceptance in the latter, where picturebooks are conventionally seen as a children’s genre, intended primarily for a child’s experience (Bader 1976). There is a prevalent belief that such works should not leave the child reader in despair (Natov 2006). In contrast, Jimmy Liao’s picturebooks are known for their existential themes, including life and death (Desmet 2004). They have been popular in Taiwan since the 1990s, significantly influencing the genre and becoming a cultural phenomenon (Desmet 2004). His success may have encouraged the publication of children’s picturebooks that address serious topics more openly. This difference reveals varying attitudes towards death and childhood and may explain the later acceptance of such themes in the US.

5. The Independent Child

The independent child has parents around them but does not depend on parents for guidance or assistance as they mourn. Independence here means that the children do not seek help from their parents, not that they are independent in all situations. This distinction is crucial, as many adult characters (e.g., a young protagonist’s parents or teachers) in death-themed picturebooks help a child protagonist deal with death.

5.1. Independent Behaviors

走向春天的下午 (One More Day with You) features a girl coping with her friend Weiya’s death by embarking on a promised journey. After saying goodbye to her parents in a dark house, she travels with her dog, conversing thoughtfully with her deceased friend. Near the end, she arrives at Weiya’s house, dances with Weiya’s family, and cries “warm and sweet tears”. The wordless final doublespread shows the girl and Weiya walking hand in hand on glowing green grass under a light blue sky, conveying a cheerful ending. Amid the shadowed and scary journey, the girl overcomes all difficulties alone, with the visual text highlighting her change and growth in the end.
In *Ocean Meets Sky*, Finn builds a boat by himself to honor his deceased grandfather and travels “up and down and very far” along a river with a giant fish as his only companion. Instead of relying on instruction or guidance from his mother, he acquires direction throughout his journey from a magnificent mustachioed golden fish, which resembles his deceased grandfather. However, the fact that the grandfather has passed indicates that Finn’s journey is likely a dream through which he channels his grief. Finn’s adventure is both an imaginative dream and a reminiscence of his loving relationship with his grandfather.

*My Big, Dumb, Invisible Dragon* personifies grief as an unwelcome dragon, recounting how a boy learns to cope with the loss of his mother. The boy deals with the dragon by himself, from trying multiple tricks to get rid of the creature to occasionally embracing it. He transitions in his reference to the creature from “that dragon” to “my dragon”, implying his acceptance of his grief. After a day in the park with a friend, he notices that the dragon has been absent for longer intervals, eventually realizing that with time, his grief, like the dragon, diminishes and becomes more manageable.

5.2. Voice and Agency

*走向春天的下午* (*One More Day with You*) is narrated in a girl’s introspective, first-person voice. Parts of her monologue compare the views of adults and children. For instance, she laments, “Grownups assume our sadness can disappear quickly. Grownups think a smile means that we’ve forgotten. I wish it were as simple as that”. These words not only bring to light children’s thoughts that are typically ignored, but they also underscore the resemblance of children to adults when it comes to facing death and grieving. The passage shows how bereaved children are “invisible” or “forgotten” mourners (*Crenshaw and Lee* 2002, p. 293), in a way corroborating the idea that children are often disenfranchised. Adults equate children’s silence with the absence of grief, as also subtly revealed in the visual text. The girl appears in every three to four doublespreads, leading the reader toward her destination. The spreads in between do not depict the actual landscapes she walks through but represent her mindscape, featuring a surreal world related to the verbal text. Some of these spreads are depicted in gloomy and dark tones, echoing the inner mind of children, of which adults may be unaware.

In *Ocean Meets Sky*, Finn’s voice is revealed through the visual text. The changing settings reflect his state of mind, as emphasized by framing. Before his journey, a sorrowful Finn is depicted within framed pictures, vignettes, or through windows. The statement “When he awoke, he felt the boat rocking gently beneath him” is accompanied by a close-up of Finn with open eyes and mouth. Gradually, the frames disappear, pictures fill entire pages, and Finn explores a magical realm, reflecting his inner world. This absence of frames “invites the reader into the picture” (*Nikolajeva and Scott* 2006, p. 62)—into Finn’s internal landscape to hear his voice through the visuals. Finn is often depicted as a small figure with his back turned and his eyes averted as an “offer” image (*Kress and Leeuwen* 2006, p. 119), inviting the reader to scrutinize the represented scene. Through this, Finn expresses his grief over losing his grandfather and ultimately finds hope and belief.

In *My Big, Dumb, Invisible Dragon*, the boy narrator expresses his voice by revealing how he deals with the appearance of the dragon and navigates the grief of losing his mother. Eventually, he is able to say, “My dragon didn’t feel as heavy as he did back when I was six”. Unlike the girl in *走向春天的下午* (*One More Day with You*), who narrates in the present and reveals her immediate thoughts, the boy recounts a story happening “one day last May”. This time lapse between the event and its narration is another potential avenue in which to process grief. The story begins by addressing the reader directly: “Have you ever seen an invisible dragon?” This “active narration” (*Schwenke Wyile* 1999, p. 198) shows that, after processing his grief, the boy has developed a voice that can be heard by others and is willing to share his story from a safe distance.
5.3. Relationships with Adults

In 走向春天的下午 (One More Day with You), the girl’s parents are visually absent throughout the story. They speak only at the beginning, reminding her to be careful and bring her hat. She reassures them, saying, “Don’t worry!” and “I already know”. Although she mentions her parents and teacher in a monologue to her deceased friend, arguing against them, no adults help her deal with her loss. By the end, she reaches her destination with a newfound understanding of death. Interestingly, at the beginning of the story, the parents respond to her leaving with a brief “bye-bye,” implying their belief in her ability to cope independently.

In Ocean Meets Sky, Finn’s mother appears only on the title page, silent, and at the end of the story. On the title page, Finn is depicted as standing short next to his mother. After his journey, however, she wakes Finn for dinner but gives him space by walking back to their house first while a much taller Finn continues to look out “over the sea, to that magical place far away, where ocean meets sky”. The final spread leaves only Finn’s gazing at the ocean, tall and confident, implying his growth and independence in dealing with his grandfather’s loss.

In My Big, Dumb, Invisible Dragon, the visual text depicts the boy and his father doing daily activities together (making dinner, etc.), but the father is silent. In another scene, the father peers worriedly into the boy’s bedroom as he goes to sleep, implying a desire to help but uncertainty about how to do so. No conversation occurs between them about the mother’s death, but both appear sorrowful and hopeless. The shared grief of the father and son highlights the similarities between children and adults.

In these three texts, the children could have “acted differently” (Giddens 1984, p. 9) by seeking adult assistance, but being agential, they deal with grief independently, and their voices are distinctly heard throughout. However, unlike the girl in the Taiwan text, who explicitly challenges the disenfranchisement of children and reveals gloomy emotions, the two US texts primarily feature children expressing their sorrow more implicitly. The girl in the Taiwan narrative denies the need for reminders from her parents during their sole verbal appearance at the story’s outset, whereas the children in the US texts sometimes prefer adults to continue playing a role. Thus, in the US texts, more childlike traits are associated with the agential children than their Taiwanese counterparts. This may reflect the belief in the US that children exhibit childlike traits and benefit from adult help, at least in certain aspects, which is underscored by the notion that children’s literature should not leave them in despair (Natov 2006).

6. The Atomized Child

The atomized child refers to a child whose parents do not exist in a story, either visually or verbally. These texts portray atomized children as living alone and without adult support in coping with loss, unlike independent children who have parents nearby. I coined the atomized child, inspired by the sociological theory of atomism (e.g., Lewis and Weigert 1985; Whitham and Heywood 2023, p. 537), which describes the tendency of society to consist of largely self-sufficient individuals, each functioning independently like separate atoms. The term “atomized” underscores the self-sufficiency exhibited by these children.

6.1. Atomized, Self-Sufficient Individuals

Heaven recounts the story of a girl, Lily, and her dog, Dill. Dill tells Lily that he is “being collected” as he packs a suitcase, followed by a whimsical conversation and heartfelt goodbye between two friends who have different views about heaven and the transitions between life and death. Their conversation may have occurred in Lily’s dream. When she wakes up, she is left distraught by Dill’s death but later learns to welcome a stray puppy. Throughout the story, she navigates loss alone.

The Heart and the Bottle follows a young girl coping with the profound loss of a male father figure. Her world is affected by his passing, symbolized by an empty chair. Only
when she encounters another “smaller and still curious” girl can she free her trapped heart. I consider the grieving girl an atomized child because, after the man’s death, she lives, grieves, and struggles alone without help from other adults.

かなしみのぼうけん (Adventure of Sorrow) portrays how a child carries the sorrow of his dog’s death. The reader has no clues regarding the child’s parents or family, making the child seem like an atomized individual. The child’s gender is also unclear. They are depicted in black and white, wearing a helmet that obscures their face. As the child experiences the adventure of riding on a tricycle at full speed in various settings and digests and accepts the truth, adults are nowhere to be found.

6.2. Voice and Agency

In Heaven, Lily confidently expresses her ideas and beliefs, even if they differ from Dill’s. Dissatisfied with passive acceptance, Lily challenges explanations. When Dill mentions he is being collected, she boldly asks, “Why can’t I come too?” When told she needs an invitation, she persists, asking, “Who invited you?” She fearlessly articulates her needs, questions authority, and negotiates with angels to prolong Dill’s stay, enabling their final conversation about heaven and the afterlife. Her voice and agency are reflected in her ability to “negotiate with others,” resulting in interactions that “make a difference” (Mayall 2002, p. 21).

The Heart and the Bottle is narrated in the third person, yet visually, it reflects the girl’s voice during conversations with the man, depicted in speech bubbles within various pictures. While these images allude to the man’s knowledge and the girl’s creative thoughts, this distinction is left up to interpretation. No authoritative voice judges the man’s thoughts to be superior to the girl’s. Their conversations allow the girl’s voice to resonate like an adult’s. The visual text also shows the girl exploring the world without hindrance from an adult. While the man sits on a boat, she enjoys herself in the sea; on land, he flies a kite while she wades in the water, engaging in activities seemingly more daring than those of an adult. Ultimately, the story reveals a power that children possess, embodied by a young girl who “helps” the protagonist release her heart.

かなしみのぼうけん (Adventure of Sorrow) is nearly wordless, save for a sentence at the start and one at the end. Before the title page, the child declares, “Candy died today.” Then, the adventure begins with the child chasing a black dog through a black-and-white forest filled with twisting trees, crying faces, and strange creatures. Each spread, when flipped upside down, hides a large dog—likely Candy—possibly mirroring the child’s inner world. As the child progresses, color gradually emerges. The dog stops and faces the child, revealing the sun and sky. Scary settings transform into vibrant landscapes before culminating in the dog jumping onto the child and disappearing, with bubbles showing moments from its life in a watery environment. This transformation of setting effectively portrays the child’s emotional journey from despair to hope and acceptance. This narrative progression is supported by peritextual clues, such as the sky on the front endpaper changing from dark gray to light blue. The story concludes with a sentence almost identical to the opening one, but with the addition of “んだ”, suggesting the child’s acceptance of the heartbreaking reality.3

6.3. Relationships with Adults

In Heaven, while Dill’s age is not explicitly stated, the visual cues suggest he is an older adult, wearing a watch, holding a briefcase, and with deep wrinkles under his eyes. Thus, the peer-like relationship between Dill and Lily, reflected in their debates on their beliefs, suggests similarities between adults and children. A wordless spread before Dill’s departure shows them embracing at nearly the same height, further emphasizing their peer-like friendship. After Dill’s death, a spread depicts Lily in the park with three adults, each holding their dogs, foreshadowing Lily welcoming her own puppy later. She takes care of it like the other adults do with their pets, assuming a parental role.
The Heart and the Bottle subtly suggests the interconnectedness of one’s younger and older selves. Visually, the girl’s growth implies a transition into adulthood, although the verbal text continues to refer to her as a “girl”. In the final doublespread, when she sits on the man’s chair with a happy smile while reading, she closely resembles her younger self. This ambiguity also reflects the challenge of pinpointing the exact moment of transition from childhood to adulthood, consistent with the gradual developmental process depicted in the kinship model.

In かなしみのぼうけん (Adventure of Sorrow), the child’s unseen face and small stature may indicate their youth. However, the absence of explicit verbal cues indicating this might lead one to perceive the character as an adult, implying that it is uncommon for a child to embark on a perilous journey or undergo profound emotions. This ambiguity suggests that the atomized child exhibits a few stereotypical attributes associated with children. Through minimal verbal text and an open visual narrative, the story blurs the line between adulthood and childhood.

The most striking similarity among these atomized children is their resemblance to adults. They exhibit self-sufficiency, and their agency is emphasized through their active role in shaping their own lives, no longer “passive subjects” (James and Prout 1990, p. 4). However, unlike narratives where the independent child experiences death some time before the stories begin, potentially buffering the impact, these texts depict death occurring within the present-day timeline of the narratives. Additionally, かなしみのぼうけん (Adventure of Sorrow) places no emphasis on childlike attributes, whereas the two UK texts highlight the protagonists’ curiosity and creativity, features that might be seen as childlike, despite their atomized status. The darkness of confronting loss is particularly explicitly depicted in Japanese texts. This reflects the wide range of death-related picturebooks in Japan, spanning from classics like 100万回生きたねこ (The Cat That Lived a Million Times, 1977) to recent works such as ぼく (I, 2022), which tackles the taboo topic of child suicide. These picturebooks delve into darker aspects of life (Ikuta et al. 2013, pp. 20–21).

7. The Helpful Child

The helpful child assists adults, such as their parents or grandparents, as they grieve when they encounter death. Helpful children are not necessarily independent or mature, yet even as many display typical childlike qualities, they still have the capacity to assist others.

7.1. Helpful Behaviors

くものうえのハリー (Harry on the Clouds) describes the death of Harry and the grief that he and his mother experience, portraying how they help each other through this challenging period. Harry can see his mother from a cloud and, hoping to make her feel better, initiates action. This encourages the mother to carry out an unfulfilled agreement with him, ultimately ushering her toward understanding.

媽媽是一朵雲 (Mom is a Cloud) recounts how a little frog who loses his mother helps his father. The resilient little frog uses his imagination to manage his feelings, explore, recover, and grow. When he feels upset, he does not seek his father’s help but spends time alone, watching clouds in the sky from the small hill that he used to frequent with his family. Dreams of his mother and inspiration from the clouds enable him to realize that as long as he thinks about her, his mother will keep him company in various forms. The little frog then shares this independently derived understanding with his father and helps him in the process.

Tibble and Grandpa from the UK and The Boy and the Gorilla from the US both feature a helpful boy. In Tibble and Grandpa, Tibble helps his grandfather cope with the loss of his wife. Despite Grandpa’s reluctance to do anything besides gardening, Tibble’s persistent questions and efforts not only bring Grandpa back to daily activities but also allow him to open up about his grief. In The Boy and the Gorilla, a boy opens up to his father after his mother’s death through dialogue in the gentle presence of a mysterious gorilla. No conversation happens between the boy and his father before the boy takes action. The
father is not depicted as stronger or more active than the boy, whose actions allow them to find solace in each other.

7.2. Voice and Agency with Childlike Attributes

In くものがえのハリー (Harry on the Clouds), Harry’s agency is punctuated as he takes the first step, returning to the world to meet his mother despite his fear. Although he is soon brought back to the clouds by the wolf watchman, his action helps his mother recall their pleasant memories, guiding her toward recovery. Simultaneously, the mother’s memories reveal that she frequently helped Harry when he was alive (shaving his bushy hair, warming him when he was cold). As she fulfills their agreement, she begins her recovery and confers on Harry enough bravery to cross the river into a “new world”.

In 媽媽是一朵雲 (Mom is a Cloud), the reader follows the little frog walking from one spread to another after school and learning what he is thinking through the voice of a third-person narrator. The story is focalized through the little frog, referred to as “he”, and it occasionally omits subjects and uses “Dad” and “Mom” instead of “father frog” and “mother frog”. This technique shifts the narrative perspective, almost adopting the little frog’s first-person viewpoint at times. His agency is evident, yet his childlike nature is also apparent: when he expresses his insights, he sits on his father’s lap. The father suggests racing toward the hill together, something they have not done since the mother’s passing, ultimately rediscovering joy in each other’s company. Near the end, the little frog asks his father, “Dad, will we also become clouds in the future?” His father responds humorously, “Of course…oops! Your mother took first place again”. This interaction highlights the little frog’s curiosity and his father’s role in providing affirming answers.

In Tibble and Grandpa, Tibble’s voice and agency are highlighted by his persistence in engaging with his grandfather. Despite initial failures and his mother telling him Grandpa just needs time, Tibble keeps trying, asking, “Grandpa, what are your top three sandwiches?” He shares his own favorites, prompting Grandpa to eventually respond. Tibble then makes sandwiches for them, and they eat together, discussing their top three other items and helping Grandpa reconnect with small comforts. The visuals show Grandpa smiling and willing to spend time with Tibble again. This process portrays Tibble as both naïve and capable, going beyond simply following an adult’s instructions and ultimately helping his grandfather change.

The boy’s voice in The Boy and the Gorilla is heard through his conversation with the gorilla, to whom he reveals “My mom died” and from whom he asks about death and dying—topics that may be considered difficult for a child. Simultaneously, the father prepares food and folds clothes, emphasizing the boy’s status as a child. Nevertheless, the boy shows agency by picking a daisy from his mother’s garden with the gorilla and telling his father, “I miss Mom”. A wordless spread follows, with the father and son hugging and the daisy symbolizing hope. The boy appears stronger as he breaks the silence, prompting his father to speak, who follows rather than leads. The final affirming message, “Mom will like her new flowers”, also comes from the boy.

7.3. Relationships with Adults

くものがえのハリー (Harry on the Clouds) stresses the similarities between Harry and his mother by showing that an ordinary child can exercise agency and that adults can be vulnerable. Harry’s attempt to see her despite being scared enables her to recall memories with him. At this point, the visual perspective shifts from a third-person view to the mother’s point of view. The reader sees Harry through her eyes, sharing her perspective and emotions. This shift invites readers to experience the mother’s memories and sadness, emphasizing their similarities: both children and adults can feel scared and distressed and can help each other through these emotions.

In the same vein, 媽媽是一朵雲 (Mom is a Cloud) shows resemblances between a child and a father overwhelmed by loss. First appearing on the title page, the father lies listless on a lotus leaf. He looks even sadder in his second appearance, his face gazing down and
his body hunched over. Interestingly, in the same spread, the little frog assumes an almost identical posture as his father, but he is sitting on the hill. This image illustrates their shared sorrow. Although the little frog is the one who takes action first, the story underlines the fact that father and son share the burden of loss and take turns helping each other.

*Tibble and Grandpa* highlights the shared sadness between Tibble and his grandfather. At the end, Tibble asks, “Who are your top three grannies?” and includes “Granny who is dead” in his own list. This prompts Grandpa to share his top three memories of his wife: “Granny when she danced in the moonlight, Granny when she watered the roses ... and Granny when she first held you”. Finally, Tibble says, “I miss Granny”, and Grandpa replies, “So do I”. This exchange and the final confession underscore their similarities when experiencing loss.

The punctuation of similarities through shared loss and coping is equally evident in *The Boy and the Gorilla*. The facial expressions and gestures of father and son mirror each other: they walk with heads down in the first spread and sit dejectedly on the sofa in the second. When the boy says, “I miss Mom” and “Mom had a funny laugh”, the father responds with his first words: “And she told the best jokes. I miss your mother, too”. This confession shows he shares his son’s feelings. Additionally, the mysterious gorilla may be a figment of the boy’s imagination, reflecting his sadness while hinting at his inner strength. The gorilla’s actions could also symbolize what the father wishes to do but cannot. The gorilla can be associated with both the boy and the father.

Helpful children appear in all the texts examined, showing them “putting aside their own immediate interests with the aim of helping others” ([Mayall 2002](#)), p. 110). However, the texts also show that helping others does not necessarily mean neglecting one’s own interests. In all the narratives, helping adults also benefits the children, leading to more comfortable situations for them. Nonetheless, compared with independent and atomized children, the helpful child’s childlike qualities are emphasized. In the British *Tibble and Grandpa*, particularly, a child’s qualities are essential for helping his grandpa, reflecting a belief in the innocent power of children.

8. The Analogous Child and Adult

Although many previously discussed texts highlight similarities between children and adults by depicting both groups facing the same death of loved ones, *1000の風1000のチェロ* (1000 Winds, 1000 Cellos) explicitly portrays *multiple deaths*, presenting *the child and the adult as analogous*. It features a boy narrator-character who loses his dog and meets a girl in cello class who has also lost her birds. Together, they meet numerous people practicing for a concert to support reconstruction after the Great Hanshin Earthquake. They sign up for the concert with an old gentleman who lost his home, family, and friends in the earthquake. The two children and the old gentleman are emphasized as analogous. The kinship model is exemplified in this story. The children’s agency and freedom of action are depicted through the girl’s immediate registration for the concert as well as by the boy’s expression of his intention to attend it. He then tells his teacher about the event and inspires more students to join. An increasing number of people sign up to participate. On the day of the concert, more than 1000 cellists gathered from all over the country and abroad. The boy not only wields agency but also influences others. More importantly, the interaction between the boy, the girl, and the gentleman highlights the similarities between adults and children, particularly in experiencing death. The man openly shares his loss: “Our city, homes, families, friends, tangible and intangible things—everything was destroyed”. He trusts the children’s ability to grasp such a brutal disaster. A spread shows photos of collapsed buildings, in contrast to all the other visual texts throughout the story, which are illustrations. This reinforces the truthfulness of his experience. The children listen without discomfort, and the girl speaks about losing her birds, demonstrating that the children are equally capable of accepting heavy truths. Once they decide to join the concert, the boy, the girl, and the man often practice together in the park. The visual text shows them sitting in a triangle, balanced and harmonious, further underscoring their shared
understanding. This reality is beautifully concluded: “A thousand cellos tell a thousand stories. And yet, they become one song. A thousand sounds become one heart”.

The story is narrated in the first person by the boy, but his loss is not the sole focus. The losses of the girl, the old man, and the other cellists are also part of the narrative. Unlike the previously discussed texts, this book recounts multiple deaths shared by both adults and children. It presents deaths in a way that is unique to Japanese picturebooks. These narratives suggest a relative openness toward both personal loss and multiple deaths. If the reality of demise is shared with adults, it should also be shared with children, emphasizing that children are analogous to adults. This highlights how Japanese texts not only extend adult privileges, such as voice and agency, to children but also reveal their shared vulnerability to death, granting them the right to know harsh and brutal truths.

9. Conclusions

While meta-critical studies of childhood in children’s literature are abundant, specific discussions on approaches to analyzing representations of childhood in picturebooks have been rare (Christensen 2017, p. 361). This study demonstrates how the kinship model can analyze childhood through multimodal analysis of picturebooks. The death-themed picturebooks examined here embody the arguments put forward by the kinship model. The analysis uncovers the heterogeneity of agential children and provides a snapshot of cultural differences in the depictions of children and adults as they grapple with death. The UK texts are dominated by the self-sufficient, atomized child with childlike qualities, which are echoed in the helpful child, whose childlike traits assist adults. The US texts often feature the independent child, who deals with grief alone, although adults still play a role in other aspects of their lives. The Taiwanese texts depict a more thoroughly independent child and a helpful child with childlike attributes. The Japanese narratives encompass all representations but stand out with the analogous child and adult.

Cultural differences stem from various potential factors, such as the Romantic tradition and its conception of childhood in Western countries, Japan’s relative openness to approaching death variously in picturebooks, and Taiwan’s influence from UK, US, and Japanese translations in picturebook publishing. However, due to space constraints, this paper only alludes to these possibilities instead of providing definitive answers. Nor are the four representations definitive, remaining flexible and open to interpretation. Nevertheless, they help illuminate the diverse nature of agential children.

What is certain is the heterogeneity of agential children across cultures. Furthermore, children’s agency is not merely an individual trait, nor does it mean simply extending adult privileges to children. My analysis suggests that a deeper understanding of childhood requires examining the boundaries and characteristics of adulthood. As Peter Hunt points out, children’s books “give an image of childhood different from actuality, but the book is then imitated in real life” (Hunt 2009, p. 52). While agential children may reflect what authors believe childhood should be, their portrayal can shape real-life childhoods. This makes the depiction of child characters in the genre more influential than mere mimetic reflections. Thus, exploring how these agential children reflect the perspectives of the kinship model can inspire us to reconsider the adult-child dichotomy when encountering death, or even in general, and expand our imagination of what children can be across cultures.

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Notes

1 Alongside the 11 texts selected for detailed textual analysis, the other five texts included in the initial sample are Benji Davies’ *Grandad’s Island* (Davies 2015, UK), Livia Blackburne and Julia Kuo’s *I Dream of Popo* (Blackburne and Kuo 2021, US), Yoshi-fumi Hasegawa’s *Dad in Heaven* (Hasegawa 2008, Japan), Chia-Hui Hsing and Wan-Jing Yang’s *My Dear* (Hsing and Yang 2013, Taiwan), and Ying-Xue Gao’s *Xiaoyi Raised a Little Tortoise* (Gao 2013, Taiwan).

2 The quotations from the Japanese and Taiwanese picturebooks are originally in Japanese and traditional Chinese. All translations into English are my own.

3 The story ends with “きょうキャンディはしんだんだ” (Candy died today). This is similar to the opening sentence, but with “んだ” adding an explanatory tone. The initial “きょうキャンディがしんだ” is a neutral statement of fact, whereas the concluding sentence suggests the child’s acceptance.

4 Another well-known example is Arthur Binard and Tadashi Okakura’s さがしています (Searching, 2012), which depicts the deaths of children and adults after an atomic bomb explosion.

References


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