

## Section 4. Cultural studies

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### DOES DEATH WITHIN CHILDREN'S FILMS AND LITERATURE MAKE IT EASIER FOR A CHILD TO DEAL WITH LOSS IN A MORE SYMBOLIC MANNER?

**Abstract.** When compared to films meant for adults, several studies have reported findings of the rate of deaths within children's films to be higher than the rate of deaths in movies targeted towards adults. Many researchers speculate that the reason for the higher percentage of violent and gory deaths of supporting roles in movies and literature targeted towards younger audiences allow children to have a higher exposure to the heavy topic of death. My research aims to show how the higher rate of deaths in children's films and the resulting increased exposure to this sensitive topic can help children cope better with many different types of loss throughout their lives.

**Keyword:** concept of death, childhood experiences, children's films, independent problem solving, movie characters as role model.

By providing case studies of the films *Finding Nemo*, *Coco*, *The Lion King*, and *Frozen* this paper will prove that death in children's media is not only being used to help children cope with death itself, but also losses like mental health, parental abandonment, confusing familial conflict, and older siblings distancing themselves during puberty or young adulthood. In the film *Finding Nemo*, Nemo has to navigate his way through his childhood with a mother figure around to support him. The sudden loss of his mother also ends up putting his father on an edge, and the viewers are introduced to some sort of anxiety induced mental illness. The film better exposes children and normalizes to them the different types of mental illnesses that they might see within their parents, peers, and maybe even themselves as they grow older. *Finding Nemo* also gives children an example of how Nemo manages to grow up with-

out a mom in his life, and reassures the viewer that they're not the only one going through the loss of a mom. In the next analyzed film, *Coco*, Miguel's family was once abandoned by his great-grandfather, and since then, even the very mention of Miguel's great-grandfather's name has been shunned from the family. Miguel is forced to wonder about his great-grandfather in silence, and he also has to learn about how his grandma grew up after her father abandoned their family. *Coco* normalizes to kids the questions expected to be asked about abandoned parental figures, and also normalizes how to healthily grapple with the mixed emotions that come with learning about abandonment. Another analyzed film was *The Lion King*, which although the topic was very subtle, still served as a symbolic way to reach out to kids and help make it easier for them to deal with the issue at hand. After Simba's dad dies, his mom is forced

to remarry Scar, the next suitable successor in line. Simba doesn't understand what's going on, and feels hurt and confused. This example can also symbolize divorce which is a big aspect in many children's lives. Throughout the film, children are able to relate to Simba's emotions and are also able to see that they're not alone and that other people are also facing the same struggles that they are. The last film analyzed was *Frozen*, in which the separation of the two sisters was a major plot point. Younger audiences may find this relatable in the sense of one of their siblings putting distance in between them due to external reasons such as college, puberty, and more. *Frozen* explores the emotions that Anna feels when Elsa refuses to come out of her room and play with her, and it also shows the audience that Anna's not at fault for the reason that Elsa is putting distance in between them. The film symbolizes to children that the sudden pull away of an older sibling is not always their fault, and that external factors must be included into the reason why the older sibling distanced themselves. *Frozen* also normalizes the feelings that a child would go through when their sibling refuses to play with them, and symbolizes to the viewers that no one is at fault for a distance between two siblings.

### **Introduction:**

It's no surprise that children—as do adults—enjoy experiencing literature and movies with protagonists that experiences the same struggles they do, but because parents, teachers, and other authority figures often use movies as a way to open up discussion about sensitive topics, children become adept quite early towards reflecting on larger issues and themes that they may not have experienced, been exposed to, or even understand completely. The loss of any character in children's films and literature allows children to begin processing the idea of death easier, and can eventually lead to their ability to process it loss in a more symbolic manner. Not only are parents able to educate their children through death in movies, but the children themselves begin to grapple with other losses by extrapolating the lessons learned onto situations that

may be just as difficult, overwhelming, and confusing to them in their lack of experience about the world.

Children's films, despite being known for their innocence and light-heartedness, actually depict visions of death and violence much more than adult movies do. When observing some common trends of the deaths that occur in kids movies, a pattern of a parental figure passing away tragically emerges. Some examples of popular films that follow this narrative arc include the Disney and Pixar films *Finding Nemo*, *Coco*, *The Lion King*, and *Frozen*. According to a 2017 study conducted by Kelly Tenzek and Bonnie Nickels, over 80% of Disney and Pixar films that were mainly directed towards an audience of children, included some depiction of death. In an article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, editor Nicholas St. Fleur analyzes a study led by psychiatric epidemiologists Ian Colman and James Kirkbride regarding how many more deaths occur in children's movies versus ones meant for adults. The data collected ranged between the top grossing movies from years 1937 and 2013. Fleur writes that the researchers, “also found that the main cartoon characters in children's films were two-and-a-half times more likely to die, and three times as likely to be murdered, when compared with their counterparts in films for adults” (Fleur).

The explanation provided by Colman and his research team for why these traumatic deaths of important parental like figures are prominent within children's films is actually quite simple: children's films must contain so many deaths because they prove to be a superb driving reason for the protagonist to develop their herolike characteristics and to be able to fully develop their character without any parents holding them back. This strategy works due to the reason that when children are growing up, when they encounter any problem, most of the time, they run to their parents for help. If the parental role in question is eliminated, the protagonist would have to learn how to deal with this issue themselves, therefore being able to mature much faster, giving the movie a better plotline.

Because children aren't always exposed to heavy topics such as death or the sudden loss of a supporting figure in their life through other media or their own experiences, using movies as an opportunity to talk about death can be a useful framework for addressing the topic for many parents who may normally avoid the topic of death because of how dark and complex the subject is. Susanna Fogel, writer and producer of the series, *Chasing Life*, states that people usually avoid talking about death because it's too depressing. Still, she points out, death is a real thing and it's best to teach children about how it works and why it happens, as "the earlier we can address them in a thoughtful, sensitive way in entertainment, the earlier people can have the conversations they need to have with their support system" (Fogel). Movies and literature can allow for children to be able to grasp the concept of death before they have to struggle with the grief and confusion of actually losing someone they love by normalizing the topic, giving parents a method of being able to confront children with the topic of loss and help them grasp the concept of it.

Seeing these stories play out onscreen or reading about them in favorite books also helps children feel heard, seen, and understood. Danielle Lowe, an elementary educator located in New York, sheds light upon helping children that are exposed to sensitive subjects cope through literature. Lowe writes that, "[o]ften the reader is looking for a solution to his/her own personal life situation and feel[s] more at ease when learning that he/she is not the "only one" dealing with a life crisis" (Lowe). Lowe proves that through her years of educating younger students, one thing that she's found helps anchor them when they're struggling is reading literature. By learning about their situation or reading about a similar scenario through someone else's eyes, children are able to find comfort in the feeling of that similarity between them and the literature they're reading. Lowe also includes in her studies a reference to Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, a professor of language arts at

the University of Central Florida. Roberts states that life "does indeed call for real books: books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life's difficult times" (Roberts and Crawford). Another supporter of using movies or literature to help children learn how to grapple with loss better, Kristy Labardee, a marriage and family therapist that aids parents in strengthening their parental skills, states that movies, "can be a friendly way of introducing children to some difficult concepts and an age-appropriate way of normalizing an experience they may have already had" (Lovelace and Flesher). Through normalizing the hard subject of death within simple light-hearted movies, thoughts towards death can be turned from those of haunting and invasive, into thoughts of understanding and thoughtfulness.

The concept of loss that children can begin to understand through movies can stretch much further than death itself, though. This symbolic connection can be established when children lose a significant person in their life to something other than death such as imprisonment, military service, mental health, hospitalization, illegal substance usage, divorce, working long hours, and more. At such a young age, many children still haven't fully grasped the full situation regarding the disappearance of a loved one in their lives, but they can understand that the person is gone—just like the parents of their favorite characters. For some kids, using movies and onscreen deaths can serve as a prime example to display to kids the many different ways the loss of a parental figure or other important person in their life can occur. Though children's literature has recently evolved to begin including topics such as divorce and mental health that weren't previously discussed widely, death has always been a symbolic stand-in experience for children who are struggling to learn how to cope with their situation, whatever it may be.

#### **Case Study 1, Finding Nemo:**

The film *Finding Nemo*, about a little clownfish who must find his way home after getting lost in the ocean, is a perfect example of a film that uses the

death of a parent to help a child deal with other familial issues, especially mental health. Immediately in the opening scene we see the titular character Nemo's mom being killed off by a barracuda. Nemo is the only one of her eggs to survive the attack. This leaves Nemo and his dad, Marlin, to navigate the big sea world by themselves. As Nemo learns how to grow up without a mother figure in his life, he also begins to learn that his dad is always nervous and is extremely. Marlin's nervous persona and his frantic actions whenever he can't keep Nemo in his sight can mimic that of a human anxiety-induced disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, or even a side effect of depression caused by the mom's death.

Mental health isn't a widely discussed topic between parents and their children, however, through *Finding Nemo*, a good opportunity is provided to discuss why some people might act like Marlin after certain events and to explain what's going on. The film also allows for children to be able to relate to the anxiety that they see Marlin going through and to realize that seeing it in a parent or even in themselves is totally ok. By directing the immediate death of Nemo's mom and the symbolized mental disorders found in Nemo's dad, the director/writers of *Finding Nemo* were able to incorporate heavy topics into a lighthearted children's movie in order to better expose or provide to children better ways of coping with what might be going on in their lives.

#### **Case study 2, *Coco*:**

In the film *Coco*, the theme of abandonment by a father plays prominently into the lack of a father figure within the household that many children experience while growing up. The lack of a father figure can be interpreted in multiple ways including death, disappearance, being unavailable, abandonment, divorce, and even simply not having enough time to spend with their kid due to work or military deployment. This abandonment—whether intended on the father's part or not—can leave a child feeling hurt, confused. Thoughts and beliefs that it was their fault can enter their brain, muddling their thoughts.

*Coco* offers children struggling with parental abandonment in any form a relatable character in its main protagonist, Miguel.

Miguel struggles with his family not discussing his great-grandfather because he abandoned them when his daughter was born. Due to this, his entire family shuns Miguel's great-grandfather's very name, along with any memories of him. However, Miguel still thinks about his great-grandfather from time to time, and often wonders about him and what could have compelled him to leave the family and never return. These questions and scenarios that Miguel grows up imagining towards the disappearance of his great-grandfather explore the possible questions that other children with an unavailable parental figure might also struggle with. The film, *Coco*, gives children the possibility to relate with Miguel and also learn how to grapple with the disappearance of a father figure in their lives. By giving children exposure to the feeling of abandonment by a parent, and normalizing the questions that are to be expected from a child when they become curious about the disappearance of their parent, *Coco* can help children learn how to cope with the mixed emotions they feel about parental abandonment.

#### **Case study 3, the *Lion King*:**

While it may be more subtle, *The Lion King* also hints at the confusion that can occur when a new parental figure comes into the home. When Simba's dad dies, the topic of Simba's mom having to remarry Scar is brought up within the movie. Throughout this all, Simba feels lost and confused, and finds it hard to understand what's going on—eventually literally being sent into exile by the evil uncle who killed his father. This remarriage and confusion afterwards symbolizes the common theme of divorce that many children may grow up to see within their homes or that of their friends.

Divorce tends to be a hard topic to bring up to kids, and most kids typically don't understand why their parents are now living apart or why new people may now be more important in their parents' lives.

When not explained properly, children might assume that they're to blame for their parents parting, or maybe even feel betrayed that their parents aren't together anymore. This betrayal and guilt could lead to further anxiety, and loss of trust between the parents and the child. However, through *The Lion King*, children can learn how to grapple with the confusing decisions that adults make, and what to do when they're left in the dark about these big decisions. Because we see that Simba's mother didn't have any control over the evil Scar's treatment of Simba, children may realize that sometimes adults do things for reasons other than that they don't love them. Being able to relate to Simba throughout this process might also reassure the child that they're not the only ones going through this, and that there are other people who also share the same experience that they have, signifying to them that they're not alone in this world, an important and comforting thought during a confusing and bewildering time in their lives.

#### **Case study 4, Frozen:**

Parents aren't the only people children look up to, and in *Frozen* the death of the parents forces Anna to deal with the alienation she feels when her sister distances herself afterwards. While there is a good reason for this that she doesn't understand, on the surface it mimics the "abandonment" that children may feel when an older sibling distances themselves during puberty, if they leave for college, and other situations involving the sudden loss of a sibling in their lives.

When Elsa first discovers that her parents are dead, she immediately locks herself in her room, afraid to hurt anyone else with her powers. However, as the years go on and Elsa continues to refuse to open her door and talk with Anna, the two sisters begin to lose their connection, and Anna feels as if she's being abandoned by her sister. Confused and hurt, Anna often sits outside Elsa's door and begs her to come outside and play with her, but Elsa refuses. Anna's feeling of abandonment by her sister symbolizes all different types of losses of siblings, but

it highlights one loss in particular, the emotional loss of a sibling. The fact that Elsa's distance is due to a physical power that she can't control also symbolizes the bewildering effects of puberty on both the adolescent and the younger siblings.

For many children, when their siblings head off to college, or otherwise distance themselves for any sort of reason, including closing themselves off emotionally, children automatically think that they perhaps are at fault, or that they're unwanted in their sibling's life. In most cases, this isn't true, and it's another external force that's keeping the older sibling away from the younger sibling. In *Frozen*, the film normalizes for the viewer and makes it clear that even though Elsa was pulling away from Anna, it wasn't because of something that Anna did, it was because Elsa didn't want to accidentally hurt Anna once more. The relationship between the two sisters can symbolize many things, but one of its main purposes is to serve as an example to children that even though a sibling is trying to distance themselves from them, that sometimes they don't necessarily want to, and that it isn't anyone's fault for the distance that's being required between them.

#### **Conclusion:**

Due to the fact that movies and literature are easily accessible and provide such a good opportunity to educate children about death, using them as a way to help teach children how to cope with loss early on in life has proven itself to be an excellent form of bringing such a heavy topic to younger audiences. Talking about dark subjects earlier on in life not only helps encourage children to find a reliable support system to turn to when they do have to face an issue in real life, but it also teaches children how to face the concept of death in a more constructive way and learn how to deal with it on their own. By seeing the characters they want to emulate experience and cope with death, children can be encouraged into thinking about death and loss in a more sensitive way, rather than letting the frightening and mysterious concepts haunt them.