

Children's Literature and Taboo Topics. Approaches to Kitty Crowther's Work

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Abstract

This paper explores the work of Kitty Crowther, one of the authors who has managed over the last few years to create her own world in which the topics traditionally considered as difficult for the child reader, such as: solitude, death, absence, mourning, identity and sexism, arise in a natural way, emerging from her own conception of the reader. In this sense, Astrid Lindgren and Beatrix Potter have constituted inexcusable references in her work. This study is based on Nodelman (2008), Salisbury and Styles (2012), Nikolajeva (2014), Kümmerling-Meibauer (2015), Antoine-Andersen (2016) in order to analyze Kitty Crowther's work. Through analysis of her books we discover an innovative way of dealing with the more difficult topics of children's literature. The empathy with which the author presents topics such as death, loneliness, sexism or filial relationships emphasizes the idea of the illustrated literature's conception as a meeting space, where the creator expresses their stories through their own emotions and talks with the reader with honesty. This implies the need to deal with life with its lights and shadows in a conception of children's literary discourse very similar to that of Maurice Sendak.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Kitty Crowther, illustrated literature, taboo topics

1. Introduction

Marc Soriano (2001), in his classic study on Children's literature, mentioned the paradoxical nature of taboo topics present in children's literature, in the sense that the social and political environment defended a particular correct social model for the benefit of a young reader: "the best sellers of children's literature are the books that, in a metaphorical or direct way, criticise the abuse of authority, the lack of listening, and the violence which characterizes some families" (Soriano, 2001: 675).

We need to look deeper and understand that, in many cases, with the aim of educating readers and protecting them from the darkest and most complex aspects, we have opted for sugarcoated discourse in which the idyllic nature of life has prevailed over any other element. This still happens today. Taboos are not really created by children, but something adults create for them. As Nodelman said (2008), behind a work for children there is always an adult. The same thing happens in mediation. It is the adult who decides which topics must be avoided, as Soriano indicates (2001).

Within this framework, our study focuses on Kitty Crowther, one of the authors who, in our opinion, has managed over the last few years to create her own world in which the topics traditionally considered as difficult or inappropriate for the child reader arise in a natural way, emerging from her own conception of the reader, which the author, through her life experience, incorporates as a textual strategy. Moreover, the picture book is the graphic approach in which Kitty Crowther's world acquires its ultimate meaning.

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We will focus on the analysis of the foundations of her work with reference to contributions from ongoing research we are developing on readers' responses to Kitty Crowther's work, following the lines of study of Arizpe and Styles (2004), Sipe (2000, 2010), Salisbury and Styles (2012), among others.

2. -Kitty Crowther and her conception of the picture book

There are not a great number of bibliographic sources to consult for information on Kitty Crowther (Brussels, 1970). It is possible, and perhaps often the case with modern authors, that most of the details about this author come from her interviews, which are in themselves also part of the virtual epitext of this discourse (Genette, 1987). From the many prizes awarded to Kitty Crowther, the most remarkable is the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2010, the most important prize awarded to an author of children's literature. The jury highlighted the following about her:

Kitty Crowther is the master of line but also of atmosphere. She maintains the tradition of the picture book while transforming and renewing it. In her world, the door between imagination and reality is wide open. She addresses the reader gently and personally, but with profound effect. In her deeply felt empathy with people in difficulty, she shows ways in which weakness can be turned into strength. Humanism and sympathy permeate and unify her artistry³.

All this being said, we cannot neglect to mention that the most recent treatises on picturebooks hold her collections of graphic work in high regard. Thus, Van der Linden (2006: 35; 2013: 40) highlights her variations in line texture, and the subtle effects she creates with colour density, set on white or shaded backgrounds with the use of black as a contrast. Moreover, she proposes that her work is an example of the use of coloured pencil techniques in the style of Burningham. Furthermore, she lingers on the fineness and expressive power of the characters who, despite their delicacy, exhibit strength. She also focuses on works such as *Alors?* to praise the construction of the text in a paradigmatic combination between text and image (Van der Linden, 2013a: 68-69). Salisbury (2005, 2012, 2014) praises her traditional technique and her intimate way of creating stories. And in the *100 Great Children's Picturebooks* (2014) he refers to Kitty Crowther's work in the illustrations of *The Tomten* by Astrid Lindgren, as an example of what it means to illustrate silence. In short, Crowther's graphic approach, with its subtle combination of techniques, textures and backgrounds, together with the determination the delicate characters conceal, allows the author to deal with topics such as death, pain, illness, sexism, violence, mother-child relationships or the concept of God, without losing sight of the child reader. Thus, Kitty Crowther's work forms a world of its own with characteristics that define it as a world with its own fixed values. Within these fixed values, the peculiar perspective in which the most complex topics are dealt with, for example a girl's death, is part of the author's conception of a reader model which she explains in many of her comments.

Kitty Crowther moves between the French and English traditions, in such a way as to combine a narrative thread with extreme intimism. In this sense, she takes from authors such as Burningham, Milne, Ungerer, Brunhoff, Lobel, Tove Jansson, Astrid Lindgren, Beatrix Potter, Hergé or Wolf Erlbruch, authors she even mentions in her dedications or introductory phrases, as is the case in *Mère Méduse*, a work in which she interacts with the Tove Jansson approach. Perhaps they are, among all the mentioned authors, Astrid Lindgren and Beatrix Potter the creators who have constituted inexcusable references in her work. The first one because of the Scandinavian tradition in which topics such as death, disease, loneliness, among others, are of utmost importance. And the second of them for its connection to a zoomorphic universe in which the magic of the creatures that inhabit it becomes her cover letter (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 128).

On the other hand, her words can help us better understand the keys that open up the world of her creation. Bessi (2010: 139) asks the author about her preferences with respect to literature:

Quelle littérature aimez-vous ? J'aime la littérature résistante qui donne à réfléchir, qui n'a pas froid aux yeux, avec des livres complets, où se retrouvent la joie et la tristesse. Mon langage à moi, cesont les enfants car ils m'intéressent profondément. J'aime leur ouvrir les portes, les fenêtres, les emmener dans un autre monde.

³ Text extracted from the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award website. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.alma.se/en/award-winners/2010-award-winner/>

[Which literature do you like? I like long-lasting literature that makes you think, that is brave, with complete books, where happiness and sadness meet. My language is the language of children, because they interest me profoundly. I love to open doors and windows for them, to take them to a different world.]⁴

She answers in the same way when Mirandola (2010: 29) asks her about the child reader's influence on her work's conception: "Il est rare que je pense aux lecteurs. Je pensé surtout à l'enfant que j'étais. Elle me guide dans mes choix. J'essaie d'être la plus honnête possible vis-à-vis d'elle et vis-à-vis de moi, puisque je ne suis plus cette petite fille". ["I rarely think of the readers. I mostly think of my child self. She guides me in my choices. I try to be as honest as possible with her and with myself, because I am not that little girl anymore".]⁵

Meaningful, talking about childish reader's conception, it is a piece of the interview with Lucie Cauwe (2007: 7)⁶:

When we find a touching story, one can't stop looking for others. And, since I make some pictures in my books, I am really close to the child. I try to go through his intimacy, to go with him everywhere, to join him but leaving some free space. I want to find some strong stories for their silences and their questions.

The interview she gave to Véronique Antoine-Andersen (2016) turned out to be particularly enlightening in regard to Kitty Crowther's approach to the creative process, drawing on her own life experience:

Entendre mal déstructure tout ton rapport au monde puisque ce que disent les autres ne t'est pas accessible. (...) Mal entendre modifie la chaîne ADN et chamboule la façon de penser, de parler ou de voir. (...) j'avais une excellente mémoire visuelle qui impressionnait ma mère. On avait beaucoup de livres à la maison. Je crois que je me suis complètement évadée dans les images. J'ai énormément lu. Le visuel a pris le dessus. (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 14-15) [Misunderstand and destructure your relations with the world because everything the others say isn't reachable for you. (...) That misunderstanding modifies your DNA strand and changes the way of thinking, talking or seeing. (...) I had an excellent visual memory which impressed my mother. There was a lot of books at home. I think I lost myself in images. I have read many books. The visual has taken the lead.]⁷

It is about the power of reading and of creating in order to explain life and to understand ourselves. As we can see from her own words, when reflecting on her world the author focuses equally on life, and all it entails, and death, as one of the elements which also forms a part of life. For her, word and image are inseparable means of communication in the service of the final meaning. When, in the same interview, she was asked about her conception of literature regarding the reader, she rejects the concept of pedagogical identification and answers:

Il y a toujours de la bienveillance et du réconfort dans mes livres comme des albums de mon enfance. (...) Les auteurs de jeunesse qui m'intéressent sont ceux qui restent profondément connectés avec une partie de leur enfance, avec laquelle ils continuent de dialoguer, et qu'ils ont envie de restituer sans simulacre. (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 48) [There is always kindness and comfort in my books like the ones I found in my albums from my childhood. (...) The authors for young people I am interested in are the ones that have a close connection to a part of their childhood and they keep talking to it, and they want to restore it without any simulation.]⁸

For Crowther, the picture book is the way to find herself and transmit that part of her childhood. Kitty Crowther mentions honesty in the relationship between author and child reader. We must show life as it really is. Once again, difficult topics arise as one of the essential bases of the Belgian author's approach. In this sense, we are reminded of the words of the great master of the picturebook, Maurice Sendak. This is how Sendak explained to Lorraine (2012) his feelings on inappropriate topics⁹:

⁴Translations from the original quotes in French made for this journal.

⁵Translations from the original quotes in French made for this journal.

⁶It will be cited as *Le monde de Kitty Crowther. Textes réunis d'après un entretien avec Lucie Cauwe*. Bruxelles: Pastel. 2007.

⁷Translations from the original quotes in French made for this journal.

⁸Translation from the original quotes in French made for this journal.

⁹Quoted through *Imaginaría* (number 314; May 2012) did as a homage to Maurice Sendak from an interview published more than 30 years ago in the first number of the magazine *Parapara*, a number published by the Banco del Libro (Venezuelan Section of the

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.¹⁰

From this conception of the child reader and the picturebook as discourse or means of communication with the reader, which is similar to that of Sendak, we will analyse the presentation of difficult topics, since, as Ana Zugasti (2014) points out, Kitty Crowther's personal tone allows her to deal with unusual topics in children's literature due to the empathy that she "manages with the reader, a path where fragility can become strength".

This being the case, Kümmerling-Meibauer (2015: 252) mentions *La visite de Petite Mort*, for its significance to the evolution of the picturebook in the 21st century (Nikolajeva, 2012; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014), and highlights the following about the author: Another significant aspect is the inclusion of taboo topics in picturebooks, such as war, death, mental illness, and child abuse. Kitty Crowther's *La Visite de Petite Mort (The Visit of Little Death)*, 2004, 24 which touches upon the philosophical question of what will happen after one's death. (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015: 252)

One of the most remarkable aspects of Kitty Crowther is her conception of the evolution of the genre, perhaps because she is following in the footsteps of masters like Sendak, and because she goes further with respect to the treatment of topics traditionally seen as difficult or inappropriate for the child reader. Certainly, the combination of the author's roots with her two reference artists, Beatrix Potter and her communion with the nature and Astrid Lindgren with the breakthrough spirit of the characters in relation with her conception of the picture book as a way of expression contribute to project a creation in which the dialogue with the child reader is established from the parameters of freedom without prejudice. The emotion without justification is the key to connect with the receiver through a discourse composed by words, images and formats, discourse in which each of the details makes a lot of sense.

3. -Taboo topics in Kitty Crowther's picture books

All of Kitty Crowther's works establish a relationship with the reader based on honesty and absolute respect in the establishment of a dialogue at the same level, without fake protectionisms which falsify the discourse. It is not for nothing that the author regards the picturebook as a meeting place between child and adult; it is with the picturebook that two people can speak, look, listen and each create their own view together¹¹. In this vein, she rejects any pedagogical will for her creation (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 54).

Thus, in her interview at the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) in 2010, she summarises the foundations of her work as a sort of mutual understanding with a reader whom she addresses not because they are a child, but because that is her way of writing and drawing; her "personal language", as she defines it:

Quality, I would say, is commitment, total sincerity. Honesty. I do not write or draw for children; I write and draw the way I do because it is my personal language. No question that I am deeply interested by children. I love their freshness, their spontaneity, their humour, their displays of wisdom. They are much more real than the many people who hide behind so many filters that they have forgotten who they are. They go through the Moulinex blender of society without noticing it. And it is not necessarily the fault of society(which usually gets the blame for everything). Is it the job of artists to wake them up?¹².

There is no doubt that this "personal language" the author refers to is reflected in each of her picturebooks. Thus, *Dans moi* brings to the forefront the child imagination in an extremely personal way, through a dull anger, a silent riot with a restrained violence, on a white background which softens the noise. Both Cheilan (2010) and

IBBY), the Proyecto Interamericano de Literatura Infantil (PILI) and the Autonomous Institute of the National Library of Venezuela (Caracas, June of 1980). <http://www.imaginarialibros.com.ar/2012/05/maurice-sendak-1928-2012/>

¹⁰ Translation from the quote in Spanish made for this journal.

¹¹ It is about an interview given to *El Norte* de Castilla in 2013. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.elnortedecastilla.es/20130703/cultura/album-punto-encuentro-entre-201307032027.html>.

¹² *Kitty Crowther. A book that changed my life.* Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.alma.se/en/About-the-award/ALMA-10-years/Kitty-Crowther/>

Mirandola (2010) have noticed Crowther's personal view and her interest in the body as a kind of internal schizophrenia which seems to see the light. She has declared her fascination for the body, for the human anatomy itself on many occasions (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 62). In *Le petit homme et Dieu*, she deals with one of the most complicated topics of childhood: God. Once again, the white backgrounds appear, embracing the compositions where colour, line and light are the essential elements of the recreation of a world where the dialogue between Theo and God takes place among humorous touches. In this work, we could highlight the material conception in which the choice of paper, backgrounds and edges involve a global assumption of the picture book's creation process.

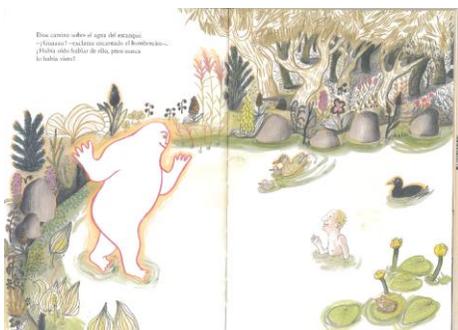


Fig 1 Illustrations from *Theo y Dios*.

On the other hand, *Scratch scratch scraww plop!* and *Alors?* are about solitude and fear of the night. In this last work, drama, which is a major part of Kitty Crowther's world as a discursive method, acquires its highest dimension in the service of the recreation of an environment. Elements such as suspense, tension, the turning of the page and ellipses support mutual understanding with the reader, in an ending that pays tribute to tenderness in its purest state. The excellent analysis of Anne-Sophie Thiry (2006) is very illuminating in this sense. And the same that the author herself offers in the interview with Lucie Cauwe (2007: 16-17) and her analysis of shadows and lights as characters creators who purchase truth through the light.



Fig. 2 Illustrations from *Alors?*.

Poka & Mina's books are also examples of the treatment of difficult topics. Van der Linden (2013b: 21) defines them with the label that has been called *Animal Fantasy*, following Grahame and Milne's tradition (*Winnie the Pooh*), or that of Arnold Lobel or even Beatrix Potter. It is a sentimental comedy where the main characters, apparently two insects, are portrayed in everyday situations where the transcendent is hidden behind the anecdote. In these two works, Van der Linden (2013b: 21) highlights the English influence of "microsociety", which Crowther creates when she carries out a synthesis between the personal and the construction of imaginary worlds, as Victorian authors did. Moreover, she points out the proximity of her graphic approaches to Badescu. The author herself, in the interview with Lucie Cauwe (2007: 18) talks about Gabrielle Vincent's influence and about his concept of respect to the childhood in the Poka and Mina's universe creation. Children are not an adult projection, they have his own identity. Poka & Mina's world is part of this gallery of animal characters that children's literature tends towards, as Nikolajeva (2014: 218-222) points out. These characters are static, though complex in their actions. The dialogues form a discourse with different complexity levels where adults and children can each form their own reading.

It should be point out that Poka & Mina's books have been developed in such a way that the graphic simplicity of the first titles have left place to works with more sophisticated elaboration as *Poka & Mine. À la pêche or Poka & Mine; Poka & Mine. Un cadeau pour Grand-Mère*. The first work is a tribute to the Japanese environment with the appearance of amazing creatures as Madame Oga. The second one is the story of a shell in the affective framework between Mina and her grandmother. The importance of the landscape, the nature and the details of the background are not white, thus they refer to an elaborated proposal from the graphic and conceptual perspective. Water is again, as in many of her works -remember, for example, *Annie du lac, Mon ami Jim, Mère Méduse*, among other titles- a symbolic and differentiating element. She is passionate by the aquatic world, with its flora and fauna. For her, water is an element with which she balances her ascendancy of fire, as well as containing the mystery that is her own (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 22). It emerges, from the demonstrations of the author itself, the increasing importance the characters acquire in their own universe which she considered simple, relaxed and nice: "Efectivamente, je me suis rendu compte que les premiers livres de la série étaient simples graphiquement et, qu'au fur et à mesure, ils s'étoffaient" (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 107).["Of course, I realized that my first (*Poka & Mine*) books were more simplistic in terms of graphics and they were expanded little by little".].

Within that gallery of animal characters, tinged with a kind of magical realism (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 42), and following the same line of graphic narrative as the author of *Babar, Jack & Jim* addresses the topic of difference and diversity, in a simple and metaphorical story, through the graphic and verbal contrasts which take place between her main characters, a seagull and a raven. Likewise, isolation and relationships with others are the themes of *L'enfant racine*. On the topic of complex and difficult topics, we must not forget the approach of *Mère Méduse*, a picturebook that portrays a topic as difficult as the possessive relationship between a mother and her daughter, symbolised by Mother Medusa who protects Irisée inside her tangled hair. This picturebook, which draws on mythological sources, includes scenes such as assistance in labour. It is interesting how Kitty Crowther explains the development process of this work in *Picturebook Makers*¹³ (2015).



Fig. 3 Illustration from *Mère Méduse*

These last two works are representative of the author's interest in the woman as a character:

La question de la femme m'a toujours intéressée. J'ai toujours été fascinée par les femmes indépendantes, probablement parce que j'aspire moi-même à cette liberté d'être et d'exister indépendamment d'un mari ou de mes enfants. J'admire ces femmes qui se sont battues pour nos droits et notre liberté. (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 49) [The issue of women has always interested me. I have been amazed by the independent women, probably because I aspire to that freedom of being and existing regardless of a husband or my children. I admire those women who have fought for our rights and freedom.¹⁴]

4. -Death, pain and illness in Kitty Crowther's world. *La visite de Petite Mort*

Kitty Crowther's world, by definition bound up with difficult themes, does not shy away from death as one of the most controversial topics. Therefore, her afore mentioned conception of the child reader and her graphic approach, on which her take on the picturebook as a genre is based, leads us to an analysis of one of the most original works by the Belgian author. The topic of death is explicitly present in the picturebooks of the beginning of the 21st century.

¹³ Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://blog.picturebookmakers.com/post/100580798276/kitty-crowther>

¹⁴ Translation from the quote in Spanish made for this journal.

Thus, the death of old people, of grandparents, told from the child's perspective, is the theme of such excellent picturebooks as *Rote Wangen* (Red Cheeks) by Janisch, *Grandpa's Angel* by Jutta Bauer or *Geno* by Juan Senís and O. Sabini. In these three works, mentioned as examples, the child's point of view of the story, both in text and illustration, creates a polyphonic discourse in which what is not said is more suggestive than what is explicit. In the same way, death as a topic in stories where animals have the main role is not unconnected to the picturebook. Let us not forget, on this theme, *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch, *The Bear and the Wildcat* by Sakai and Yumoto, or *The Velveteen Rabbit* by K. Sakai, picturebooks that create a poetical discourse which is not far from reality and where death appears in its different manifestations. On the other hand, the pain produced by absence, and the emptiness that loss implies constitute another approach to the topic that the picturebook of the 21st century represents in a very poetical line, where the image suggests more than it shows. *Anna's Heaven*, by Stian Hole, serves as an example. It is a remarkable work because of its use of metaphor as a discursive axis.

All the picturebooks we have mentioned are about the death of beloved adults or animals that serve as symbols of the more brutal aspects of the topic. Within this framework, *La visite de Petite Mort* follows a path that is very rare in children's literature. It is not about the death of loved ones, about loss or absence as the focal point, but this time it is a girl who dies. This is not the first time that this author has addressed this topic. Her previous work *Moi et rien* portrayed the solitude and isolation between a father and daughter broken after the death of the wife and mother. In this work, the dynamic narrative rhythm with characters suspended on a white background without margins, just like *Babar* (Van der Linden, 2008: 20), emphasises the feelings of sadness and loneliness, all represented by the metaphorical component of the girl wearing her father's blazer, in order to feel him close to her. A blue Himalayan poppy implies the recovery of the communication between the father and daughter and the return of the mother's spirit in a very special garden. The narrator's intimate style is underpinned by a very old typing machine writing, which suggests an overall conception of the picturebook as a genre in which the different codes that are involved make sense (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 92-93).

In another vein, *Annie du lac* raises the suicide of the main character who, at one point, decides to dive into the water due to the impossibility of tolerating life. The author herself talks about this fact and answers to the reluctance of some mediators because of the presence of this type of topics, very difficult to assume in the childhood by explaining the need of the children of knowing what happens in real life, without emphasising in the cruellest aspects of it and avoiding, in any case, the adult's prejudices. Crowther maintains the differentiation between the adults and the children lecture's of the same event (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 57). Moreover, the importance of the character in her work implies that in every of her books the connection with the receiver is based on the empathy (Nikolajeva, 2012; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014; 2015).

Although this picturebook, *Moi et rien*, deals with the topic of death from the angle of its consequences, *La visite de Petite Mort* incorporates two unusual motifs, the illness and pain of a child, aspects which we do not find in works such as *Rose Blanche* by Innocenti, which ends up with the death of the young protagonist or, in a different line, in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* by Gorey, which describes in a sardonic tone the misfortunes that cause the deaths of the children characters, to mention some of the few examples of picturebooks which deal with the death of children. Elsewise is an ill girl who shows great excitement when she sees Death.



Fig. 4 Illustration from *La visite de petite Mort*.

Petite Mort est perplexe. C'esta la première fois qu'elle rencontre quelqu'un aussi content de la voir. Ça lui rappelle quelque chose d'étrange. (*La visite de PetiteMort*, 16). [Little Death is puzzled. It is the first time she has met someone so happy to see her. It reminds her of something strange. (*La visite de Petite Mort*, 16).¹⁵]

For Elsewise death is liberation, a solution, the end of suffering, just like Andersen advocated in his metaphysical interpretation of his work. Elsewise tells Little Death about pain, illness and suffering, from her child's point of view, because Death is also a child: Elsewise parle alors de samaladie et de la douleur qui ne la quittait jamais. Maintenant, elle n'a plus mal. Elle est bien. Petite Mort la regarde, fascinée par son beau sourire (*La visite de Petite Mort*, 19). Then, Elsewise speaks about her illness and the pain that never left her. Now she has no pain any more. She is fine. Little Death stares at her, fascinated by her beautiful smile. (*La visite de Petite Mort*, 19).¹⁶]

The two characters, Elsewise and Little Death, become friends and learn to understand each other. The sadness that had always accompanied Little Death becomes happiness and kindness, and they play together. The rhythm of narration is slow and deliberate, held in a frame when the narrator, focused on the character of Little Death, explains in the third person the feelings of cold and loneliness she produces on all the people she visits. This rhythm accelerates with the arrival of a moment of friendship, and cold and sadness give way to light, heat and dance, this time without any frame constricting the action.

The white backgrounds, very characteristic of Crowther's world, highlight the feeling of cold that death suggests. The apparently fragile characters, highly nuanced by the coloured pencil technique, make emotions central to each page, tinged with sensitivity, delicacy and sometimes humour. Once again, a mutual understanding with the reader is established on different discursive levels, in such a way that everything flows with a gentle rhythm that implies a personal and silent reading, which is not particularly adapted, at least in the paperback version, for sharing in social circles.

The narrator's comments are interrupted by concise and dynamic dialogues that contribute, as Nikolajeva mentions (2014: 218-222), to the characterisations of the characters. Furthermore, the main characters move with the typical lightness of the elements, using mythological technique to create the iconography of the realm of Hades. Thus, death's embodiment, inspired by Inuit masks, carries a scythe, which is typical of traditional representations. The book also includes the lake on which the boat sails that transports the dead, and black swans, silent observers of the last journey, are spread throughout the book from the back cover to the title page. All this is done with a subtlety which arouses silence and contributes to strengthen Elsewise's apparently fragile personality. Intertextuality, dialogue with works of art, with authors and with her obsessions remind the reader to the work of Arnold Böcklin, *La isla de la muerte*, and also to the inuit's masks.

Slowly, darkness gives way to the light that the girl creates, a light that shines over the shadows created by the characters themselves and over the signs of light of each of the illustrations. But Elsewise cannot stay in the realm of the dead; the frames which imprison the characters come back, and the abundance of light in the happy scenes gives way to a single sad bulb hanging from the ceiling at the moment of farewell. The drama that characterises the picturebook increases in the last images, which are very dependent on the turning of the pages, because of the suspense it creates. Moreover, Elsewise carries in her hands a mask that reminds her of Little Death and the games they have shared, games that open and close the story in a symbolic way in the opening and closing pages, hinting beyond the boundaries of the book in a suggestive and meaningful way.

In the end, Elsewise, transformed into an angel, will provide Little Death the necessary company to explain death as a benevolent path where there is no need for fear or sadness. The doors, containing many implications, open and close the transition to a world that is completely illuminated from the images' composition.

¹⁵ Translation from the quote in Spanish made for this journal.

¹⁶ Translation from the quote in Spanish made for this journal.



Fig. 5 Illustration from *La visite de Petite Mort*.

La visite de Petite Mort offers an unusual treatment of the topic of death because of its link to childhood pain and illness. The dramatic conception of the picturebook in each of the compositions, and games of symbolic suggestions of the elements that appear on all pages, both graphic and verbal, define *La visite de Petite Mort* as a poetical work that represents evolution in the conception of the genre and the intended reader.

5. -Conclusions

After the thematic analysis of the presented works, developed in detail through the case of *La visite de Petite Mort*, we understand that among the keys to the conception of the world created by Kitty Crowther, there is one that especially interests us: the presence of topics which have traditionally been considered difficult in children's literature. However, these topics arise from the stories themselves and from the ways of understanding the creation process, from both emission and reception. The empathy with which the author presents topics such as death, loneliness, sexism, filial relationships, violence, etc., as we have described, emphasises the idea of the picture book's conception as a meeting space, where the creator expresses their stories through their own emotions and talks with the reader with the honesty that implies the need to deal with life with its lights and shadows, with its own contradictions, with its darkest side, in a conception of children's literary discourse very similar to that of Maurice Sendak. However, unlike Sendak, Crowther is following a path he already forged and creates her own world halfway between accepting reality and explaining it through fantastic worlds that obey her own laws and that place feelings, no matter how complex, as the central focus of any discourse.

Thus, Astrid Lindgren and Beatrix Potter's influence generates a universe in which reading is understood as a vital action of reparation:

La lecture élargit les réponses possibles aux multiples situations de la vie et lorsque notre esprit a besoin de se déterminer, de décider, il pioche dans cet éventail élargi. Comment pouvez-vous quitter une pièce si vous ignorez l'existence des portes. Pour moi la lecture, c'est cela. (Antoine-Andersen, 2016: 58) [Reading increases the responses to different situations we can find in life and when our spirit needs to determine itself, to make a decision, so it stumbles in this wide range. How can you quit a part if you ignore that the doors exist? For me, reading is that.¹⁷]

Her way of telling, her "personal language", is on the one hand related to her own life experience as a reader in the silence that has accompanied her since her childhood and, on the other hand, to her conception of the book as an often dramatic space, where she can explain herself through words and images that hold the characters on white backgrounds, in such a way as to accompany the story, which is tinged with a gentle, almost ironic, humour that also invites adults to participate. It is only in this way that we can accompany the main characters in the stories of *Moi et rien*, *Dans moi*, *Jack & Jim*, *Poka and Mia*, *L'enfant racine*, *Scritch*, among other works. Crowther understands as well as anyone the poetry of silence and is especially careful to build an atmosphere where no topic is out of bounds.

¹⁷ Translation from the quote in Spanish made for this journal.

As Ana Zugasti (2014) neatly expresses it, “her books always speak about the essential things of life, no matter if they are big or small”. This is a new take on picture books, with its roots in deep knowledge of the genre and its masters, resulting in a new approach within children’s literature; a sort of reinvention of the literature and its reader. The author’s words sum this up well:

I like books that demand something of the reader, where things are not glaringly obvious, because I say things that don’t seem to mean much. To not grasp everything, to not understand everything, because mystery looms large in our lives. It is better to get used to it and live with it as soon as possible.¹⁸

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¹⁸ *Kitty Crowther. A book that changed my life*. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://www.alma.se/en/About-the-award/ALMA-10-years/Kitty-Crowther/>

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