

POSSIBILITIES OF USING AHARON APPELFELD'S PUBLICATION ADAM AND THOMAS IN TEACHING LITERARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The main aim of the paper is to point out the possibilities of implementing Aharon Appelfeld's book *Adam and Thomas* (2013) in the educational process with a focus on Literary Education. We believe that this narrative has the potential to arouse the interest of different groups of readers, from beginners to experienced ones. The compositional construction provides a considerable space of indeterminacy into which readers may (but need to) plant their ideas about themselves, society, or the world, guided by Appelfeld's philosophical and transcendental ideas in relation to not only faith and God. On the other hand, the plot of this book may also be of interest to readers who are not looking for an interesting storyline and the portrayal of the fates of the main characters in liminal situations, in this case set against the backdrop of the events of World War II. This war conflict in this artistic narrative is merely a backdrop that causes Adam, Thomas and Mina to find themselves in a situation where they must rely on themselves, which they each do in slightly different ways. Based on the content narrative analysis, we point out different plot levels, themes and motives that we believe can be worked with in the teaching of Literary Education at different levels of education. Our aim is to present the ways of possible work with an identical passage from a text in relation to the age of the pupils (first grade of primary schools, lower-secondary schools and secondary schools).

Keywords: *Aharon Appelfeld, Adam and Thomas, literary education, research, implementation.*

“We will be able to talk about what we went through in the forest years later.”
(Appelfeld, 2014, p. 108)

1. Introduction

The main aim of the paper is to point out the potential of Aharon Appelfeld's publication *Adam and Thomas* (2013) in the context of its possible integration into teaching at different levels of education. We have chosen this book because we believe that it provides sufficient scope for its reception, among different age categories of readers. The youngest of them may be attracted by the story's rather engaging but easily recognizable plot, while more experienced readers may reflect on various transcendental and other aspects of life and being while reading it.

Aharon Appelfeld, born in 1932 in what Ukraine is now, was a Holocaust survivor whose literary works often explore themes of trauma and loss, particularly focusing on the *impossible mourning* of his mother, who was murdered during the war. His novels delve into the psychological impacts of his traumatic experiences, using the image of the body to express the enduring pain and unresolved grief from his past (Bannasch, 2023; Xia, 2024). Coppel-Batsch (2005) adds that Appelfeld's literature often reflects the tension between the Jewish diasporic past and the Zionist present, as he navigates themes of memory and identity through a unique narrative style that blends fiction with autobiographical elements. Langer (2023) states that his work is characterized by its exploration of the unsaid, where the avoidance of catastrophe and the silence surrounding it play a crucial role. This approach allows readers to engage with the underlying trauma and historical context through subtle hints and portents, rather than explicit depictions of horror. His narratives often focus on the internal struggles of characters who, like himself, are survivors trying to reconcile their past with their present, a theme that resonates with the experiences of other Holocaust survivors who were integrated into Israeli society (Shillony, 2014). Krausz (2011) concludes that through his evocative storytelling, Appelfeld preserves the cultural and historical episteme of Central European Jewry, offering a poignant reflection on the enduring impact of the Holocaust on individual and collective memory.

1.1. Shortly about Book *Adam and Thomas*

This book by Appelfeld is a kind of personal literary account of the author's selected experiences during the events of World War II. Rather, it is an artistic elaboration of his feelings, thoughts and assumptions that arise from his memories of the Holocaust (Shoah). The events of the war appear in the book more as a kind of backdrop, as a space in which Appelfeld's ideas are set, and which gives them a certain gravity and validates them in a certain way.

As we have already suggested, the primary storyline of this book is very simple: the mothers of the two boys, Adam and Thomas, take their Jewish sons into the forest with the hope of increasing their chances of survival. During their stay, they discover by chance that Mina, a girl they knew, has been hidden by a farmer whose farm is located near Adam and Thomas' temporary home. The story ends happily: Adam and Thomas return to their mothers, and one of them adopts Mina, who lost all her relatives during the war.

As can be seen from the above, this storyline can be adequately understood and understood even by beginning readers who in most cases have not heard about the events of the Second World War. They will perceive the story as the adventures of children hidden in the woods. On this point, Lobel (1998) notes that stories constructed in this way can be comprehensible to beginners. This is aided by the way children's literature often frames war through the lens of personal experiences and adventures, making complex historical events accessible to young readers.

1.1.1. Implementation of philosophical ideas. The above storyline is complemented by Appelfeld's thoughts and opinions, in which faith and its (possible) conflict with pragmatic thinking are very often thematized. It is at this point that the simple adventure story transforms into a philosophical treatise on the meaning of life, the (non-)existence of God, the place and role of the human being in the earthly world, and so on. We are convinced that these narrative parts - irrelevant for an adequate reception of the storyline - guarantee that this book has the potential to appeal to teenage or adult readers who may ponder Appelfeld's ideas, consider their premises and possible solutions, or relate them to their own lives.

As we have already indicated, this paper will point out the possibilities of implementing *Adam and Thomas* in teaching at different levels of education with a focus on the teaching of Literary Education. We believe that literary texts have considerable potential for introducing pupils and students to selected events of the Second World War.

2. Literary Education and presentation of the events of World War II

Literary Education holds significant potential for introducing pupils to the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War by fostering a nuanced understanding and critical engagement with historical narratives. Bélanger (2024) underlines the importance of using historical fiction to help young readers critically engage with literature, understand its revelations, and consider its omissions, thereby enhancing their comprehension of the Holocaust's complexities. Literature serves as a powerful tool for humanizing the Holocaust, transforming personal accounts into cultural iconography that can convey the experiences of survivors and victims to new generations (Hertina, 2023).

The presentation of the Holocaust in Literary Education employs a variety of methods to engage students and foster a deeper understanding of this historical event. In a broader educational context, there is a growing recognition of the need to teach the Holocaust to raise awareness about the dangers of hatred and intolerance. This has led to the incorporation of new pedagogical approaches that aim for a comprehensive understanding of the Holocaust, adapting to cultural and political differences across countries (Schurster & Ramos, 2024). The use of memory and representation in curriculum theory highlights the ambivalence and complexity of understanding the Holocaust, suggesting that both historical texts and novels serve as forms of memory that educators must navigate carefully (Morris, 2001).

3. Research method

The analysis of *Adam and Thomas* was carried out through literary content analysis. This method is a multifaceted approach that has evolved to address the limitations of traditional methods of literary evaluation that often fail to capture the intrinsic value and thematic depth of literary works (Bingke et al., 2022). Thematic content analysis emphasizes the importance of identifying underlying themes and meanings in texts, which goes beyond mere word count and allows for a deeper understanding of literary works (J, 2020). Anagaw's (2020) study of civic virtues and skills in literary texts highlights the application of content analysis in educational contexts and reveals inconsistencies in the inclusion of civic themes across different textbook editions, underscoring the potential of content analysis for assessing the educational value of literary texts. We believe that the chosen method is adequate to fulfill the aim of the paper, i.e., to highlight the possibilities of implementing *Adam and Thomas* in the teaching of Literary Education at different levels of education.

4. Results and discussion

In this section of the paper, we highlight the potential of implementing *Adam and Thomas* in teaching at different levels of education in the context of the above theoretical anchoring.

4.1. Reception of the primary storyline

In the beginning of the book, readers are introduced to Adam: “Adam is nine years old and about to finish fourth grade. He is not an outstanding student, but in the third quarter, three A’s stood out on his report card. This made his parents happy, and they bought me a new soccer ball” (Appelfeld, 2014, p. 8). We believe that the appropriate introduction of the readers into the plot, through a close introduction of one of the main characters, is adequate and quite sufficient given the reception of the primary storyline of the narrative. Thomas is characterized as follows: “Because of his conscientiousness and consistently excellent school results, Thomas was not popular with his classmates. He was humiliated, and he tried to defend himself with what he could: the numerous assignments he did, the essays he wrote, the books he read. But it was these efforts that compounded the hostility towards him. In vain did teachers try to defend him” (Appelfeld, 2014, p. 16).

As is evident from the characteristics of Adam and Thomas, they are opposites. This fact is explicated not only in their relationship in teaching, but also in their relationship to life, to God. We believe that the implementation of different characters can increase the motivation of readers, who will reciprocate the primary storyline, to read the story. This concept is supported by the notion that characters with distinct qualities and roles can enrich narratives, making them more engaging and relatable for readers (Alexandre, 2008). The portrayal of characters with varying relationships to life and God can introduce complex themes that resonate with readers on a personal level, as seen in religious character education, where diverse character traits are used to convey moral and spiritual lessons (Efendi et al., 2019).

Thomas is further characterized in relation to the family background from which he comes: “Thomas’ father, tall and short-sighted like Thomas, is a professor at the grammar school. His mother teaches in an elementary school. During the ghetto era, before he was taken to the labor camps, his father continued to home-school students who had been expelled from the gymnasium. ‘Education protects us,’ he replied to all those who doubted his efforts. ‘We have to take care of the soul, especially in our times,’ his father reiterated (Appelfeld, 2014, pp. 22-23) As can be seen from the above quotation, the inner characteristic of Thomas is further developed by the philosophically attuned thoughts uttered by his father. This is an example of a narrative that can be reciprocated in different ways by different readers. Readers with less reading and cognitive experience can relate to *only* the characterization of Thomas, while more mature readers can contemplate the sentences uttered by Thomas’s father. Importantly, even without reception of the relevant philosophically attuned passage, there is no lack of interpretation of the primary storyline, for the reception of which information about the family environment and its principles from which Thomas comes is central. A little further on, Adam and his background are specified: “Adam did not study during the ghetto, he helped his mother, who worked in a public kitchen. He scraped potatoes and beets, cut cabbage and washed pots. At noon there was a long queue in the kitchen and Adam helped ration the bread and soup” (Appelfeld, 2014, p. 23). The characteristics in correspondence with the lives of Adam and Thomas during the ghetto provide, especially for readers who can encompass the complete text (i.e., its full depth), a starting point for the subsequent mindset of the two boys in relation to their relationship to life and especially to faith.

4.2. Philosophical passages

As we have already mentioned, the primary storyline is supplemented by philosophically tuned passages that provide readers with additional interpretative space for this narrative. Wróblewski (2023) argues that philosophical passages in children’s literature about World War II often serve to explore complex themes such as trauma, displacement, and moral responsibility. Franco (2021) highlights how postwar children’s literature addresses the historical circumstances of World War II by focusing on themes of separation and family relationships, helping young readers understand and process the impact of the war. Sainsbury (2017) discusses the use of thought experiments in children’s literature that engage young readers in philosophical reflection and encourage them to consider ethical dilemmas and conditions of power. Krongold (2020) explores the pictorial dynamics in young adult Holocaust literature, noting how these narratives evolve from factual recounting to metaphorical representation, allowing young readers to engage with the moral and historical implications of the Holocaust through creative storytelling.

The following quotations are examples of such passages. “Thomas now saw his mother quite clearly sitting beside him. She seemed to be distressed at the screaming, and Thomas wished to reassure her: ‘I forgive you with all my heart.’ ‘Thomas don’t forgive me easily. I don’t deserve easy forgiveness,’ she said and disappeared from his sight” (Appelfeld, 2014, p. 31).

“Adam didn’t seem to be concerned. ‘The forest still has many gifts for us.’ ‘I see you are counting on the forest,’ said Thomas. ‘Sometimes the forest is better than people,’ said Adam. Thomas remarked, ‘The forest always seems to us like a place of prey animals. Remember, prey animals hunt only when they are hungry. So, it follows that humans are far worse,’ Thomas said, in his father’s manner” (Appelfeld, 2014, p. 57).

As the quotations above show, these transcendently tuned passages, which permeate Appelfeld’s narrative, are not the main carrier of the plot, but serve as a space to express the author’s views and to explicate his perception of God. To this end, he uses two characters. One of the boys comes from an orthodox Jewish family, the other has a background based on rationalism and pragmatism. These seemingly disparate streams of thought collide against the backdrop of the events of World War II in a forest setting. As the boys get to know each other more and more, they (along with the author) conclude that the two currents can enrich each other and that neither should be seen as definitive or rigid.

4.3. Possibilities of integrating Adam and Thomas into Literary Education

Above we have listed the basic narrative aspects of the *Adam and Thomas* publication. We believe that we have sufficiently explicated the potential that this artistic narrative has in relation to presenting one strand of the events of the Second World War to pupils and students at different levels of education. The multi-layered nature of this Appelfeld publication ensures that it can be worked with at all stages of education, from the first stage of primary school to secondary education. At the same time, in our opinion, it is possible to return to this narrative repeatedly, because with repeated readings (ideally with some time lapses) readers can find additional meanings and symbols in the text.

As the events of the Second World War are not explicitly expressed in the text and are a kind of starting point for which the boys and Mina find themselves alone in the woods, we believe that reading this book should not result in the kind of traumatization of the youngest readers that some teachers who work professionally at the relevant level of education fear. At the same time, however, there may be an internalization of the relevant atmosphere and an effect on the reader in terms of emotions, which, in our opinion, is the main aim of familiarizing pupils with the literary depiction of the events of the relevant line of the Second World War. Ungeheuer-Gołab (2024) points out that literature, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as war, can serve as a tool of sensitization or desensitization to help children process difficult emotions and taboo topics in a controlled manner. We believe that Appelfeld’s analyzed narrative also fulfills Ben-Tovim’s (2022) claim that World War II literature highlights the enormous impact of war on literary expression, suggesting that such literature can provide clarity and understanding of the profound effects of war without necessarily causing trauma.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of the paper was to highlight the possibilities of implementing Aharon Appelfeld’s *Adam and Thomas* (2013) artistic narrative in the teaching of Literary Education at different levels of education. This narrative, by its content structure, has the potential to saturate all groups of readers, especially with its relatively simple storyline, which incorporates the author’s reflections on the meaning of life, existence, friendship, family, faith or God.

The book under analysis is proof that, especially in the field of artistic narratives with the theme of the Second World War, the boundaries between literature for children and young people and so-called adult literature are blurring. This fact, in our opinion, can lead to a common reading of these narratives, to sharing of one’s views and ideas arising from their plot and to a sharpening of one’s views on the Second World War period and on the role of people with different social, cultural and geographic backgrounds in it.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc GFD_PdF_2024_02_Compilation and Verification of a Monothematic Set of Texts on the Shoah.

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