UDK: 821.163.41.09-93
82.01:111.1
https://doi.org/10.18485/slitam.2025.2.ch5

Vladimir M. Vukomanović Rastegorac

University in Belgrade
Faculty of Education
vladimir.vukomanovic@uf.bg.ac.rs
ORCID: 0000-0002-9442-9435

DEATH, TRAUMA AND MEMORY IN THE CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN NOVEL FOR YOUNG ADULTS – INTERPRETIVE AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Abstract: The death of a close person is considered one of the typical causes of trauma, and the thematization of the response to it, as well as memories of the deceased, are particularly sensitive in literature intended for young readers. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to identify the main motivational and problem-oriented centers in the formation of the aforementioned topics on the basis of a selected corpus of contemporary young-adult novels. An analysis of literary works has confirmed the presence of a broad spectrum of emotions and behavior as responses to the death of a close person, as well as a complex representation of memories and their integration into the life experience of the literary characters. Such content-rich artistic discourse on responses to death, the nature of memory, and the significance of forgetting opens up space for various methodological approaches—interpretation based on the dominant character, comparative thematic and motivational interpretation, problem-based discussion, as well as research based on the correlation-integration methodological model—whether within the frameworks of regular classes or in the format of optional workshops.

Keywords: literature for children and YA, contemporary novel, teaching methodology of Serbian language and literature, thanatology.

Introduction: On Death, Trauma and Memory

When the Dictionary of the Serbian Language (Матица српска 2011: 1224) defines *death* as the "cessation not only of life and life processes of the organism," it introduces finality as its prominent characteristic but as its essential one. Such a definition, however, is only one of many possible approaches to the phenomenon of death, which can indirectly extend to a series of interrelated questions—ranging from what constitutes a person's identity to the possibility of outlasting death. While a physicalist stance assumes that a human being is exclusively a bodily (material) creature, a dualistic view finds an element in human nature which cannot be reduced just to the physical (material) being, and which, in different religions and cultures, may be named differently (see Kagan 2008). In the first instance, the end of one's life is determined by biomedical criteria, and death is perceived as absolute.[1] On the other hand, the dualistic view allows for the possibility for man to outlast the death of his body, making death appear simply as a relative ending of one's life path—thus, not as its termination, but rather as a transition into a different mode of being.

The presence of the phenomenon of death not only arouses intellectual questioning on the nature of human existence, but also implies an emotional response. The death of a loved one is a typical example of an event which causes psychological trauma (cf. Trebješanin 2008: 383) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; according to the *International Classification of Diseases* – ICD-11). Many different factors influence whether a traumatic response will occur: subjective (related to a person's character), and also objective (related to the nature of the experienced event). Additionally, social and cultural contexts in which the event occurred can also play a significant role. In order to establish the presence of a traumatic response, three criteria are crucial: 1) recurring memories of, or reliving the event(s) which triggered the reaction (*re-experiencing*); 2) avoiding thoughts and activities, situations and people that might remind

[1] However, it should be noted that even biomedical criteria are not entirely unequivocal and unchanging. Compare: Brante – Hallberg, 1991; Kastenbaum – Moreman, 2017: 41–45.

the individual of the traumatic event (*avoidance*); and 3) an elevated state alertness, which manifests itself through insomnia, a heightened level or irritability, and an excessive sense of threat (*hypervigilance*). It is also important for our topic to note that traumatic responses are usually followed by vivid and intrusive memories (or their persistent repression), flashbacks, dreams and nightmares accompanied by strong emotions and physical sensations (cf. Stein et al., 2014; Kolk 2014: 176).

When memory occurs as a response to traumatic events, it can manifest itself in its aggressive form, a force that disrupts everyday functioning, given that "people with PTSD are unable to put the actual event, the source of those memories, behind them" (Kolk 2014: 198–119). However, memory is usually something that enables human existence on different planes. The human experience is characterized by (among other things) the need for remembrance, and one of its causes is the fact that memories of past events are an integral part of our identity (see Костић 2014: 231). When dealing with the death of a loved one, keeping memories of them is one of the symbolic ways to prolong their existence, even after their death. To make things more complex, the human will cannot fully control even those memories which are not associated with disturbing events. As Aleksandar Kostić writes (2014: 219–220), all of our autobiographic memories—just like many others—are susceptible to change: certain events are simply forgotten, and many similar events can merge into one single memory. What is more, autobiographic memories can sometimes contain details which never even occurred, because: "over time, the events integrate themselves into a wider scheme" (Костић 2014: 220). This seems to be the case not only with individual memory, but, to a degree, with collective memory as well. Collective memory is susceptible to change depending on the social context, which can either "consign to oblivion" a particular figure or event, or, through memory, integrate it into the foundation of its national, cultural, or some other kind of identity (see more in Kuljić 2014: 187 ff.).

The complexity of the phenomena discussed opens up various possibilities for their artistic exploration. In literature for children and young adults, their thematization is complex not only because every trauma is preverbal (Kolk 2014: 56), and because talking about it means "speaking about the unspeakable" (Бјелановић 2023: 202), but also due to the usual difference of age and life experience between the author and the recipient

of the work. Nonetheless, within the same corpus of literature their treatment is important, because a literary work has the power to support a young reader during specific life events by suggestively familiarizing them with different possible reactions to the loss of a loved one, enabling them to view the situation from a different angle.

The same applies to the various modalities of memory and the approach towards them. Hence, the goal of this paper is to recognize the essence of the motifs and problems that touch upon these phenomena in the selected contemporary novels for young adults, written by accomplished authors of different generations and poetic orientations: Igor Kolarov, Vesna Aleksić, Jasminka Petrović, Zoran Penevski and Aleksandra Jovanović. From there, based on these observations, we will point to some possibilities for the methodological shaping of a dialogue. Meanwhile, during our methodological reflections, we will focus on the established methodological models and strategies. Their contribution to the teaching process should not primarily be sought after in this text, but rather in their actualization in conversation that focuses on delicate, challenging, somewhat controversial subjects, and topics considered as taboo, especially in a school setting.

Protagonists' Responses to the Death of a Loved One

Emotions as a response. – One of the most prominent aspects of the responses to the death of a loved one in the discussed novels is the thematization of the emotions which follow the traumatic event. Sadness is, as expected, the most dominant emotion, where a special emphasis is placed on its longevity and its intensity in certain segments. That is how Igor Kolarov, in a subplot of his novel *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*], reveals to his reader how Simona "wasn't quite so young when her dad passed away," and how she remembers that "during those days, she wept a lot. One day, two days, three days… one year, two years…" (Коларов 2007: 26); while Tijana, at the very end of *The Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*], recognizes a sadness within herself which "never fades, and never forgives" (Алексић 2018: 171). In the novels *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*] and *It's All Right* [*Sve je u redu*] by

Jasminka Petrović, a special emphasis is placed on the feeling of guilt. In a conversation with her Grandma Marija, Sofija confessed: "It's my fault that Nana's died... I dreamt about her flying and being dressed in white, like an angel. And having two spots underneath her heart. It's my fault. What's more, I made an artificial flower ikebana arrangement next to her pillow, which is a bad omen" (Petrović 2015: 131; 2020: 141). The distress which follows this feeling of guilt is clearly stated in the monologue of young Vukan, who blames himself for the unfortunate death of his brother: "I am guilty. I am guilty because of Veljko, too. [...] I forgot to take my helmet. I'd left it on the chair next to the door. He gave me his. [...] I fell on the pavement; he went under the truck. I am guilty, I am guilty for everything. I stayed behind, Veljko flew away. Flew away forever." (Petrović 2017: 19; 2023: 19–20).

The departure of a loved one is followed by an end in verbal and physical contact with them, which is why the protagonists commonly face the feeling of loneliness—more so indirectly, through the lack of communication with other people or the change in social dynamics between characters, than in a more direct way, where the feelings are expressed verbally. The sense of loneliness is quite pervasive in contemporary novels for young adults, even when exploring the motif of death is not the main focus (see Опачић 2011; Панић Мараш, 2023). However, in some of these texts, it is accompanied by the feeling of emptiness; a conviction that life lost all its meaning after the death of a loved one, or that it is, to say the least, "wrong". When confronted with Simona's terminal illness, Kia Sibin writes down: "*I am empty. The world is empty*" (Коларов 2007: 103); in Aleksandra Jovanović's novel *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], Želja thinks "of the coming days, of Dad and how everything was going to be monotonous and gray" (Jovanović 2020: 44–45; 2021: 49); while Vukan, who is convinced that, after the death of his brother, he is "damaged goods," and that the words "*He did everything wrong, and then he died*" will be imprinted on his gravestone (Petrović 2017: 19; 2023: 19), makes a decision to join a monastery and find solace there.

Another possible response to death is denying that the event even occurred in the first place. This is perhaps most obviously expressed in *The Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*], when Tijana finds out about Ana's death, where she says: "*Check again, somebody! That's not true! / The truth seemed impossible amid so many green, swollen leaves;*

amid those tree crowns of stupendous beauty" (Алексић 2018: 165). In this moment, it is as though the heroine's split between "the awareness of childhood as a collection of privileged moments and her temporality in this world" (Лалатовић 2018: 88) reaches its climax. In *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*], the strength of denial and, simultaneously, radical powerlessness in the face of reality—not only when death had already occurred, but also when it is clear that death is inevitable—transform into rage, which Kia expresses by smashing her carefully curated collection of porcelain figurines: "Kia was swinging tirelessly. A true symphony of explosions; the porcelain was bursting all over the place. A terrible sense of helplessness flooded over Kia. An enormous, utter helplessness." (Коларов 2007: 44)

The memory of a traumatic experience "may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger," because a traumatized person "has an altered perception of risk and safety" (Kolk 2014: 14, 93). Thus, the death of a person close to you can intensify the fear for the existence of your other loved ones, and can sometimes cause an intense concern for one's own existence. Said themes are rarely explored in the analyzed novels, but they may be the most powerful expression of the connection between the event and the exaggerated feeling of threat—which is, after all, included in the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder—as given in a subplot of the novel *Sara and a January for Two Young Girls* [*Sara i januar za dve devojčice*] by Zoran Penevski. In it we meet Mrs. Panić, a history teacher, who got the nickname "Mrs. Panic" from one of the characters, considering that "even to this very day she panics for no reason. She's bothered by the way we (under)dress, or how bratty we are, or she's nagging us to be extra careful when we're out in the street" (Penevski 2018: 52). Later on in the text, the teacher's behavior reveals a tragic detail: its cause is an accident in which Mrs. Panić's seven-year-old daughter Milica, got run over by a car. "Since then, Mrs. Panić screams at children in order to draw their attention to what they're doing, so that they wouldn't end up in a dangerous situation. She knew that there was nothing she could've done to save her daughter Milica, and since then, she fears for every child. She's constantly imagining that some tiny creature might die tragically" (Penevski 2018: 137).

In the domain of expressed emotions following the loss a loved one, one more aspect is highly frequent: the attempt to conceal and/or

suppress feelings. This is not only done by adults, but children as well. We could conclude that grownups, consciously or unconsciously, direct their children to suppress, or even completely avoid showing their emotions. In *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*], Maša's mother Senya teaches her not to cry when remembering her father, because "he didn't like to see you [Maša] whimpering" (Алексић 2020: 9; 2022: 9); while Želja's aunt condemns her for being "ungrateful" and "spoiled," because she does not want to celebrate her birthday "the way all normal children do," and in that way help her mother, who is going through a rough period (Jovanović 2020: 35; 2021: 39). An interesting detail is that, in the novels, both mothers have good intentions to spare their children from the pain, offering them a sense of security after the loss of their father, but the lack of communication about what causes their daughters—and not just them—to feel troubled, produces the exact opposite effect. Maša is unsure of Senya's feelings, and wishes to openly ask her whether she misses her late husband (Алексић 2020: 110; 2022: 110), while the desperate struggle Želja's mother goes through in order to lead a normal life after her husband's death, leaves a (wrong) impression on the protagonist of *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], making her think that her mother had completely forgotten about him (Jovanović 2020: 84; 2021: 90). Nevertheless, in both *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*] and *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], there comes a moment which reveals that concealing your grief does not mean it is erased: Senya bursts into tears while in a museum which, very likely, reminded her of her husband with whom she had previously visited (Алексић 2020: 112–113; 2022: 112–113), and Želja's mother, pressured by the accusations of forgetting about her late husband, confesses to her daughter that she regularly visits and takes care of his grave (Jovanović 2020: 85; 2021: 90). In a laconic and clear manner, Kolarov also touches upon these matters in his novel *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*], summing up everything that has been discussed so far in just two sentences: "While Simona was able to cry, Simona's mother was able to hide her tears. […] That doesn't change the matter: that which is concealed, does not mean it doesn't exist" (Коларов 2007: 42).

Behavior as a response. – In discussing emotions which accompany the death of a loved one and the attitudes towards them, we have touched upon their manifestation in the characters' behavior. The reader, however, may not only detect the given signals, but many other, more subtle

signs and the overt indications that the departure of a loved one left a mark on those who were close to them.

For instance, the reader will probably notice when, on the very first page of *Sara and The Forgotten Plaza* [*Sara i zaboravljeni trg*], the female protagonist "picked up her phone for the third time in a row, only to remember that it won't help," after which she put it back into her backpack, which was a gift from her grandmother, and which she, for that reason only, "was unable to just throw it away" (Penevski 2015: 7). Similarly, near the end of *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*], Sara holds a medallion which had recently been gifted to her from her deceased Nana Luce (Petrović 2015: 147; 2020: 158). In *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], Želja takes her father's violin, and attempts to play a piece her father used to perform (Jovanović 2020: 88; 2021: 93). In the examples mentioned, the preserved objects hold strong symbolic meaning for the young protagonists, and enable them to prolong their relationship with the person who is no longer (physically) present. The need to feel the presence of someone who is no longer alive, compelled Kolarov's Kia to create a little ritual: "They ate oranges. Kia noticed them on her hospital bedside table, on that day. / She would peel the orange, and place one half on Simona's empty bench, and after that, she would eat her half. / Those were the sweetest oranges in the whole world" (Коларов, 2007: 120). Similarly, at its very core, the narration in *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*] depicts a strong commitment to the tradition which Maša and her father established; which will be discussed later on in this paper.

While the aforementioned rituals carry within them the component of a willingness to continue life while holding the memory of the deceased, the uncontrollable consequences of the traumatic experiences are also thematized on a few occasions. For Sara, time seems to have quite literally stopped after her grandmother's death; which is why the initial scene, where she and her father are stuck in traffic, can be interpreted as an allegory (for more on the concept of *time freezing* in this novel, see Карановић 2017). By the end of the narrative, Sara realizes that she is no longer twelve, but fourteen years old. Meanwhile, her father points out that ever since her grandmother died, she occasionally slips onto "an odd state which lasts for a couple of minutes. Sometimes a bit longer, a little less than half an hour." (Penevski 2015: 145). Sara's being practically went

numb at the sight of her dead grandmother, who unexpectedly passed away at the table, so the fanatic adventure we get to take a part in is taking place inside Sara's mind and imagination, which are joined together against the struggle of experiencing the death of a loved one—an attempt to process this experience, and an effort to start moving her life from a standstill.

If Sara approaches her traumatic experience in moments when she dissociates from the world around her, Želja confronts hers mainly through dreams and nightmares—haunting images that express themselves from a place where words are absent (Kolk, 2014: 56). The very first pages of *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*] present an intense experience of events which are obviously connected with the death of the protagonist's father, the need to make contact with him, and the impossibility of doing so. In her dream, the protagonist finds herself in a cemetery, where tombstones and fog dominate the setting. From a distance, a gentle and familiar melody can be heard, and she calls out, senses, and/or desires to recognize her father's voice (Jovanović 2020: 7–8; 2021: 7–8). Just how intense Želja's yearning is to see her father once again, is most poignantly illustrated somewhere in the middle of the novel, where her frequent visits to her father's grave result in a deformation of reality. From the perspective of the protagonist, those deformations open up a new and different dimension, in which a radical reexamination of the living/dead dichotomy is made. Želja finds his interlocutor in Vuk, a boy who died in a tragic accident while riding on a carousel, but who, neither dead nor alive, resides in a "liminal zone" (see Перић 2022: 29). His presence will further fuel the protagonist's hope that she will, in this separate space, once again reunite with her deceased father.

In some texts, the experience of going through a difficult period of separation from a loved one can, albeit rarely, include gestures which are related to self-harm and obsessive actions. For Želja, pinching her arm becomes "a defense mechanism to prevent releasing from herself, after six months of suppressing, all the inflated emotions" (Јелисавчић 2021: 180). Her daily visits to the graveyard can be viewed as a ritual which embodies her all-consuming, obsessive thoughts about her departed father. In a similar manner, Vukan from Jaminka Petrović's novel, is verbally and mentally confined within a triad consisting of a cry for his lost brother, the feeling of guilt, and the act of prayer. His state of emotional turmoil and

existential anxiety is emphasized through his feverish repetition of words and forms (cf. Petrović 2017: 15–19; Petrović 2023: 15–20).

Memory: its triggers and qualities. – In an optician's store, Sara finds an unusual model—glasses for silent people. Those frames "correct" taciturnity by "magnifying certain things through random selection," so that "people who are stingy with their words are exposed to tiny details that suddenly jump out at them, thereby giving them a reason to mention them" (Penevski 2015: 107). What is interesting is that the protagonist in Penevski's novel is brought to the store by her ability to, in a particular way, magnify small details—to detect within them signs which deeply affect her, but she chooses to remain silent about. It is clear from the structure of the novel that the brief visit to this unusual place in Sara's imagination happens under the pressure of her repressed internal perception of the scene in which the image of her grandma's broken glasses is included.

This detail suggestively touches upon the question of what initiates the memory of a deceased loved one; and especially in the novel *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], several kinds of these "triggers" will be covered. In the first place, those would represent places and objects for Želja: an attic in which she would spend time in with her dad, and his violin (Jovanović 2020: 32, 33; 2021: 36, 37). Additionally, her birthday also serves as a reminder of her father (Jovanović 2020: 10, 12, 28; 2021: 13, 15, 32), as well as the funeral vendor's question: "How's your mom doing?" (Jovanović 2020: 20; 2021: 24). All of these triggers indirectly point to a shift from the former way of living, which is the root cause of that pain: birthdays are not the same ever since dad passed away, aunt's cake is not as tasty as his was, and a seemingly innocuous question cannot be understood differently from: "Is your mom doing okay *after the tragedy*?" (Jovanović 2020: 20; 2021: 24). There is also a handrail, and the memory of her father waiting for her at the staircase landing when she was a young child (Jovanović 2020: 9–10; 2021: 11–12), books in which women cry over lost love, whereas, in Želja's opinion, "one shouldn't cry over such matters" (Jovanović 2020: 38; 2021: 41), and so on. Moreover, memories can be aroused by perception in various domains: when she thought she had heard the sound of a car horn, Želja remembered how her father used to call his car a "carriage," and would say to it: "Gee!" (Jovanović 2020: 96; 2021: 101); and the warmth in the liminal space where she and Vuk play in will evoke the heat she was feeling when her father died (Jovanović 2020: 96; 2021: 101).

In line with the possibility that various sensory stimuli can arouse memory, memory itself is also showcased as multidimensional. Near the end of *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*], "the most beautiful picture" emerges in Maša's consciousness, which vividly appears to her "as a film were played inside, from my head or soul" (Алексић 2020: 118; 2022: 118). A *movie*—in comparison to an *image*—is a more accurate description of the form the consequent memory takes. It not only employs a static, visual aspect of memory—for example, an image of an autumn dusk or a view of leaves dropping on a car—but also a temporality of events which are depicted as passing "like in a slow motion" (Алексић 2020: 118; 2022: 118). That mental footage consists of exchanged words between father and daughter, joined by the smell of dad's jacket, and the reminiscence of the fact that Maša's father "loved nice pictures and how he was a tireless dandelion hunter" (Aleksić 2020: 119; 2022: 119–120), followed by the feelings of admiration and love for her father, and then the delight which accompanied the whole event. In other words, Maša's memory embodies both a static and dynamic dimension. It includes: sensory representations of various origins, encompasses both verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as an understanding the characteristics, actions and the thought process and inner emotional workings of both her father and herself.

However, it is important to remember that memory is not just a simple imprint of events, but that it is ever so susceptible to shading, changes, and/or distortions. For example, towards the end of *The Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*], right before her trip to Niš, the glasses Ana forgot on her bed leave Tijana with a smile which lingered on her face as she was falling asleep. When she woke up, and left her apartment in Solunska Street—in which she "never set foot again"—she conveniently brought with herself only "Ana's forgotten glasses with a prescription of minus 0.75" (Алексић 2018: 165). It is certain, however, that the latter gesture—and subsequently the memory of it—is not followed by laughter, but rather an immense sorrow over the fact that her friend had lost her life under the onslaught of NATO bombers. An even more explicit insight into the transformation of reality within memory can be witnessed by comparing passages in the novel *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*]. When Nana gifts Sofija a gold chain with a medallion hanging from it, the girl knows that she is expected to

"potentially cheerfully" react to the present, but is unable of "conjuring up" such a reaction (Petrović 2015: 28; Petrović 2020: 30). Similarly, the way she spends her summer vacation initially feels like an injustice: "I was bored to death [...] someone makes a campfire and plays the guitar during the holiday, and I collect snails and listen to Grandma's snoring" (Petrović 2015: 33; Petrović 2020: 35). Contrary to this, when faced with the loss of her grandmother, the medallion becomes a cherished object which nests the memory of an encounter with the rather unusual and authentic Luce, and in Sofija's memory, the time spent with both of her grandmothers picks up a melancholic and sacral shade, evoking an emotional response in which "a waterfall rushed from my eyes" (Petrović 2015: 126; 2020: 135).

The transformation of reality in the domain of memory is most profound in *Sara and The Forgotten Plaza* [*Sara i zaboravljeni trg*] (see also Карановић 2017; Вељковић Мекић 2019). It seems that every element of the scene that Sara unexpectedly encounters undergoes a transformation through zooming in, exaggeration, anthropomorphization, and/or fabulation. Grandmother's rocking chair takes the protagonist to *The Wave Boutique*; a porcelain figurine on her table is embedded into a figure of a man wearing a top hat, serving as a basis for the chapter about porcelain merchants. Moreover, creating stories together with her grandmother, and her message written on a typewriter all inspire her to visit a typewriter museum, where new stories start to flourish from an unknown place; and grandma's final verses turn out to be an "entrance ticket" into a store of taxidermied birds, where she encounters creatures who, just like the "Pelikan's Song," consist solely of words starting with the letter P. Additionally, Sara's difficulty breathing and inability to understand others are projected into two scenes: a figure of a nurse, who utters everything in a flash, and a meeting with a breathing coach. The warped order of things and the significantly altered landscape from her childhood reflects itself in the existence of *Salamongus*—a convenience store in which things hang upside-down—and in the workshop designed to repair childhoods. As we have witnessed in the given examples (and there are many more), the real-life events and memories in Penevski's novel are not always following a one-to-one correspondence; rather, multiple aspects of a real event are sometimes condensed into one of the dimensions of memory and vice versa.

The importance of memory and the necessity of forgetting. – One of the more frequently cited sentences in *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*] happens to be the statement that: "Everything that exists can die only within man" (Коларов 2007: 77). This is not incidental: in addition to announcing the core axis of this remarkable work, the aforementioned statement reexamines the significance of death, and emphasizes the power of memory and its ability to bring solace through the symbolic presence of the deceased person.

The importance of memory in *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*] is evident right from the first half of the novel, when Maša recalls being "the favorite face of his lens" (cf. Алексић 2020: 22). A detail worth adding is her father's gesture of coming up with endearing surnames, such as "Sunculić," "Biciklijanović," and "Maslačković,"[2] as well as the memory of how Nikola thought his daughter had a "personality similar to an embassy" by saying: "Your dad loved the fact that you were capable of defending yourself, being daredevil and independent, but I will add – you have to be a dignified embassy, too" (Алексић 2020: 41). In all three cases, the figure of the father, and then the memory of it, plays a significant role in shaping the identity of young Maša: the photographs testify of the central position she held in the family, which indirectly communicates her father's great love for her, that, among other things, builds her sense of personal value. Maša's "new surnames" and the comparison to an embassy, quietly influence how she deems herself and the manner in which she should conduct herself: at the very end of the story, even though she is moved by the memory, she is fighting back tears, saying: "Well, I don't whimper. I am an embassy, but you know that already" (Алексић 2020: 120; 2022: 120).

Meanwhile, there are cases where memory is not only concerned with the individual, but with the collective as well. This is especially evident in the novels by Jasminka Petrović, an author who, from the very beginning of her career, has never shied away from actively addressing contemporary social issues (see more in Petrović B. 2016). In *The Summer*

[2] "Sunculić, Maslačković and Biciklijanović are imaginary surnames derived from the words for the sun, the dandelion and the bicycle, respectively. (Translator's note)" (Aleksić, 2022: 84f).

I Learnt to Fly [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*], Sofija's grandfather Luka is devastated by his son Tonči's death during the civil war of the 1990s. This feeling of tragic loss will compel him, in one of his letters, to label his sister Marija (who moved to Belgrade), as a "chetnik" (Petrović 2015: 68–69; 2020: 72). Thus, those two individual memories (memory of Tonči's death and the labelling of "chetnik"), prompted by Luka's interpretation of the national-identity split, will cause two of the closest relatives to cease communication for a long time. A somewhat similar kind of communication paralysis is discussed in the novel *It's All Right* [*Sve je u redu*], through the monologue of the eighteen-year-old Admir. While speaking about a seminar titled *Love Knows No (Entity) Borders*—which was organized for the students from Tuzla, Brčko and Bijeljina—Admir will mention two professors: Benjamin and Milica. Both of them, in their own ways, boycott the meeting, to which the rest of the guests show a certain degree of sympathy because they are aware that in Benjamin's case, "his entire family perished in Srebrenica," and with Milica, "her sister and mother were killed before her eyes" (Petrović 2017: 27; 2023: 30).

Especially due to the strength of the link between identity and personal and collective memory, it seems that some of the protagonists are consumed by the fear of forgetting their lost loved one. Maša repeatedly emphasizes that her greatest fear is forgetting her father (Алексић 2020: 10, 23, 84, 110; 2022: 10, 23, 84, 110). For her, the true death of her father would be represented not by his physical death, but rather with forgetting his character (cf. Вељковић Мекић 2017: 25). Therefore, the act of picking dandelions—a ritual they partook in together—represents a precious situational synecdoche of the memory of her absent father, so that even when the ritual occasionally slips the protagonist's mind, it leads to an internal reprimand, self-criticism and insomnia (Алексић 2020: 84; 2022: 84). Similarly to Maša, in a couple of instances, Želja sees herself as a (sole) keeper of the memory of her father, where the intensity of the gesture and the hope that she might somehow again meet her father, in her case represent a symptom of the refusal to accept that the main source of stability in her life is lost forever. In these cases, the memory of the deceased person produces a paralyzing effect: it obsessively ties Maša to her ritual, while Želja's personal growth and maturation stagnate. And what can be said about Sara's "forgotten story," which caused her to lose two years of her life in an oneiric rendition of the disturbing scenes

that happened in her grandmother's apartment? An appropriate example which should be added to these involves the situations in Jasminka Petrović's novel, in which it is not the individuals who are paralyzed *per se*, but rather their relationships.

And yet, the issues mentioned in the examined novels do not remain without a resolution. In *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*] and *Sara and The Forgotten Plaza* [*Sara i zaboravljeni trg*], advice appears from the deeper layers of the (sub)consciousness. In her dream, the voice of Želja's father urges her, together with her mother, to continue with their lives without him (Jovanović 2020: 138–139; 2021: 145–146); while Sara, in one of her conversations with Scotoma, finds out about the constructive nature of forgetting, which "doesn't mean that now you don't know who you are, or what your past was like," but rather represents "a complete knowledge of yourself and who you truly are, but also [...] erasing the things which make you weak and unhappy" (Penevski 2015: 138). Maša will regain the trust in her memory the moment she remembers, with distinct clarity, the idyllic scene from a road trip with her father. The intensity of that memory, "reverberating with the sense of timelessness" (Вељковић Мекић 2017: 25), makes her realize that there is "no point" in fearing that one day she might forget something so important and lovely (Алексић 2020: 120; 2022: 120).

Things seem to be a bit more complex—and simultaneously more elliptical and explicit—in the novel *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*]. Immediately, the novel's motto suggests to the reader that the invisible harmony is stronger than the visible one (Коларов, 2007: 9). Professor Api claims that: "*Just because I'm not here, does not mean I'm not somewhere else*" (Коларов 2007: 61); a dwarf named Two Plus One points out to Kia that: "every single thing you see, exists in a couple of other realities" (Коларов 2007: 88), after which she starts believing that she belongs to both a visible and invisible world, as do the people she loves (Коларов 2007: 90). The previously mentioned statements, which come across as undeniable truths—and make Serbian literature for children "open up to the field of the numinous, as well as the metaphysical" (Панић Мараш 2023: 26)—have the value of consolation because they do not view death as the absolute end of existence, but rather as a mere termination of being in one of many worlds. These statements will not remain just some abstract hypotheses, but will be at least partially confirmed in the novel

by the experience of Kia Sibin. One example which illustrates this is the case involving a porcelain figurine of a Siberian tiger, next to which rests "a piece of a broken leg with its paw, but that other tiger had disappeared" (Коларов, 2007: 16). In accordance with the previously mentioned statement of Professor Api, it will turn out that the tiger did not completely disappear, but that it is situated in a different place, where Kia will eventually find it (Коларов 2007: 70).

Finally, when talking about interpersonal relationships which are violated in the interplay between personal memory and collective identity, extreme situations and the passage of time will mostly influence their constructive change. We can see that with Luka and Marija, who will make up only when their Luce falls terribly ill, and ultimately passes away (Petrović 2015: 137; 2020: 147).[3] Also, while the relations between people of different nationalities only ostensibly improve, with new generations who do not want to subjugate their choices to the matrices of collective memory, Admir and Jelena's love displays that—with an understanding of historical causes—one can still resist the disintegrative vectors of memory (Petrović 2017: 29–30; 2023: 33).

Instead of a Conclusion: Stepping Towards a Methodological Actualization of Dialogue

Some of the discussed authors and their works are already present in the official Serbian language school curriculum: when they reach seventh grade, the students can choose between *Shoe At The End of The World* [*Cipela na kraju sveta*] by Dejan Aleksić or *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*] by Igor Kolarov; and as part of compulsory reading, the novel *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*] by Jasminka Petrović is included (Serbian Education Guidebook 2019: 63). In recent times,

[3] Ivana Ignjatov Popović (2020: 106) interprets the deaths of Nana Luce in *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*] and Ana in *The Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*] as an "idiosyncratic redefinition of sacrifice," considering that they symbolically allow for the birth of a new world, which includes the reconciliation of war-ridden sides, but also play "a significant role in the process of maturation and formation of the heroines' characters".

Kolarov's work has been the subject of methodological reflections (cf. Божић 2023; Кљајић 2023), and the presence of Vesna Aleksić's prose in the reading program (Serbian Education Guidebook 2018: 196), alongside the positive critical response to the novels of Zoran Penevski and Aleksandra Jovanović, all generate a desire for those reflections to continue.

The analysis of the selected novels has shown that we could conduct a dialogue encompassing several topics, such as: the emotions and behavior of literary characters which follow the death of their loved one, the nature and value of memory (its triggers and qualities, and its relation to a person's sense of identity), as well as the role of forgetting in the process of integrating (past) events into life experience, which enables further character maturation. A thorough artistic discourse on these issues brought up in these works opens up a space for different focal points in a dialogue for students to explore; and we will briefly introduce some of them in this work.

Primarily, taking into consideration the structure of the majority of the novels—which mainly center around one literary character—it seems helpful to use the dominant literary figure for the instructional principles of discussing a literary text with young readers (Николић 1992: 220 ff.; see also Милатовић 2019: 323–327). This model directs its aims of discussion towards how the reader perceives the literary character: their actions, worldview and psychological portrait, as well as their relationship with others. Given that the literary character is the main focus, and that through him the entirety of the book—and not just a single specific theme—is explored, this model of discussion requires a somewhat indirect approach to the dialogue which includes the topics of the passing of a loved one, responses to death and the memory of the deceased. The dialogue, however, will inevitably touch upon these topics, since all the assumed elements of analysis are closely linked to the already mentioned thematic and motivational complex present in the examples of Kia, Sara, Maša or Želja.

The thematic and motivational analyses of a literary text (Николић 1992: 232 ff.; Милатовић 2019: 321 ff.) allow for a more focused examination of specific excerpts from a novel and their evaluation in a comparative key. Despite the fact that this approach may obscure the wholeness of some literary works in particular, one of the benefits of this approach is its potential motivational property, which may "stimulate the student's inner

sensibility" (Мркаљ 2016: 182), and prompt them to further examine the text as a whole. The selection of excerpts can be done based on different criteria, depending on the goal one wishes to achieve. For example, if the emphasis is placed on the interpretation of dominant emotions which arise as a response to the death of a loved one, a comparative analysis can be applied to selected excerpts from the novels *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvalaesto more*] and *The Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*], which highlight the presence of grief and its qualities. Some (shorter) excerpts from the novels *It's All Right* [*Sve je u redu*], *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*] and *Sara and a January for Two Young Girls* [*Sara i januar za dve devojčice*] could be added along the line, as they encompass a full spectrum of emotions which these novels suggestively portray; from the feeling of guilt and loneliness, to an excessive sense of threat for the lives of others, as well as their own. This way, with the necessary and adequate localization of the text (cf. Мркаљ 2016: 184), a more in-depth insight into the dynamic of a person's complex inner life in extreme situations—including the death of a loved one—can be implemented.

The most inspiring—and at the same time the most challenging—approach to a literary text is the problem-based approach, because, among other things, "problem-based teaching of literature is the highest form of learning, which transfigures reproductive learning into thinking and creativity, a passive approach and attitude into exploration" (Милатовић 2019: 327). The mechanisms used to create a problematic situation are numerous and varied (for more details, see Rosandić 2005: 226–229). For example, the characters' need for hiding/showing their emotions in *The Dandelion Hunter* [*Lovac na maslačke*] or *The Black Bird* [*Crna ptica*], can spur divided opinions and judgements among students, for which providing thorough arguments during the dialogue would be preferable. Moreover, *The Twelfth Sea* [*Dvanaesto more*] is brimming with gnomic statements that can stimulate conversation, discussions and reflections; the illustrations which are part of the novel *Sara and The Forgotten Plaza* [*Sara i zaboravljeni trg*] prompt the evaluation of the relationship between the textual and the visual; while the movie adaptation of *The Summer I Learnt to Fly* [*Leto kad sam naučila da letim*] naturally poses the question to the young reader/viewer about how certain motifs and themes have been reshaped, in what direction their development is going, and what the (internal) motivation for it is.

This type of approach affirms the research method in the teaching of literature, as well as the use of research tasks and even entire research projects (Rosandić 2005: 205; Мркаљ 2016: 89). There is no special need to emphasize that the important benefits of this kind of evaluation lie in the fact that it is open for "deeper levels of interpretation, the actualization of aesthetic experience or discovering literary problems which will help motivate students to open up discussions about ethical, social, psychological and other issues" (Мркаљ 2016: 90). Another perk of this type of evaluation is that it encourages the formation of a critical attitude based on arguments by posing assertions which should either be proven or disproven (Rosandić 2005: 205), in which the individuality in perceiving phenomena and drawing conclusions about them is particularly fostered. In this regard, the ambivalent attitude of some of the characters in the aforementioned novels towards memory and forgetting, whether they are "just" an individual or a collective concern (especially in the novel *It's All Right* [*Sve je u redu*]), opens up a wide horizon for adopting different viewpoints and explanations for them. This process cultivates respect for differing opinions and positively influences the development of tolerance among young people.

The analysis of explored novels and their thematic and motivational axis can be conceptualized—although with some difficulty in the current educational circumstances—within the framework of a correlation-integration methodological model, which is based on connecting subjects from similar or differing educational areas (Rosandić 2005: 206). Achieving an interdisciplinary connection implies the involvement of a larger number of participants, each contributing to the dialogue from the standpoint of their respective fields of expertise. The mentioned participants would include even those people who are not part of the educational system in the strictest sense—writers and musicians, movie directors and actors, psychologists and sociologists, etc. In the context of analyzing the given novels, the thematization of the process of memorizing and forgetting, the foundation and formation of individual identity, all call for input from the perspective of a biologist and/or psychologist, where the role of memory in the process of defining an (national, cultural) identity is best understood through the lens of historians and/or sociologists. Given that certain compositions play a significant role in the novels by Vesna Aleksić, as do illustrations in the novels by Zoran Penevski, it would be useful

to examine their works from the viewpoint of experts belonging to the field of classical and pop music, or (visual) arts. Although organizing these kinds of lessons is quite sophisticated and requires for many separate components to work in unison, it is certain that it would bring about an exciting and fruitful interdisciplinary approach to literary works.

With all things mentioned, it is worth adding that every interpretation should consist of two levels: an emotional-intuitive and a logical-intellectual one (Rosandić 2005: 217), and that the application of these methodological principles and models should not solely be confined to educational institutions and regular classes, but better yet—considering all the topics brought up in this paper—in the format of extracurricular activities and workshops. These activities and workshops would aim to reach to a deeper understanding of a literary text in the light of the selected aspects. Such an exploratory framework would be able to stimulate a rather productive engagement with smaller groups of young and enthusiastic readers, where their individuality in experiencing and understanding the text would be brought out.

Additionally, if we take into consideration the variety of life experiences, and the fact that chronological age is just one of many factors which influence how one receives a literary work, as well as their motivation for engaging with it, this approach could gather readers who are not necessarily of the same age, but who possess an intrinsic motivation for the interpretation of the text at hand. Although the "scope of influence" of a literary text is narrowed down in that case, the depth of its influence is—at least in principle—often more intense and gives rise to a space with more opportunities for channeling creative impulses.

The very nature of the novel as a work of art allows for many possibilities of reconfiguration: adopting and developing the literary characters' different perspectives by envisioning the same event through each one of them, enacting scenes characterized by strong emotional charge, along with a more open correspondence of events and situations to one's own life experiences and the world in which one exists in. These are just some of the imaginative directions which the analyzed literary creations can evoke, and which may catalyze or further advance the intellectual and emotional development of a young reader—their maturation, in which empathy towards other people and a profound understanding of human nature are placed at the forefront.

Translated by Tijana Kozić

First published: "Смрт, траума и сећање у савременом српском роману за младе – интерпретативни и методички аспект", *Детињство* 4 (2024): 113–126.

WORKS CITED

Алексић, Весна. *Ловац на маслачке*. Београд: Креативни центар, 2014.

—. *Сазвежђе виолина*. Београд: Креативни центар, 2018.

Бјелановић, Недељка. "Како се изговара несаопштиво: траума дјетета у романима Весне Алексић *Ја се зовем Јелена Шуман* и *Сазвежђе виолина*". *Књижевна историја* 181 (2023): 197–211.

Божић, Снежана. "Проза Игора Коларова у методичком кључу: емпатијско-етички аспекти рецепције". *Детињство* 3 (2023): 40–50.

Вељковић Мекић, Јелена. "Мотив смрти у савременим романима за децу". *Детињство* 3 (2019): 22–29.

Игњатов Поповић, Ивана. "Уметност као противтежа рату у романима *Лето кад сам научила да летим* Јасминке Петровић и *Сазвежђе виолина* Весне Алексић". Детињство 1 (2020): 97–109.

Јелисавчић, Маријана. "О жељи и (не)могућем". *Детињство* 1 (2021): 180–182.

Карановић, Мирјана. "Сара и Алиса: заустављено време". *Детињство* 2 (2017): 58–71.

Кљајић, Наташа. "Могућности наставне интерпретације романа *Дванаесто море* Игора Коларова у седмом разреду основне школе". *Детињство* 3 (2023): 29–39.

Коларов, Игор. *Дванаесто море: свет Кие Сибин*. Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2007.

Костић, Александар. *Когнитивна психологија*. Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2014.

Лалатовић, Јелена. "Портрет уметнице као девојке која (не) одраста: темпоралност прекинутог одрастања у делима Весне Алексић". *Детињство* 4 (2018): 83–89.

Милатовић, Вук. *Методика наставе српског језика и књижевности: у млађим разредима основне школе*. Београд: Учитељски факултет, 2019.

Мркаљ, Зона. *Од буквара до читанки (методичка истраживања)*. Београд: Учитељски факултет, 2016.

Николић, Милија. *Методика наставе српског језика и књижевности*. Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства, 1992.

Опачић, Зорана. "Усамљено дете као нови тип јунака у српским романима за децу (на примеру романа Игора Коларова)". *Детињство* 3/4 (2011): 12–20.

Панић Мараш, Јелена. "Наративне стратегије у роману *Дванаесто море* Игора Коларова". *Детињство* 3 (2023): 17–28.

Перић, Драгољуб. "Стратегије концептуализације демонских ентитета у савременом српском хорор роману за децу". *Детињство* 2 (2022): 22–33.

Петровић, Биљана. "Рат у бившој Југославији у књижевном делу Јасминке Петровић". *Детињство* 1 (2016): 88–94.

РМС: *Речник српскога језика*. Нови Сад: Матица српска, 2011.

*

Aleksić, Vesna. *The Dandelion Hunter*, translated by Nataša Srdić. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2022.

Brante, Thomas, Margareta Hallberg. "Brain or Heart? The Controversy over the Concept of Death". *Social Studies of Science* 3 (1991): 389–413.

ICD-11: *International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11)*. <https://icd.who.int/browse/2024-01/mms/en> 1. 2. 2024.

Jovanović, Aleksandra. *Crna ptica*. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2020.

—. *The Black Bird*, translated by Nataša Srdić. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2021.

Kagan, Shelly. "The Nature of Persons: Dualism vs. Physicalism." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gh-6HyTRNNY&list=PLEA18FAF1AD9047B0&index=2> 30. 9. 2008.

Kastenbaum, Robert, Christopher M Moreman. *Death, Society and Human Experience*. New York, London: Routledge, 2018.

Kolk, Bessel A. van der. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking. 2014. <https://archive.org/details/the-body-keeps-the-score-pdf/page/n6/mode/1up?view=theater>.

Kuljić, Todor. *Tanatopolitika*. Beograd: Čigoja štampa, 2014.

Penevski, Zoran. *Sara i januar za dve devojčice*. Beograd: Laguna, 2018.

—. *Sara i zaboravljeni trg*. Beograd: Laguna, 2015.

Petrović, Jasminka. *It's All Right*, translated by Nataša Srdić. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2023.

—. *Leto kad sam naučila da letim*. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2015.

—. *Sve je u redu*. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2017.

—. *The Summer I Learnt to Fly*, translated by Nataša Srdić. Beograd: Kreativni centar, 2020.

Rosandić, Dragutin. *Metodika književnog odgoja (temeljci metodičkoknjiževne enciklopedije).* Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2005.

Serbian Education Guidebook on the Teaching and Learning Program for the Seventh Grade of Primary Education [Pravilnik o programu nastave i učenja za sedmi razred osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja]. *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije – Prosvetni glasnik* 5, 2019.

Serbian Education Guidebook on the Teaching and Learning Program for the Sixth Grade of Primary Education [Pravilnik o programu nastave i učenja za šesti razred osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja]. *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije – Prosvetni glasnik* 15, 2018.

Stein, Dan J., McLaughlin, Katie A., Koenen, Karestan C. … and Ronald C. Kessler. "DSM-5 and ICD-11 Definitions of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Investigating 'Narrow' and 'Broad' Approaches". *Depress Anxiety* 31 (2014): 494–505.

Trebješanin, Žarko. *Rečnik psihologije*. Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 2008.