

Comparative Analysis of Two Texts for Young Adults, *Dečki [Boys]* and *Fantje iz gline [The Clay Boys]*

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Abstract: The article presents a comparative analysis of the search for identity in (youth) literature, especially (homo)sexual identity. The fairy-tale type/motif of changing clothes/gender is well-known in literary history (ATU 514 and 884) and modern picture books. It appeared in Slovene (youth) literature in 1895. Literary texts with the theme were not negatively accepted, as literary critics mostly affirmatively expressed themselves about the “youth” theme or “puberty” or “transitional” period, which was mainly placed in marginal social spaces, e.g. hospital, boarding school and orphanage. Next follows a comparative analysis of two youth novels dealing with (homo)sexuality: *Dečki [Boys]* by France Novšak, 1938, and *Fantje iz gline [The Clay Boys]* by Janja Vidmar, 2005.

Keywords: problem topic, search for identity, gender identity, criticism of society

Introduction

Global social changes are also affecting Slovenian youth literature, among others with the problem topics characterized by the search for identity. This can be a search for biological, cultural, gender identity, etc. Problem topics also include other topics, such as refugees, illness, otherness, culture, violence, poverty, death, sexuality, dying, war, abuse and mourning. Search for identity is a constant in youth literature, only the emphasis on the way of the search differs, but usually this topic is grouped into a broader topic. In modern times, the topic of searching for (gender) identity can also be traced in crossover picture books, mostly written from the perspective of an adult (adult-centrism). The characteristic of canonical texts in children's/youth literature is the so-called crosswriting, meaning that such texts are mostly written for children, but the context is intended for adults. The search for different types of identities, including gender, is a contemporary topic, presented in the form of short contemporary fairy tales in the picture-book

form for young children in pre-school and first educational periods. The topic is most often presented with anthropomorphized and/or personalized animals.¹

Gender Motif in Picture Books

The topic is present in a number of contemporary fairy tales in picture book, for example Slovenian B. Mozetič, *Prva ljubezen* [*First Love*], 2014; *Dihurlandija* [*Skunklandia*], 2016, A. Spacal, *Mavrična maškerada* [*Rainbow Masquerade*], 2013, *Kako ti je ime?* [*What's Your Name?*], 2018, or translations L. Schimel, *Neighbors and Friends*, 2008; A. Maxeiner, *All Our Families!*, 2012. The authors are aware of the crossover openness and intentionality, as the picture books are aimed both at children and adults.² In picture books by L. Newman, *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1989); M. Willhoite, *Daddy's Roommate* (1991), and pictorial writing (M. Lupša, *Očka* [*Two Daddies*], 2012) the adult-centric perspective is highlighted, while children are the secondary literary characters. B. Cole's picture book *Mummy Never Told Me* (2003) also deals with individual (sub)topics from the point of view of the child (child-centrism): adoption, appearance, childbirth, conception, homosexuality, pregnancy, surgery, sexuality, etc.

Gender Motif in Fairy Tales – ATU³ 514 and ATU 884

In the international Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index of folk tales, the motif of *disguised women* is classified as the ATU 514 “*shift of sex*” motif, although the motif of *shift of gender* would be more appropriate. The basic motif has several variants, beginning with the emperor/ father/ king/priest who has a daughter/infant son but wants a male offspring to succeed the empire/kingdom. The father sends his daughter to war (e.g. *Mulan*). In some variants, the queen pretends that the daughter is a boy. A disguised woman may perform heroic deeds in the service of a king (e.g. *Joan of Arc*). The king's daughter (sister) falls in love with the disguised woman and wants to marry her (*Kamar al Zaman and the Chinese princess Badur*). The disguised woman rejects the marriage (*Vasilisa Popova*) in order to remain independent. In some variants, she also undergoes a test of whether she is male or female, e.g. with bathing, food, handiwork, jewellery, meeting in the garden. At the end of some variants, the disguised woman turns into a man by magic or by accident, while in some variants parents are happy to have a son, even though it is really a girl who is raised as a boy.

1 For example, skunks (Mozetič, *Dihurlandija* [*Skunklandia*]), penguins (Parnell, *And Tango Makes Three*), snails (Spacal, *Mavrična Maškerada* [*Rainbow Masquerade*]), pigs (Hobby, *Toot & Puddle, A Present for Toot*), etc.

2 “I put a lot of specific LGBT symbolism into the picture book, which is reflected in both the textual and the visual part of the book. [...] Although I am aware that certain codes are understandable to adults only” (Spacal 72).

3 The abbreviation ATU is an international designation, an acronym based on the surnames of three folklorists (A. Aarne, S. Thompson, H. J. Uther) who published an internationally classified folktale type index (Uther 2004, reprint 2011).

Fairy tale type ATU 884 is a combination of different types and different episodes, e.g.: (1) The motif of disguised women (*Joan of Arc, Mulan*); (2) The test of masculinity or femininity (*Vasilisa Popova*); (3) Separation of lovers (*Rožmanova Lenčica* [*Rožman's Lenčica*]); (4) The wife finds her lost husband (*Makalunca*) before marrying another (*Turki odpeljejo Srebrno* [*The Turks take Srebrna*]) (Radešček); (5) The girl in modest disguise in court (*Joan of Arc*); (6) Forgotten fiancée/wife (*The Turks take Srebrna*); (7) Identifying the lovers by the picture (*Bela in črna nevesta* [*White and Black Bride*]) (Grimm); and (8) The prince marries his first fiancée.

Gender Motif in Slovenian (Youth) Literature

Josip Stritar wrote the poem *Glavan* with a homosexual topic in 1894 which falls within the scope of literature for adults⁴ (Zupan Sosič, “Zadrge” 167). In eight parts of the feuilleton titled *Institutka* [*The Boarder*], Govekar wrote a text about 17-year-old Ida, sent by parents to the boarding school “Sacre coeur” in Vienna (“daughters ... with short skirts ... who are still half *boys* in their appearance”). Before returning back home to Slovenia, Tilka comes into her bed. The composition of the *The Boarder* is very similar and at the same time different from that of Novšak’s *Boys*. Initial scenes of homosexual experiences in the boarding school are followed by trials and the traditional conclusion (marriage out of gratitude).

Ivan Cankar, *Hiša Marije Pomočnice* [*The House of Mary Help of Christians*], 1904.

Cankar describes various issues in the text, but intuitively took into account the basic premise of (youth) literature that the writer should be on the side of children, to feel empathy for the child being victimized. In the text Cankar describes the fates of fourteen girls and their agony in an orphanage. The problem topic is multifaceted and diverse, while eroticization takes on the forms ranging from the cult of Mary, maternal love, to other forms (e.g. child abuse, incest, homosexuality, paedophilia, prostitution, voyeurism, etc.).

All these (youth) novels that deal with the search for identity, including gender and sexual identity, depict love and/or attachment respectfully and with empathy for children, regardless of the unjust social conditions of capitalism, which because of its wanton greed eats its children, in this case workers/orphans. In Cankar and Novšak, in addition to describing the search for identity the central topic is social critique: Cankar uses the example of a poorhouse, while Novšak criticizes boarding schools and the Catholic Church. The suffering in this novel is the result of unresolved social (and consequently family) relationships (Zupan Sosič, “Ljubezen” 63). The motive for the sexual abuse of a

4 “How I loved him, and he loved me! / He put his arm around my neck – / oh that was a soft, good hand! – [...] / A woman came to us the next morning, / his mother. [...] / I was not made to love a woman.” (Stritar 1894: 94)

child is presented, depicted in Cankar's *The House of Mary Help of Christians*, followed by the motif of homosexuality between two girls.⁵ A. Zupan Sosič points out the following characteristics of the time of the publication of the book (1904): "For the bourgeois world at the time the novel was published, the sexualization of childhood and motherhood and their demythization were highly innovative (of course, undesirable) approaches that undermined and even demolished bourgeois ethics." (Zupan Sosič, "Ljubezem" 67).

Ljudmila Poljanec, *Baronesi Sonji* [*To the Baroness Sonja*], 1906

Ljudmila Poljanec (1874–1948) studied in Vienna and lived in Belgrade, Constantinople, Paris, Prague, Salzburg, etc. She dedicated many of her poems to her friends (Marica H., Friend A. M. R., Friend), and because of (self-)censorship she used pseudonyms (Bogomila). Also included in the titles of her poems are textual metaphors and allusions: Gypsy ("If only I could hug you, sweetheart! / Give me your love!") (Poljanec 22). Lj. Poljanec christened her songs and implicitly tried to affirm "holy love", including same-sex inclinations and/or love, by intertextually referring to the biblical style of the *Song of Songs* (bosom, eyes, palm, etc.).⁶

A. Zupan Sosič also writes about new emotionality and special sincerity, an autoreflective interplay of male and female categories with subtle intertextuality ("Spolna identiteta" 93) and speaks about the biological, social and psychological gender which is more represented in adult literature, while in children's and/or youth literature it is literary and metaphorized and placed in picture books in the world of personified animals. Both are accompanied by frustration; however, the latter is "quieter" in female homosexual allusions, evolving from scenes of female friendship as an upgrade and extension of friendship (Zupan Sosič, "Homoerotika" 6), which can also be found in the form of close and distant associations in children's and/or youth literature. She also makes a distinction between female and male homosexuality, as is evident in the crossover novel *Boys* (1938).

In his novel for young adult readers, entitled *Človek mrtvaških lobanj: kronika raztrganih duš* [*The Man of the Skulls: A Chronicle of Torn Souls*], 1929, B. Kreft discussed a boarding school and also addressed the topic of homosexuality of adolescents which he combined with criticism of the church. The novel received the response of leading literary historians, F. Vodnik, J. Vidmar, and J. Jurančič. Kreft was convicted and fined for the novel, and the novel was banned as "anti-communist" (Zadravec 44). The novel also provides a critique of clericalism, religious institutions, and abuse. Due to censorship, Kreft was unable to continue his trilogy, so he devoted himself to drama.

5 Father laughed and grabbed her arm. "Well, go on, baby, don't be afraid of me!" She could barely defend herself [...] (ibid, 100). "Your breasts are as pure as baby's and white as snow!" Lucija leaned down and kissed her on the breast and made Tončka shiver." (Cankar 134)

6 Although the *Ob Adriji* [*By the Adriatic Sea*] [...] On the contrary, she is fond of the Romanian poet Carmen Silva and is erotically fascinated by the Russian baroness Sonja (Mihurko Poniž 581).

Alma Karlin, *Najmlajša vnukinja častitljivega I Čaa* [*The Youngest Granddaughter of the Reverend I Cha*], 1948, 2016

Slovenian writer Alma Karlin spent much of her life traveling and living abroad. She published between the First and the Second World Wars, mainly in German. Some of her works are crossover, including the fairy tale *The Youngest Granddaughter of the Reverend I Cha*, published in German in 1948 and translated into Slovene in 2016 (by Jernej Jezernik). The fairy tale is intertextually linked to the fairy tale types ATU 514 and 884. Comparative analysis and application of the theory by S. Žižek confirms the hypothesis that Karlin's fairy tale relates to the literary tradition from Antigone to the present and that the fairy tale expresses the characteristics of the literary heroine's subjectivization, which is an international fairy tale type, while Karlin added features of Chinese culture. In this fairy tale, she also discusses the search for a (gender) identity⁷ on a metaphorical level. Žižek says of Joan of Arc, a medieval heroine, that she represents a new character of women's intervention in politics. The youngest granddaughter of the reverend I Cha in disguise as a man is similarly not a symbol of unstable gender identity. Crucially, she acts as – a woman (Žižek 57). She consciously enters politics for political and personal reasons, as a woman, the youngest granddaughter, dressed as a man – a son and a grandson.

Franček Bohanec, *Knjižne police za otroke* [*Bookshelves for Children*], 1958

References to homosexuality in literary history dealing with youth literature are rare. Bohanec writes affirmatively about erotic poetry which in his mind constitutes an ingredient and represents an appropriate reading for a growing child: "Erotic lyric poetry is especially necessary for sensitive young people. In addition to erotic poetry, social song is of great importance for education", "the path to healthy sexuality" (Bohanec 1958). Bohanec understands lyrical, erotic and social poems as equally important for children growing up.⁸

France Novšak, *Boys*, 1938

Although F. Novšak (1916–1991) focused on the identity topic as the central topic in the young adult novel *Hudobni angeli* [*The Wicked Angels*], it was already fully taken into account in the crossover novel for young adults *Boys*, published in book form in

7 He didn't yet manage to free himself from ancient Chinese customs or from ancient superstition. Nevertheless, he sternly asked, "Were you so unvirtuous in your previous life that you were born again as a woman?" (Karlin 9-10). [...] "Like women from the West, I will learn a lot and walk through my life as a man, as your actual grandson" (ibid. 23-4).

8 "The child is in the "homoerotic" phase at this age (12-13 years). [...] In comics, thus, adventures intertwine with secrets based on the child's homoerotic complex. [...] It is true that the hidden urges that draw a child to comics are real and perfectly sound. ... He needs to acquire the ideal of man" (Bohanec 64).

1938. Extracts had already been published in 1937 in the *Ljubljanski zvon*, which means that detabooization happened over eighty years ago. Since its publishing, the novel has received a great deal of attention and significant literary reviews from leading literary critics of adult literature between 1918 and 1941, when the literary criticism addressing young adult literature was just emerging.

The first reaction was by D. Šega in 1939, in the *Sodobnost* magazine. Šega affirmed the novel.⁹ The second article on this topic was written by M. Javornik, in 1939.¹⁰ The third response was written in 1939 by V. Pavšič, under the pseudonym of Matej Bor, who wrote affirmatively about the novel and the love between the two boys.¹¹ Another response was written by A. Zavrl, in an article entitled “*Dečki med erotiko in moralo: telo, spol in spolnost v prvem slovenskem homoerotičnem romanu [Boys between Eroticism and Morality: Body, Gender, and Sexuality in the First Slovenian Homoerotic Novel]*”, 2009. He focuses on the representation and terminology of the body, gender and sexuality. He emphasizes the conclusion of the novel in the first (the tragic end for one and the heterosexual exit for the other protagonist) and the second edition (the “maybe” exit to heterosexuality). He also analyzes the terminology used by Novšak for a homosexual relationship (“such a relationship”).

Comparative Analysis of the Novels *Boys*, 1938, and *The Clay Boys*, 2005

Janja Vidmar (1962) is a Slovenian writer for youth who deals with problem issues throughout her literary oeuvre. One such work is the complex youth novel *The Clay Boys* which addresses, inter alia, homosexuality, but the topic is complex because it covers family and social issues through the perspective of searching for gender identity, therefore the novel has an open or tragic end, which is actually a new traditionalism.

Methods

My comparative analysis uses a descriptive research method and a qualitative research approach based on the application of literary criticism on young adult fiction established

9 “Novšak’s text is not merely a psychological and analytical account of the life of adolescents, but more; it was supposed to be a rebellion against the encroachment of young life between the four walls, by the dry, mechanical rules of the boarding school and by the narrow-minded norms of Catholic education” (Šega 101).

10 “With *Boys*, Novšak wanted to write the so-called ‘generation tragedy’ which were so common in that shattered and anarchic era when expressionism died down and a new reality began, which started the decline of European literature into a tendency. [...] But if Novšak intended to write a story of his own genus, he should be ruthlessly told that his purpose had been distorted into the first longer homosexual piece in Slovenian literature.” (Javornik 230). [...] “An instrumented love, introduced into Slovenian literature by Novšak, develops between Papali and Castelli” (ibid. 231).

11 “For the whole boarding school is only an image of a failed life system with wrongly set life goals” (Pavšič: 312).

by Igor Saksida in the article “Tabuji v mladinski književnosti [Taboos in Youth Literature]”, 2014. In the article, he defines and classifies (topic, perspective, story, literary figures, language, mood, and subjective perception) the theory of taboo or problem literature and defines its basic characteristics. Saksida distinguishes between problems, which he defines as a content feature, and taboos, which are defined as a reception feature.

Results

The elements of the comparative analysis between the two youth novels and employing Saksida’s theory are as follows: (1) topic, (2) perspective, (3) story, (4) literary figures, (5) language, (6) mood, and (7) subjective perception in the works *Boys* and *The Clay Boys*.

1. Topic – detabooing the perspective of a safe childhood, as contemporary topics portray pain, otherness and distress. Saksida also ranks disability, homosexuality, etc. among the topics of otherness, i.e. the topics that deviate from traditional youth literature and the horizon of expectation. *Boys*, a novel intended for young adult readers, addresses several topics. The author often and explicitly thematizes “Catholic feudalism”, violence (various types of violence against children), paedophilia and sadism, which is directly shown, unlike indirectly represented homosexuality (love, intoxication, kisses).
2. Perspective – the central perspective is represented by refusal or the child’s rebellious attitude toward the world. Regarding perspective, it would make sense to distinguish between the perspectives presented in children’s (picture books) and youth (novels) literature. The youth novel *The Clay Boys* features a distinct rebellious perspective, resisting traditionalism with markedly derogatory expressions characterized by style, i.e. vulgarisms and insults.

Papali was offered the lips of the lovely
Zdenko Castelli, finely carved and warm.
The bodies were pinned to one another.
A wave of heat passed from one to the
other. (Novšak 117)

[This] doorman [is] an utter tyrant.
[Such] people are sadists? (Novšak 1938:
18) [...] So he swung from fanatical
kneeling in church to paedophilia (ibid.,
p. 20). He became a sadist. (ibid. 41-42)

I was wearing sneakers. Original. 22,999
Slovene tolar. My heart pumped in Puma
T-shirt, 13,990 Slovene tolar. (Vidmar 38)

It’s not really about not wanting to be gay.
But I am bloody well not one of them. (ibid.
207)

3. Story – the text contains a conflict; a child or an adolescent in *Boys* is portrayed as a victim of the boarding school and the system, while in *The Clay Boys* by J. Vidmar

the context of self-inflicted injury (death, deathbed, suicide) appears. Novšak's novel also contains a basic plot, e.g. an introduction by the writer, written in May 1937 in Belgrade, a promise to a friend on his deathbed – to reveal his secret.

He [Nani] sat at his desk thinking that this world is so strangely arranged that people are not allowed to love whatever they want and that they have to be ashamed of themselves. (Novšak 95)

Love is the strongest, even when it develops between people of the same sex, I blurt out thoughtlessly, pick up a notebook and hide in the steps that separate me from the door. (Vidmar 145)

4. Literary figures are different, they are presented descriptively and narratively in the context of trials.

For the first time, he kissed the boy more than just a friend. He pressed his own lips to his. (Novšak 117)

As long as we drink, smoke, and have sex, no worms enter the body. (Vidmar 126)

5. Language – frequent use of swearwords, vulgarisms and other linguistic elements that characterize literary figures and the plot by style, especially in young adult fiction, and less so in children's literature. Elements of foreign languages are also present. Language has the function of provocation. In *Boys*, the union between Nani and Zdenko is rapturously or even solemnly described (blessing, flower (of youth), gift (of day), (dear) child, (always) dear, gospel (of peace), (reverend) sir, (exalted) gentleman, I bow to you (Lord Headmaster), overlord, glory (of martyrdom), shrine, etc.).

"Nani, let me kiss you!" – "No, no! You make me too dizzy! [...] Zdenko was amazed when Papali then grabbed his hands and pressed them to his lips." (Novšak 157)

I'm not gay. I just ain't. Not that I don't want to be. I don't want to be. I don't care. (Vidmar 77)

6. Mood – it is related to the emotional response to the text, especially through the description of suffering, sexuality, etc. In the novel *Boys*, the descriptions are positive and uplifting, in addition to the situation itself, the emphasis is on the new sensibilities, emotional and social elements of the union of the two boys, but the text also describes the affliction, the stifling mood, physical violence, sexual violence of the headmaster and the doorman.

Something has been going on in his body since he met Nani Papali. This boy totally chained him to himself. In his vicinity, he felt happy. (Novšak 71)

By the way, doctor, do you treat homos? Can you turn me into a hetero? (Vidmar 131)

In the novel *The Clay Boys*, however, the mood is described in vulgar words and homosexuality is expressed “per negationem” through denial (“I am not gay.” “I hate the word faggot.” (Vidmar 55); vulgarisms like shit, whorish, balls, etc.), and thus the novel creates an image of dystopia.

7. Subjective perception – readers have subjective ideas about childhood and the functions of reading. The point of the novel *Boys* is presented as the finding of the boy Nani Papali, unlike the point in the novel *The Clay Boys*, where there is also doubt and self-irony.

However, there was no more incense for Zdenko Castelli, no institution, no God, nothing but love. (Novšak 151)

Everybody is bugging me and I am fed up. Why do I have to live among jerks who are not even able to grasp the greatness of my personality? (Vidmar 26)

Having said that “there is no god, that there is only love” (Novšak 151), it is necessary to add that in the novel *Boys* (homo)sexual love between boys is tragically final, but conversely, paedophilia, sadism and abuse in the boarding school are not sanctioned. In the novel *The Clay Boys*, literary characters are also victims of their own egoism, of competitiveness, and of defining themselves on the basis of the great other, i.e. society.

Discussion

The topic of homosexuality in the discussed novels *Boys* and *The Clay Boys* also has a socio-critical significance in terms of resisting the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church (*Boys*) and society (*The Clay Boys*), since dealing with various topics and practices in the 20th century gradually changed the point of view of society, not because the topic of the search for (homo)sexual identity is placed in marginal and closed spaces (e.g. hospital, boarding house/school, shelter, etc.), but because it is verbalized in the wider context of a closed society. From the very beginning, these works were presented to the readers as obscene and not as a critical insight into a clerical society that is not disturbed by things such as abuse, paedophilia, sadism, merely due to the fact that they are being represented in youth literature.

In addition to all these topics, which are central but by no means the only ones, other topics are also presented, e.g. topics of sexual abuse of children (Cankar and Novšak). It is important that both authors critique society and affirmatively present homosexuality on the one hand, while on the other hand exerting critical attitude toward sexual abuse of children; that they defend children and took the side of children as victims. The authors describe homosexuality affirmatively and child abuse critically as well as with empathy, unlike some contemporary adult texts addressing the problem of child abuse, incest, rape, suicide, sodomy, violence, without advocating for the child, who is a victim,

while promoting the adult novel as an “excellent youth novel” that lacks even the basic starting point – being on the side of the child (Blažič, “Mestna knjižnica”).

Conclusion

The paper consists of three parts, the first part presents picture books and fairy-tale types that focus on gender. The second part presents a historical outline of the motif of (homo)sexual identity in Slovenian (youth) literature from Stritar, Govekar, Cankar, and Poljanec to this day. The third part of the article presents a comparative analysis of the central youth novels *Boys* and *The Clay Boys*. Homosexuality is portrayed in the novel *Boys* as a love relationship with the elements of emotional and physical love, and in the novel *The Clay Boys*, the subjective representation of (homo)sexuality is portrayed through denial, vulgarism and rebellion. Novšak portrayed the main literary figures affirmatively, aware of entrapment in tradition and love that is even above “God”. In Vidmar’s novel, adolescents are portrayed as wounded rebels, perverting their emotions, showing sensitivity as anger, homosexuality through denial. The authors contributed a great deal to the detaboosation of the topic, not only by addressing the subject, but above all through quality writing, and in more than a century of development, the topic has become part of youth literature. The topics are presented in a broader motif-thematic part of the search for identity in the family and society and have contributed to academic research at all four Slovenian universities.

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