

**The Inclusion of Taboo Topics in Children Literature**  
***Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson as a Case Study**  
**L'inclusion de sujets tabous dans la littérature pour enfants**  
***Bridge to Terabithia* par Katherine Paterson comme étude de cas**

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to give an account of the inclusion of taboo topics in children literature. This is going to be explored through the novel *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) by Katherine Paterson who incorporated topics that are traditionally considered difficult for the juvenile reader; like the use of swear words and discussing the topic of death. Accordingly, the study throws light upon this phenomenon and whether it is suitable for children to be exposed to such an inappropriate language and to face such challenging issues. The results display that teaching children how to deal with sensitive issues helps in their growing up and the profane language does not always act in deviation but also serves a stylistic effect in the story.

**Keywords:**

Swear Words; Death; Children Literature; Inappropriate Language, Stylistic Effect.

**Résumé:**

Cet article vise à rendre compte de la prise en compte des sujets tabous dans la littérature jeunesse. Cela va être exploré à travers le roman *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) de Katherine Paterson qui a incorporé des sujets traditionnellement considérés comme difficiles pour le lecteur

juvénile; comme l'utilisation de jurons et discuter du sujet de la mort. En conséquence, l'étude met en lumière ce phénomène et s'il est approprié pour les enfants d'être exposés à un langage aussi inapproprié et de faire face à des problèmes aussi difficiles. Les résultats montrent qu'enseigner aux enfants comment traiter les questions sensibles aide à leur croissance et que le langage profane n'agit pas toujours en déviation mais sert également un effet stylistique dans l'histoire.

**Mots-clés :**

Gros mots ; Décès; Littérature pour enfants; Langage inapproprié, effet stylistique.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To the majority of people, swearing is stigmatized and is considered as an inappropriate language that must be avoided and it is also connected with social inferiority, low level of education and low prestige; therefore, less has been done as far this subject is concerned as it is believed that swearing does not belong in the academic sphere for the simple reason that it entails expressions that are socially established as a taboo, let alone when this subject is used in children literature. This latter is supposed to depict a world where children are portrayed in a goody-goody manner and where adults instruct in them how to distinguish the grey shades of life, to use an appropriate language free from unholy words, far from sensitive subjects that evoke in them negative and painful emotions.

Therefore, the concern of the present study is to discuss the inclusion of swear words and the topic of death in the juvenile literature through scrutinizing *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) by Katherine Paterson. Additionally, it seeks to find out whether it is suitable to expose children to such an inappropriate language and to get them face such challenging issues at this early stage of life.

## 2. Definition of Swearing

The phenomenon of swearing is worldwide and in all the cultures it is seen as an indicator of a bad language as it is often related to aggressiveness. As a

definition of swearing, Andersson and Trudgill (2007: 195) suggest that “swearing can be defined as language use in which the expression: (a) refers to something taboo or stigmatised (b) is not to be interpreted literally (c) expresses strong emotions or attitudes.” (Locher, 2010, p. 289)

From the previously mentioned definition, it can be understood that swearing is socially regarded as a bad and a shameful act. It is not apt for a denotative interpretation as it is uttered in strong emotional situations. Consequently, this leads to the assumption that “swearing fulfils some particular communicative functions, which are not easily accomplished through other linguistic means.” (Locher, 2010, p. 290)

Swear words can be categorised based on a derivation from one of the three taboo areas: excretion, sex and profanity. This latter is related to religious issues like; damn, goddamn, bloody, Chrissake (Locher, 2010).

In addition to its shocking value, swearing is used to make a stylistic effect. For instance, swear words that have been used in *Bridge to Terabithia* are related to religion and they are suitable for showing surprise both to indicate a sense of joy and in situations that evoke fear (Schippers, 2013)

### **2.1 Taboo Words as a Culture Established Concept**

It is noteworthy to mention that the concept of taboo differs from one culture to another. What is believed to be a taboo word in a given society might be accepted in the other and vice versa. Menon (2000) considers the term taboo as being defined according to its culture and it can be either accepted or denied depending on the differences among cultures (Schippers, 2013)

The way people respond to the use of swear words varies. There are certain words that may be offensive depending on the context, formality, relationship, age, culture and social class (Schippers, 2013)

### **2.2 Children and Taboo Words**

It is obvious that the young audience should be prevented from being exposed to taboo words and adults, including parents, educators and publishers are responsible for censoring what children should read because the more they are exposed to taboo words, the more they get influenced by them as it has been agreed by: "obscenity law assumes that children are naive to taboo words and become corrupted or depraved when exposed to them; therefore, children should be protected from taboo words." (Jay, 2013, p. 459)

The concept of taboo is not the invention of children but is rather created by adults for them because a children book is written by an adult and he is the one who chooses what is appropriate for children and what is not (Taberner Sala, 2017)

However, children should not be deprived from being exposed to taboo topics rather to face them just like adults and this is the point that has been emphasized by Sendak:

Children are ready to face questionable topics which adults would like them not to know about. [...] All we are really trying to do is to tell them about life. What is wrong with that? And, in any case, they already know about life. [...] Honesty is the basic element. Any text you are working on, no matter whether it is realistic, fantastic or science fiction, must start from a basis of honesty. The truth of the topic must be told to the child, as much as possible, without mitigating that truth. It is necessary to recognise that children are brave little people who face many problems every day, just as adults do. (Taberner Sala, 2017, p. 124)

Sendak encouraged the belief of allowing young readers to be exposed to what is not conventional in order to grow as aware readers. Alongside with that, Menon (2000) believed that sensitive issues allow the child to grow with an open mind

and to grow more responsible and this can be achieved when the book is achieved by a talented author, regarding this she puts:

But in the hands of a talented writer the same issues are communicated with a sensitivity that opens the child's mind in ways that more conventional books do not. As publishers with a commitment to good writing we must defend and celebrate a writer's freedom to challenge the prevailing complacencies of our age. More importantly, we must give children the choice to read a range of books from the traditional and conventional to the more challenging and unconventional if we are to make them responsible readers. (Menon, 2000, pp. <https://www.tulikabooks.com/info/are-there-taboos-in-children-s-literature>)

### **2.3 The Spreading of Swearing Phenomenon in Children Literature**

Including swear words in children's literature has long been denounced by educators, parents and publishers, in this respect Barichello asserts: "swearing in children's books, and even in books for teenagers, used to be pure anathema." (Barichello, 2016, pp. <https://juliestroebelbarichello.com/2016/07/24/profanity-in-kid-lit/>) This means that this phenomenon did not take place before, yet nowadays it is witnessing an increase in various domains, literature, television, media, political speech, to mention but few.

### **3. The Issue of Death in Children Literature**

The topic of death, often, when mentioned in the presence of children, is used in a euphemistic way. Expressions like; someone passed away, he went to sleep or he went to live in heaven, are used instead. Although death is a daily experienced subject, that is to say its occurrence is frequent, its discussion in children literature

is considered as a taboo “dying has, to some degree, replaced reproduction as the taboo subject between adults and children; and, to a large extent, in modern literature for children.” (Kaufman, 1976, p. 02) for death is believed to be a dark subject for children to deal with.

It is not surprising to mention that children books in which the theme of death is presented are exposed to objection. This latter is the fallout mainly when the theme of death is not associated with the antagonist of the story “death in children’s books was taboo especially when it did not happen to a wicked character in the story.” (Menon, 2000, pp. <https://www.tulikabooks.com/info/are-there-taboos-in-children-s-literature>)

However concludes that for whatever purpose, the complete avoidance of the topic of death can be deemed deceitful and harmful to the sentimental and mental development of the child (Kaufman, 1976) because the more children learn how to face death, the more they are contributing in their self growing up as “literature, apart from entertaining and instructing, can aid people in coping with real life situations. Many children will have to face the death of a close relative. If they are somehow spared from a personal tragedy, they will probably know classmates who will need support in time of grief.” (Kaufman, 1976, p. 10). Consequently, this will increase their empathy.

Accepting death as a reality is a must and children need to acquire that and perceive that all kinds of creatures are concerned with it and this is a fact that must be accepted by everyone. So, literature is a suitable platform that can present the issue of death in a proper way (Kaufman, 1976)

#### **4. Data Collection**

##### **4.1. An Overview about *Bridge to Terabithia***

Katherine Paterson wrote her masterpiece as corollary to the death of her son’s friend because of lightning. Such a tragic event inspired her to write the novella.

By doing so, the book represented a sort of relief not only for her son but for herself as well. (Sanderson, 2004)

In an imperfect life, Katherine Paterson hones the life of Jess Aarons who lives in a rural society where creativity is not welcomed. Jess, the 10 years boy, is trying hard to become what he wants. He is a boy who is fond of drawing. He is also haunted by another dream that is to be the fastest runner in his grade. This dream is suddenly confronted and destroyed by a new coming girl, Leslie Burke. Such a meeting between them does not smell a promising friendship, yet Jess and Leslie became true friends sharing together a lot of imagination and purposes that are: to fit with other, overcome differences, to be what they really are and to become themselves only. Together, they create their own kingdom where they can be King and Queen, which was Terabithia. A place where they defeated their enemies both fictional and real, until the coming of the unexpected day which ruins Jess's life, the death of Leslie. Soon afterwards, Jess is aware about the courage and confidence Leslie has entrenched in him. (Rugg, 1994)

#### **4.2. The Atmosphere of the Novel**

Jess lives in rural Virginia, while Leslie Burke is a moving girl with her family from the suburbs of Washington to that rural community where Jess lives. Leslie just feels different. This difference is ample in the novel as Leslie is trying hard to fit in, in order to be accepted. For instance, when Jess and Leslie are in their kingdom Terabithia, they have to use a poetic language to fit as king and queen. It is very easy for Leslie to use the language but it is not the case for Jess who seems to use it with difficulty, he could hardly manage English, much less the poetic language of a king (Marie, 2015).

This, in fact, shows a difference between them, however, for Leslie, it means nothing but strength and unity and that is what she raised in Jess through working together and overcoming their differences; such as their different accents for it is advocated to educate children about differences, enjoying them, studying them,

and savouring them, without condemning or repressing non-standard forms. (Stan, 2015)

Although Leslie spoke a standard, Jess's hillbilly talking does not mean for her backwardness, vulgarity or buffoonery and this is apparent in the novel. It was through dialogue that Paterson made her use of dialect in the novel in order "to allow the reader to understand the background of both Jess and Leslie." (Sutherland, 2010, p. 10)

The novel is set in the 1970s in rural Virginia. That period of time marked a well-known event in the American history, the aftermath of the war with Vietnam. People who lived in rural societies were doubtful of the Burke family who moved to a farmhouse where they were called 'hippies', who were people of the 1960s and 1970s who disregarded the fashions of the middle class. The family was not satisfied about a comfortable life, their concern was to look for peace (McGraw-Hill)

People who lived in Appalachia used to live in small communities where they farm small pieces of land and this can be shown the Aarons family who were poor, relying on that piece of land and a cow. The father works in digging and hauling in Washington DC. The family suffers from the problem of money and this can be widely noticed when Jess is worried about what to offer Leslie in Christmas because he does not have enough money (Sanderson, 2004)

By so doing, Paterson creates a novel as a real life by using the dialogue spoken by early adolescents in order to allow the reader to feel as though he is in the story (Bryson, 2017)

#### **4.3. Profane and Swear Words in Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia***

The language that Katherine Paterson chose in *Bridge to Terabithia* was meant "to convey characters and setting. One choice she made as an author was to include obscenities." (Linsay, 2003, p. 11)

This language has been described as being offensive and this represented the main attack against it. The book received different appellations; profane, vulgar, inappropriate, to cite but few. The use of such a language in a book that is addressed to children enhanced "the stereotype that poor people swear and well-to-do people do not." (Green, 2005, p. 428)

Another argument emphasized the impact of such a language on the young readers "this kind of language being taught to our children is not real life....it's an attention getting thing. We are not lifting our kids up anywhere by exposing them to this; we're stooping to a gutter level." (Green, 2005, pp. 427-428)

Paterson's book was expelled many times from being suggested in school programs because of its language. Paterson responds "initially, it was challenged because it deals with a boy who lives in rural Virginia, and he uses the word 'Lord' a lot, and it is not in prayer." (Lindsey, 2011, pp. <http://www.literarylindsey.com/2011/09/banned-books-week-bridge-to-terabithia.html>)

For this reason, many critics did not support the use of offensive words since the book was devised for young readers "one way in which Bridge offends some readers is with its use of swear words.", says (Sanderson, 2004, p. 48).

Paterson, in her comment on the character Jess responds: "he speaks like children I have known in that part of the world. I tried to be true to the child he was, not make him an example of proper language and behaviour." (Sanderson, 2004, p. 13)

Paterson believed that there should be a sort of honesty when it comes to the relationship between the author and the child reader and life should be shown in its fullest reality. Consequently, Lindsay proclaims that "[Paterson] believed it was important for the language to be authentic." (Lindsay, 2003, p. 11)

According to Paterson, in order to exhibit a character as real, it is necessary not to make him a model of good behaviour; she argued "I have a lot of respect for my

readers. I don't expect them to imitate my characters, simply to care about them and understand them." (Sanderson, 2004, p. 49) Paterson's aim was to create a book from which children can read, enjoy and learn.

#### **4.4. Death and Religious Issues in *Bridge to Terabithia***

In her novel *Bridge to Terabithia*, Katherine Paterson portrayed death in an attempt to help children cope with it when it occurs in their life and this is an aspect of realism. Some critics appreciated the book for two reasons; the themes that the book covered were praised as well as for facing sensitive issues like death. (Thomas, 2008)

However, this does not help in preventing the book from being banned and challenged,

For combining fantasy with reality, using profanity (hell and damn), and including children who fail to respect adults or religion. For instance, when Leslie attended church with Jess, she was interested in the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection but she considered it no more than a story that someone made up. She did not plan to become a Christian or to do what the Bible commended. But, perhaps most objectionable was Leslie's death, a feature condemned by people who considered death an inappropriate subject for children. (Thomas, 2008, p. 17)

Copious complaints were addressed to the issue of the Christian religion that seemed to be devalued throughout the novel. ALA, Connecticut, 2002 views the book as a promotion of witchcraft, secular humanism and New Age religion. PFAW, California, 1992 criticises the contempt for the church and changing beliefs in what concerns heaven and hell (Green, 2005).

To cite an example from the novel, when the father claimed that God would never send a little girl to hell, as the novel reads: "Lord, boy, don't be a fool. God ain't gonna send any little girls to hell." (Paterson, 1977, p. 148) which is not exact and does not make any sense because from the perspective of the book, children

are all born good, however people in general are somehow sinful, be they children or adults and the only way to heaven is to believe in God and act according to what He orders.

Another aspect that received objection is the reference of fantasy that Leslie and Jess created. A world of their own that is based on secret and magic and this gives a way to what is known as the occult -realm of supernatural-. (Green, 2005)

In her justification of her book inclusion of the subject of death as being suitable for the young readers, Paterson explains:

Two of my children lost friends by the time they were eight years old.... [So] death was not appropriate for my children, but somehow, as their parents, we had to help them face death.... I feel that *Bridge* is kind of a rehearsal that you go through to mourn somebody's death that you care about. It's very normal to be angry when someone you love dies—even angry at the person who dies... I'm always a little worried when somebody gives *Bridge* to somebody because someone has died, because I always think that it's too late. They should've read it before that. (Thomas, 2008, p. 17)

So, Paterson's aim from writing the book is to give children a sort of practice to face death before it happens to them. Paterson believed that the challenges that her book received were resultant from people's fear of death as she condemns them as not being fully religious because Christianity deals with facing death and not escaping it, accordingly she puts:

I have a feeling that what might be behind a lot of these attacks is a fear of death, or perhaps a fear of talking about death to children. Maybe these people feel that the sudden and seemingly senseless nature of the death of the girl in the book would cause children to question their religious beliefs. Of course, most of the people who attack the book consider themselves to be devout Christians, and we Christians are not supposed to be afraid of death, so maybe my theory is wrong. (Bird, 2014, pp. 102-103)

## 5. Data Analysis

### 5.1. Swear Words in *Bridge to Terabithia*

As it is mentioned previously, swear words that are used in *Bridge to Terabithia* belong to the religious category. Different instances of the words *Lord*, *damn*, *hell* and *bitched* are found in the story. In table 1, the swearing word *Lord* is the most frequent used word that appears in almost 43 instances and the curse word *damn* occurs in 07 instances throughout the story, additionally, the swear word *hell* is repeated thrice and lastly the word *bitched* happened in the story only once. So, the table below shows an arrangement of swear words according to their frequency; that is to say they are arranged on the basis of their number of occurrence in the story.

**Table 1:** Frequency of Swear Words in *Bridge to Terabithia*

Swear Word	Number of Occurrence
Lord	43
Damn	07
Hell	03
Bitched	01

### 5.1. Death in *Bridge to Terabithia*

In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Katherine Paterson made a portrait of death out of sight of the audience; that is to say she did not describe it. Only the way the characters responded to death is drawn. In fact, this depiction is not the issue, however; "it is the emotional connection and the response of the reader to death that is

considered unsuitable.” (Guðmundsdóttir, 2019, p. 17) Even the reaction of the character Jess to death as a young boy has been hosted with criticism.

When he learns about Leslie’s death, Jess became upset and emotionally confused. He even showed a sense of anger toward the attitude of adults “He looked around at the room full of red-eyed adults. *Look at me*, he wanted to say to them. *I’m not crying*” (Paterson, 1977, p. 143)

Jess is all aware about the influence that Leslie entrenched in him which cannot fade away as a result of her death; by contrast this fact makes her everlasting in his life “she wasn’t there, so he must go for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength.” (Paterson, 1977, p. 161)

The depiction of death in the book was meant to teach children to be ready to face this unpredictable fact.

## 6. Results and Discussion

Katherine Paterson’s use of swear words in her novel like; *Lord, damn* and *hell* was not with the aim of disgusting the reader but it was purposeful to be to the reader and to provide authenticity by giving emphasis on the context in which the story takes place. Hence, the profane words serve a linguistic purpose like to emphasise a given word or expressing feeling like; surprise, shock, frustration, anger or annoyance about something. Even the word *bitched* is used to mean ‘complained’.

When it comes to death, this latter occurs on a daily basis to individuals, be they young or adults. It is a reality that no one can deny or escape. So, children books writers, by moving from the traditional to the challenging through treating sensitive topics that do not seem to be appropriate to their age, are helping in opening the young readers’ minds in ways that cannot be found in conventional books and this will help them to become responsible readers (Menon, 2000).

## 7. Conclusion

Plunging into the sea of profane language and dealing with sensitive and religious issues is a challenging task that solely a skilful writer dare to do let alone when it comes to implementing such a language in children literature. Katherine Paterson has verily proved *Bridge to Terabithia* to be far from being expelled and banned. She succeeded in her venture to transmit to the child reader authenticity; a language that is used every day and everywhere by everyone, a language that does not set stereotypes between social classes for it is intentionally or unintentionally used by them all, a language that is not merely used for obscene purposes but also for a linguistic effect as to emphasize a given point.

Preventing children from getting exposed to topics like death is not the sole and appropriate way to get them goody-goody grownups for the more they learn about life's ups and downs the more aware and responsible future-adults they become.

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