

<p align="center">TEACHING LITERATURE WITH CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING IN THE SECOND TRIMESTER OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</p>		<p>Comparative Literature</p> <p>Keywords: teaching literature with creative problem-solving, the literary problem-solving method, the flipped learning method, ethical literary studies, and the school literary canon.</p>
---	--	--

<p>Milena Mileva Blažič</p>	<p>Faculty of Education. University of Ljubljana. Ljubljana, Slovenia.</p>
<p>Arburim Iseni</p>	<p>Faculty of Philology. University of Tetovo. Tetovo. North Macedonia.</p>

<p align="center">Abstract</p> <p>Taking ethical literary studies (Virk 2017) into account, the article demonstrates that modern ways of teaching literature can already be used in the second trimester of elementary school. These include creative problem-solving (Žbogar 2007, 2013), flipped learning (Žbogar 2023a, 2023b), the method of solving literary problems (Žbogar 2023c), and knowledge about the neuroscience of reading (Pirtošek 2016). We demonstrate that, through contemporary methods of teaching literature, pupils can be encouraged to gain a deeper understanding of the fairy tale, ethical matters, and the competence to compare it with Dostoevsky’s <i>The Beggar Boy</i> at Christ’s Christmas Tree by studying Hans Christian Andersen’s <i>The Little Match Girl</i>.</p>
--

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we attempt to explain why it is necessary to integrate relevant findings from modern literary science, special didactics, and neurological knowledge about reading into the modern school system. We draw on ethical literary scholarship (Virk 2017) and neurological findings on reading (Pirtošek 2016) and apply the findings to teaching literature in the second trimester of elementary school. New methods of teaching literature, i.e., those that use creative problem solving (Žbogar 2013), the flipped learning method (Žbogar 2023a, 2023b), and the literary problem-solving method (Žbogar 2023c), are suitable for teaching literature in elementary school. At Christ’s Christmas Tree, we apply the results to Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, *The Little Match Girl*, and Dostoyevsky’s fairy tale, *The Beggar Boy*. Both reflect unfavorable social and historical circumstances, as well as children’s unfortunate positions, which can serve as important sources of understanding and coping with the challenges of the contemporary world in literary education. The selected texts allow for reflections on identity, poverty, child labor, and other forms of child abuse, raising ethical and moral questions that reflect and shape the human experience. Thus, the quality of children’s and young people’s literature becomes a way to confront the complexity of human existence and express moral attitudes and responsibilities toward one’s fellow human beings and society as a whole. Andersen’s fairy tale, *The Little Match Girl*, with its vivid imagery, encourages reflection and thought, enabling young readers to develop their ability to understand complex contextual structures and grasp deeper meanings and messages with which they may not even agree. Numerous literary analyses of this fairy tale have demonstrated that young readers find the story’s intent unfair, believing the girl doesn’t deserve a tragic ending, particularly in the context of abundance, Christmas, and the adults’ lack of mercy. Andersen’s fairy tale touches on fundamental literary elements such as contrast, symmetry, and drama, which contribute to its universality and allow young readers to engage more deeply with the content while at the same time distancing themselves. The fairy tale creates a play of harmony

and dissonance (Armstrong 2015: 8): the tension between the expected and unexpected (dying, death) and between harmony in the fairy tale and disharmony. This encourages young readers to consider different interpretations of the text and develops their critical thinking about the fairy tale, the role of adults, and the author. *The Little Match Girl* belongs at the core of the school canon because of its timeless literary qualities.

2. TEACHING LITERATURE WITH CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Žbogar (cf. 2007, 2013) systematically addresses teaching literature with creative problem solving: she defines the method, lists the phases and types of such teaching, and considers it particularly suitable for upper elementary and secondary school classes, as confirmed by Kouta Skok (2010) in her master's thesis. Krakar Vogel (2004, 2020) discussed problem-based learning in terms of a flexible methodological system for school interpretation. This system likely evolved into its own approach due to its significant departure from the natural literary reception of the original contributions. In Slovenia, in the 1990s, Zoran Božič used the term problem-based instruction, whereas Žbogar introduced the term creative problem-solving instruction (Žbogar 2007: 58).

In this paper, we demonstrate the implementation of creative problem solving and simplified and adapted literature teaching in elementary school. The benefits of creative problem solving, as conceived by Žbogar (2013), lie in the development of reading literacy and literary competence (Žbogar 2015: 1222-1242). This method of teaching is based on the latest findings of cognitive psychology, which emphasize that the knowledge acquired through one's own research is more enduring (Krakar Vogel discussed this in 2004 in terms of active engagement with fiction). The shift toward such a paradigm of learning changes the traditional roles of teacher and learner. Through pupils' active engagement with fiction, i.e., through their own research, analysis, and interpretation of literary works, they gain a more comprehensive understanding of literature, thus fostering their creativity, independence, and in-depth thinking about literature. Because they emphasize important aspects of literary creativity and interpretation, Uther's (2004) concepts of *homonarrans* and *homoludens* are relevant in the context of creative problem solving and literature teaching. Both *homo narrans* and *homo ludens* offer useful frameworks for understanding the human role in the creation and interpretation of literary works. *Homo narrans* emphasizes the importance of storytelling in human culture, allowing students to analyze narrative structures, motifs, and characters and develop their own narrative skills. This concept encourages critical thinking and understanding of the complex elements of literary works, enabling students to better interpret and creatively apply literary elements. On the other hand, *homo ludens* emphasizes play as an elementary mode of expression and learning. This concept allows pupils to explore literary texts in a creative and playful way, which stimulates their creativity and imagination. By playing with genre conventions, creating alternative endings, or developing new characters, pupils can broaden their understanding of literary works and develop their creative skills.

The method of solving literary problems involves well-defined stages (Žbogar 2023c), which can be adapted for elementary school and even omitted. The advantages of teaching literature with creative problem solving are “the promotion of critical thinking, the development of problem-solving skills, and the strengthening of communication skills, which result from so-called active learning” (Žbogar 2007: 58). According to Žbogar (2007: 58), “the exploration and creation of ethical problems, which helps to test the understanding of literary concepts for interpretation,” produces a stimulating learning environment for the teaching of literature. Žbogar (2014) defines creative reading as the learner's creative understanding of the content and form, along with the author's attitude towards the message. Learner-centered teaching emphasizes the significance of readers' or students' connections to the spoken words. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of emotional and cognitive empathy, and how it would be beneficial to incorporate a distancing from literary situations and circumstances, as well as the students' ability to evaluate, make judgments, or express opinions about what they have read. Utilizing appropriate learning resources can help achieve this goal. The claim is that the creative reading of fiction deepens the creative process that manifests itself through reading while encouraging openness to one's own experience and putting this at the center of one's engagement with the text. Zajc (2019) emphasizes that identification and empathy with the text, the empathy with experiences and memories, the activation of experiential-cognitive experiences, and the expression of opinions—i.e., evaluation—all contribute to this process.

Students are becoming more independent in their use of learning materials, especially now that so much material is available online. They are thus more likely to use supplementary literature on their own initiative and to access multimedia adaptations of the focal texts. It is important for the active teaching of literature that students' active contact with fiction is meaningful and that they reflect on the reasons for reading fiction and the value of literary knowledge. Encouraging students to expand their existing literary knowledge, establish cross-curricular connections, and explore textual and extratextual realities is also crucial.

In addition to the creative problem-solving approach, Žbogar introduces two new methods of literary instruction into the Slovenian didactics of literature, namely, the method of flipped learning (Žbogar 2023a, 2023b) and that of literary problem-solving (Žbogar 2023c). Both methods are original and suitable for teaching literature with creative problem solving. In this study, we put them into practice on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, *The Little Match Girl*, emphasizing the educational aspects of the treatment of this text in elementary school (from the point of view of ethical literary science, cf. Virk 2017: 13-31).

3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE AND BACK AGAIN: THE FAIRY TALE *THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL* [I]

As early as 1850, translators translated Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales into Slovenian, including *The Nightingale and Emperor's New Clothes*. Since 1954, his works have consistently featured in the curriculum, establishing their canon in Slovenia before the Brothers

Grimm's fairy tales. Elementary school literature classes should encourage both reading for understanding and reading for comprehension. As Žbogar puts it:

Reading comprehension progresses from understanding the meaning of words and data (verbal comprehension) to comprehension by inference, making connections (grasping the gist, the message, the idea of the text read, and interpreting the connections), and finally to (meta)cognitive-critical as well as creative reading (i.e., evaluating and reading between the lines). (Žbogar 2023c: 312)

According to Žbogar (2015: 1224), reading for and with comprehension is promoted “through activities such as reading, reading with pauses, reading aloud, multiple readings, post-reading comprehension, talking about what has been read, summarizing, and retrieving what has been read.” Reading literacy is encouraged when the students go through all these activities and the teacher supports them, is a reading role model that provides them with a variety of reading materials, and makes them aware of the use of different reading strategies (Žbogar 2015: 1225).

During the text-parsing stage, educators pose a variety of questions to students (following Žbogar 2013: 105-106):

1. Perspective questions: Do you think that the narrator is more sympathetic to children or adults? Why? Could you find instances in real life, such as in the media, where children may not have received the same rights as adults? How has this affected their lives? How does this impact the girl's fate with the matches? How do you understand the final sentence in the story describing the girl's death? What message does it send?

2. General questions: Do you think poverty is still present in today's society? How is poverty manifested among children? Does social exclusion affect children today? What do you think is moral (right and wrong) in the fairy tale *The Little Match Girl*? Do you believe that the events in the story are comparable to real-life situations? Give a reason for your answers.

3. Comparative questions: Why do you think the adults in *The Emperor's New Clothes* [2] take the child's opinion into account, whereas in *The Little Match Girl*, they do not, and they do not help her? How would you feel if you were the girl with the matches? Would you feel differently as an adult observing the situation? How would you feel differently? Have children and adults the same rights and responsibilities in society? We should compare their respective rights and responsibilities.

4. Problem questions: Why do you think the adults didn't help the girl with the matches? What would have changed if they had decided differently? Why do you think the girl wanted her grandmother to take her to the afterlife? How did you feel when you read the end of the story?

5. Guiding questions: How can society help eradicate poverty and improve the situation of children? Is it already trying to help? In what ways? Do you think that children today are in a similar situation to the girl with the matches? Are you familiar with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child? How is society today trying to protect children's rights?

6. Alternative questions: do you think *The Little Match Girl* could have ended differently? How would you have changed the ending, and why? What endings do you think would have been more just? If you wrote this fairy tale with a different ending, what would you want to tell readers?

After the pupils have consolidated their knowledge of *The Little Match Girl* in the classroom and completed the phase of reflection on the ethical and moral issues raised by the fairy tale, it is time to compare this story with Dostoyevsky's 1876 fairy tale, *The Begger Boy*, at Christmas Tree. Using a thematic and motivational example, the pupils will be able to identify the influence of the social context (in our case, Christmas and New Year's Eve; poverty, dying, and death; (dis)belief in the afterlife) on the fate of a fairytale hero. Through a comparative analysis of the two fairy tales, the students gain insight into the dynamic between public and private realms, as well as the destiny of the story's protagonist, heavily influenced by his unfavorable social circumstances. They look for similarities between the two fairy tales, the main one being that in both, the child is a victim of poverty. The pupils then identify the differences by placing them in a literary-historical period and comparing the romantic and realistic elements. The pupils conclude the lesson by summarizing their learning through a table or word cloud. The class could also incorporate elements of the problem-solving method, as suggested by Žbogar (2023c), in addition to the activities outlined above. This method begins with a literary problem, which the students develop into a hypothesis. This hypothesis arises from a cognitive unknown, a cognitive conflict, and it should awaken students' desire to discover and explore, thereby activating their divergent and convergent thinking. [...] Literary problems are objective or subjective; their solution requires originality, and the way they are solved depends on students' emotional and cognitive maturity, as well as their sensitivity, background knowledge, experience, and motivation. (Žbogar 2023c: 312)

Pupils may start working with literary problems from the time they start school, but “in an adapted way and in accordance with their emotional maturity and cognitive and imaginative capacities” (Žbogar 2023c: 313). In the case of *The Little Match Girl*, we recommend encouraging pupils to make predictions based on the title and subtitle—A Fairy Tale—as this gives them a clear frame of reference. For homework, we first present a modeling activity through which the pupils are shown “the applicability of literary knowledge in everyday life” (Žbogar 2013: 106), and then at home, they write a text in which the girl with matches and the boy in Dostoevsky's story meet, in which the pupils imagine what the two children would talk about and how various humanitarian associations in Slovenia (e.g., the Moste-Polje Youth Friends Association, the Red Cross, Karitas, etc.) could help them with their problems.

Elementary school literature lessons also encourage pupils to explore stories independently. The Little Match Girl boasts a wealth of high-quality online resources, frequently selected for mandatory home reading. Pupils can find biographical information about the author themselves, either in a textbook or online, followed by reading fairy tales. The story can also be read independently before school. They enter their impressions of what they have read the principle of flipped learning (Žbogar 2023a, 2023b)—into an application, e.g., *Google Docs*, *Kahoot*, *Socrates*, etc.—and then read it aloud to the rest of the class. The teacher designs the

course of the classroom discussion based on the students' written impressions, taking into account the principles of learning with creative problem solving. The teacher first rereads the text with the students in the classroom, followed by a discussion of their impressions and another rereading for comprehension. We anticipate that the tragic fate of a girl, a victim of circumstances in the cold winter, in a state of delirium just before her death, will deeply impact the pupils. She sees her deceased grandmother's body and receives an escort to the afterlife in this state. Elementary school pupils can address the text's ethical dilemmas and questions, but their responses often rely more on extra literary arguments than the text itself. Therefore, it's beneficial to direct them towards the text during their rereading, assisting them in identifying its arguments, thereby fostering a more profound comprehension of literature. This comprehension manifests through the application of knowledge to specific challenges or situations, like ethical dilemmas. The Little Match Girl's discussion of ethical issues utilizes insights from ethical literary scholarship (Virk 2017), contextualized within the realm of children's and young people's literature. These include:

1. Can the adults in *The Little Match Girl* serve as moral role models in literary works?
2. Exploring individual moral situations, characters, and decisions (by discussing moral dilemmas, we encourage the development of pupils' moral skills).
3. By asking the students to imagine themselves as the grandmother and the little match girl, and reflect on why none of the living adults assist her, we stimulate moral imagination and reflection through literature.
4. We are delving into values and their historical context, educating the students about the 19th century's historical context, child labor during that era, the plight of homeless children, and poverty overall, while also motivating them to draw comparisons between the historical context and modern society.
5. Analyzing values in literary
6. Examining the potential influence of fairy tales on readers and society, as well as the ethical position of writers and their creations, we explore if *The Little Match Girl* mirrors the moral values of the 19th century, society, and the writer.
7. We will delve into the impact of authors and their creations on other writers and literary pieces, examining how Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, *The Little Match Girl* (1845), impacted Dostoyevsky's *The Begger Boy at Christ's Christmas Tree* (1876), and how both fairy tales impact both young and adult readers.
8. The discussion focuses on the portrayal of adults and children in *The Little Match Girl*, exploring the connections between literature, ethics, and society.

The concept of the ethics of the other, mentioned by Virk (2017), is particularly important, as it encourages students to be compassionate, understand different experiences and perspectives thus develop healthy interpersonal relationships. However, as we understand Virk (2017), it is not ethical issues but the concepts related to "literariness" that can take precedence when considering the literature. As a result, there is a particular formality and multidimensionality from which open questions, including ethical ones, arise. This is critical in shaping the reader's identity and understanding of the world, as well as contributing to the development of empathy and an

appreciation of interpersonal relationships. Nikolajeva (2013: 249-254) makes a similar point, discussing ethical issues in the literature in the context of emotional and social literacy. She emphasized the involvement of the reader in literary work and the importance of instruction in addressing social and human issues. This encourages readers to actively participate in understanding the complexity of literary works as well as developing their critical thinking and ethical awareness. Kidd and Castano's (2013) paper also emphasized the theory of mind, according to which reading fiction stimulates thinking. Pirtošek (2016) noted that the process of reading can be sequential and parallel. This process is sequential because reading takes place one step at a time, gradually revealing the text to the reader from beginning to end. On the other hand, reading is also parallel, which means that readers simultaneously practice different strategies and skills to understand the text. Readers can perform reading via a top-down approach, utilizing their prior knowledge, the text's context, and their expectations and assumptions to comprehend the meaning. In contrast, a bottom-up approach is when readers analyze individual words, sentences, and sections of the text to understand the whole work. Žbogar (2022) emphasizes the use of both approaches in teaching literature, especially in assessing literary ability.

4. CONCLUSION

In bringing ethical literary studies into the school system, we take responsibility for creating a safe and stimulating environment for young readers. All parties involved in literary studies and the educational system must accept accountability for the caliber and subject matter of the books that are a part of the school literary canon in order to be on the side of the child. When selecting books for the school curriculum, it is crucial to consider their impact on pupils and ensure that they promote humanistic values, an understanding of complex social and moral issues, and the development of critical thinking in young people. We must create a safe and stimulating learning environment, and foster the moral and intellectual development of young readers. Literature lessons that apply creative problem solving facilitate the development of pupils' critical reading skills, enabling them to independently evaluate and understand the moral and ethical aspects of texts and society.

We suggest that instead of including problematic [3] works in the literary canon; works that look at certain problems should be included. Also, we suggest that schools combine the principles of teaching literature with creative problem-solving, knowledge of the psychology of reading, and the neurological laws of reading. This way of doing things can help young readers learn to think morally and critically, develop empathy (using their moral imagination), and add to the problems that literature brings up in a constructive way. This can contribute to a better understanding of the role of literature in the education of readers, as well as promote critical thinking and ethical awareness among young people. The work of the school system in the literary system is crucial to developing reading literacy among pupils, which also includes emotional and social literacy.

The literature has great potential for shaping the thought processes of young readers, encouraging them to think about moral dilemmas and ethical issues, and teaching them compassion and empathy. It is crucial to incorporate high-quality literary texts into the school's literary canon, ones that are not universally applicable, stereotypical, or problematic. The quality of children's and young people's literature does not shy away from difficult themes or problematic issues, but it does present them in such a way that is sensitive to the abilities, needs, and experiences of young readers. Literature can encourage young people to think critically and develop into empathetic individuals when teachers approach such topics compassionately and critically in the classroom.

Resources

Andersen, Hans Christian, 1998: *Deklica z vžigalicami*. Pravljice. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
Dostojevski, Fjodor Mihajlovič, 1970: *Deček pri Kristusovem božičnem drevescu*. Mali junak: izbor kratke proze. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

References

- Armstrong, Paul B. (2015): Kako se literatura igra z možgani? Nevroznanost umetnosti in branja. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete. Prev. Igor Žunkovič.
- Kidd, David Comer, and Castano, Emanuele (2013): Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science* 342/6156. 377–380. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918>.
- Košuta Skok, Ana, 2010: Podobe drugačnosti v sodobni slovenski mladinski književnosti in osnovnošolski pouk književnosti. Magistrsko delo. Ljubljana: Filozofska Fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani.
- Krakar Vogel, Boža: 2004: Poglavlja iz didaktike književnosti. Ljubljana: DZS.
- Krakar Vogel, Boža: 2020: Didaktika književnosti pri pouku slovenščine. Ljubljana: Rokus Klett.
- Nikolajeva, Maria, 2013: Picturebooks and Emotional Literacy. *The Reading Teacher* 67/4. 249–254. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1229>.
- Pirtošek, Zvezdan, 2016. Umetnost in možgani. *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 44/265. 23–38 . <https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-FOJJ2AX2> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Uther, Hans-Jörg, 2004: *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliophy*. Parts I–III. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia (Academia Scientiarum Fennica).
- Virk, Tomo, 2017: Etična literarna veda med kakofonijo in pluralnostjo. *Primerjalna književnost* 40/2. 13–31. <https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-WY9ZMS30> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Zajc, Ivana, 2019: Miselni procesi višjih taksonomskih ravni v esejskem delu splošne matu-re iz slovenščine. *Slovenščina v šoli* 22/2. 4–13. <https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-SOQ55CLC> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2007, *Za dejaven pouk književnosti*. *Jezik in slovstvo* 52/1. 55–66. <https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-IJXQ2ZB0> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2013: *Iz didaktike slovenščine*. Ljubljana: Slavistično društvo Slovenije.

- Žbogar, Alenka, 2014: Literarno branje in mladostniki. Žbogar, Alenka (ur.): *Recepcija slovenske književnosti*. Obdobja 33. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za slovenistiko. 551–557. <https://repozitorij.uni-lj.si/Dokument.php?id=171211&lan-g=eng> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2015: Reading ability and literary competence in language arts classes in Slovenia. The article was published in the *Croatian Journal of Education* 17/4, pages 1219–1247. <https://doi.org/10.15516/cje.v17i4.1271>
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2022: How to grade literary competence in gymnasium literature classes. *Slovene Studies* 44/1. 43–58.
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2023a: Metoda obrnjenega učenja pri pouku slovenščine (književnosti). *Jezik in slovstvo* 68/2. 19–30. <https://doi.org/10.4312/jis.68.2.19-30>.
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2023b: Strniševa Večerna pravljica po metodi obrnjenega učenja. *Pedagoška obzorja: časopis za didaktiko in metodiko* 38/3–4. 67–83. <https://www.dsposi/index.php/dspo/article/view/111> (Accessed on 15. 5. 2024.)
- Žbogar, Alenka, 2023c: Metoda reševanja književnih problemov in problemski šolski esej v gimnaziji. *Slavia Centralis* 16/2. 308–325. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18690/scn.16.2.308-325.2023>

[1] UN: 1984, 1998, 2002, 2011.

We are assuming that they have prior knowledge of this fairy tale.

[3] We should distinguish between creative problem-solving lessons and problem-oriented and problematic literature. The former encourages students to think critically and explore on their own. Teachers must approach problem-oriented literary works, which deal with taboo and sensitive topics and issues, with the utmost professional ethics and sensitivity in literary instruction. They must also select these works carefully and plan their didactic treatment in the classroom with care. It is important to include literary works in the school canon that do not condone violence or problematic perspectives but rather promote dialog, understanding, and empathy. We discourage the introduction of problematic literary works into literature classes because they deal with sensitive and taboo topics in a stereotypical way, lack artistic merit, and are therefore one-dimensional.