

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHILDREN'S STORY – STJEPAN LICE AND SONJA TOMIĆ

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Abstract: The aim of this paper¹ is to explore some of the ways in which Christian values are present in contemporary Croatian children's stories. Contemporary Croatian children's literature is extremely diverse. However, Christianity has been immanent in Croatian children's literature from the very beginning and has engaged with contemporary children's stories through various creative processes. One of the contemporary approaches to Christian themes in Croatian children's literature will be presented, analyzing the works of the Croatian writers Sonja Tomić and Stjepan Lice. Their stories are inspired by biblical themes, motifs, and forms such as parables, the stories of rich symbolic relationships and strong messages in which Jesus Christ speaks in a vivid and understandable way about ordinary things, elevating them to the level of timeless meaning, thus pointing to correlations between the everyday world, spiritual reality, and the Kingdom of God. Sonja Tomić and Stjepan Lice approach these biblical themes through contemporary narrative concepts of children's literature and bring the original, complex way of Christ's teaching closer to the children's world and the potential experience of religiosity as it applies to children.

Keywords: biblical motifs, Croatian children's literature, Christianity, parable, contemporary approach to Croatian children's literature, Sonja Tomić, Stjepan Lice

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Introduction

In this paper, we will be interested in the contemporary position of Christian thought in Croatian children's story, taking as an illustrative example the short stories written by Stjepan Lice, namely two of his collections for children and young adults, and two collections of short stories by Sonja Tomić.² Contemporary Croatian authors of Christian orientation rely on the Christian tradition in (children's) literature, which is the result of its continuous presence in Croatian cultural and literary history³ and, in this case, also a certain need of the authors to testify to their personal experience of encountering the Almighty, as confirmed by their biographies.⁴

In the first part of the paper, we will consider Christian continuity within Croatian children's literature as a process that has gone through several developmental stages. Using a contemporary approach to Christian themes, we will offer an analysis of the collections of stories by Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić as an interesting combination of biblical themes, motifs, but also traditional biblical forms (parables)⁵ and contemporary storytelling techniques typical of children's literature. The stories of selected authors will be approached from a literary-historical perspective and from the field of literary theory of children's story.

² See the chapter *References*.

³ A concise review on the topic was given by B. Petrač (1995).

⁴ Sonja Tomić studied at the Family Department of the Institute of Philosophy and Theology, and Stjepan Lice is a member of the Secular Franciscan Order. In his speech at the presentation of Stjepan Lice's book *Kako su rasli zemlja i nebo / How the Earth and the Sky Grew*, Božidar Petrač (1991, 41) emphasizes the "Franciscan note of Lice's spirituality", implying peace and goodness which "permeate his subtle prose composed of simple expressions, without superfluous metaphors, glittering associative compositions, without sentence loads and other figures".

⁵ In the paper, different terms will be used: parable (Croat. "parabola", "prispodoba") and comparison. Namely, it was noticed that scientific community uses different terminology and it is interesting that don Marinko Vidović in his speech *Parable – argumentative-dialogical fictional speech. The challenge for faith, and not its interpretation*, held in Dubrovnik on March 4, 2020, points out that "there are only 5 to 8 true parables in the Gospels, while the rest are comparisons, allegories and the like. He said that parables are actually a speech performance, and a vivid way of speaking that is, a fictional speech that has its goal in reality". Retrieved from: <https://laudato.hr/Novosti/Biskupije/Dubrovačka-biskupija/Don-Marinko-Vidovic-Snaga-parabole-nije-u-njezinom.aspx> (Accessed September 22, 2021).

Christian continuity of Croatian children's literature

Officially, Croatian children's literature has long been considered to have its beginnings in the mid-19th century. If we look at recent research that clearly points to fractures within the hitherto generally accepted paradigm of Croatian children's literature,⁶ the real beginnings of Croatian children's literature date back to the 15th century, primarily as a Christian moral story.⁷ Even if we ignore this fact, the long-term continuity of Croatian children's literature is supported by the attitude that the text is incorporated into a certain history of reception; finally, Jadranka Brnčić holds that the meaning of the text is realized for the most part in its interpretations (325).⁸ The origin of children's literature lies in the oral literary word, whose individual forms, although not originally intended exclusively for children, in the contemporary sense of the word can be viewed as part of children's literature. It is precisely prayers, stories, and oral traditions, but also other simple forms, most often in verse, that for the most part are typical of children's literary corpus. The oral literature corpus testifies to the long-term rootedness of Christianity in the cultural image of the Croatian ethnic space. If we start from the fact that the oral story is a kind of "mixtum", often mixing the parabolic and anecdotal, phraseological and quoted, gnomic and paremiological (Botica 2013, 399), then it is completely understandable that the author's story will be created by the same model.

In this context, we will analyze the selected stories written by Stjepan Lice, where we will emphasize the interpolation of parable in his literary and artistic work, and the stories written by Sonja Tomić, where in addition to biblical symbolism, the narrative discourse of the New Testament will be noticed in the author's literary expression.

⁶ Cf. Majhut, B.

⁷ Cf. Majhut, B. & Težak, D.

⁸ As an example of different interpretations of the same motif we can use the motif of Genevieve (cf. Majhut, & Lovrić), of medieval origin. Similarly, Hranjec (8-18) discovers Christian motives also there where they are seemingly invisible or are denied depending on the cultural-historical discourse within which they originated. A similar analogy is noticed by Ana Pintarić when she says that classic, but also modern fairy tales are based on biblical truth. The stories of Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić also have elements of a fairy tale in terms of the content. In this relationship we can see the connection with the eight beatitudes and Jesus' golden rules, but also with parables that are often a stimulus for literary works of contemporary children's authors such as Maja Gjerek Lovreković, Božidar Prosenjak, Vjekoslava Huljić, Sabina Koželj Horvat, Sanja Polak, etc. (33).

In his monograph on Christian sources of Croatian children's literature, S. Hranjec confirmed the inseparability of children's literature from the dominant currents within the general literary and cultural space of the Croatian people, one of the currents being Christianity. The way that Christian thought developed and moved within Croatian children's literature can be shown in several key stages. Christianity intensively shaped Croatian literature until 1945, when during the regime of Socialist Yugoslavia it was more significantly challenged in public and cultural life – Christian literature being either marginalized or denied, adapting to ideological imperatives. Lahorka Plejić Poje says that in contemporary literature we encounter religious themes only occasionally, while in older Croatian literature, concluding with the period of the Croatian national revival, it is impossible to avoid them (76). Recent research on children's literature indicates the mechanisms by which such efforts were carried out (cf. Majhut, & Lovrić Kralj 2020, 177-210). The fact is, however, that even after 50 years of repression, Christianity survives, and moreover, the suppression has strengthened its revitalization.

In the introduction we have referred to recent research that increasingly sheds light on hidden facts about Croatian children's literature, warning of the fact that its beginnings go much deeper into the past, precisely with the appearance of pious, Christian booklets, catechisms, and prayer books, which, however, similarly explained the foundations of the faith both to unlettered adults and children.

In its beginnings, children's literature in the Croatian language had a distinctly Christian character, which was transmitted through moralizing, didactic stories, writers' lecturing and texts that had a mandatory moral referring to an exemplary Christian life. For almost 50 years, such stories had been published on the pages of the most important children's magazines of that time, *Smilje*, *Bosiljak*, and *Bršljan* (cf. Hranjec 31).

A significant change in the approach to Christian themes is visible in Ivana Brlić- Mažuranić's *Tales of Long Ago* which unites Christian spirit and Slavic mythology with the traces of Andersen's poetics.

In addition to silencing, the prevailing model of attempts to obstruct Christian content in children's literature involved adapted interpretations of certain literary works that consciously excluded, marginalized, or downplayed Christian content. Jagoda Truhelka, a Croatian writer who introduced a new type of children's novel about childhood into Croatian children's prose, has only been revived in recent times.

Contemporary Croatian children's literature chooses a different ways of talking about God, so we can talk about pluralism of contemporary approaches. One of the contemporary approaches to Christian themes is humor, which is especially seen in Balog. Along with Balog, there are a number of writers of Croatian children's literature who, after a long silence, revitalize Christian thought in Croatian children's literature in various ways. In the 1990s, for example, literature on the Homeland War was written, which often contained Christian motifs or Christian philosophy.

It can be concluded that Christianity is an indispensable feature of Croatian children's literature, within which we can generally speak of four stages of development of Christian thought:

- (1) traditional approach – moralizing-didactic literature;
- (2) Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić and Jagoda Truhelka as a separate category;
- (3) avoidance/denial of Christian topics in the time of socialism;
- (4) pluralism of contemporary approaches.

The last stage implies a different poetic matrix – Christian motifs in children's literature rise to a higher level; by discarding simplified forms, they transform Christian continuity fostering children's immersion into the Christian essence.

The word of the New Testament interpolated into the narrative opus of Sonja Tomić and Stjepan Lice – from a parable to a universal metaphor

We will analyze the stories by Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić inspired by parables and other biblical contents. The texts will be approached by an analysis of styles and symbols that often grow into universal metaphors. The comparative method will find common messages and motifs and, based on that, the Christian character of the contemporary children's story will be considered in relation to the traditional moral stories for children and within the poetics of the contemporary Croatian children's story.

Namely, already at the first reading of the stories written by Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić, we can notice they are stimulating and instructive stories of rich symbolic relationships and strong messages, "the path of evangelical, Christian truths to the child's heart" (Hranjec 122). In his narrative opus for children, he often uses the laws of animalistic story, using motifs related to flora and fauna, which are familiar to children, referring to Christianity as a synthesis of humanistic values in which an individual plays an important role for the collective as a whole. His story *Sretna sjemenka / The Happy Seed*, in terms of its form and content

structure, relies on a parable, and it is used in working with children in grade 4 of primary school⁹ and children of preschool age.¹⁰ Parables are short stories with a distinct message/moral, which gives them an effective ending and a gnomic nature. Namely, they are a type of anecdote. As a narrative structure, they have only one episode, which can be a global comparison, but it receives a performance structure in the story (Botica 2013, 459). Parables do not have the role of teaching, but of persuasion through coherence, generalization, and something that has a universal meaning¹¹ (cf. Vidović, 2007). Therefore, the ending in a parable must judge the intended meaning in the recipient's mind, including reflection and axiology, prompted by a well-worded ending (Botica 2013, 459), while the "speaker" telling the parable is often the "character" of the global story (Brnčić 227). Jesus' parables vividly depicted in images from everyday life represent the spiritual reality and the Kingdom of God, and Jesus usually speaks using the present tense about things that happen regularly in nature and human life, that have a timeless meaning. Slavić notes that the "parables bring images that could be familiar to the listeners because they relate to agriculture and vegetation (sower, ryegrass, a grain of mustard seed), fishing and animal world (good and bad fish), household chores (yeast), recognized material values (treasure and pearl), and finally the work of grammarians, scribes" (394). More than a third of Jesus' words were parables, they are present more in the New Testament (about 40) than in the Old Testament, but similar comparisons, metaphors, and allegories can be found there as well.¹² Some parables express the pain of rejecting God, such as the parable of the sower (Mt 13: 3-8), when only a quarter of the seed yields and the rest decays (cf. Matić 2007). Thus, even in parables, there is an element of strangeness, paradox, which attracts the reader, because they transcend every possible reality (Brnčić 198). Such moments occur in several places in the stories by Stjepan Lice as well as Sonja Tomić, because it could be said that the

⁹ <https://youtu.be/804Lly3v-8Y> (Accessed June 19, 2021).

¹⁰ <https://www.carobni-pianino.hr/programi/program-predskole-prijedlog-aktivnosti-25-5-29-5/> (Accessed June 19, 2021).

¹¹ Cf. Vidović at: <https://laudato.hr/Novosti/Biskupije/Dubrovacka-biskupija/Don-Marinko-Vidovic-Snaga-parabole-nije-u-njezinom.aspx> (Accessed September 22, 2021).

¹² Cf. Vidović at: <https://laudato.hr/Novosti/Biskupije/Dubrovacka-biskupija/Don-Marinko-Vidovic-Snaga-parabole-nije-u-njezinom.aspx> (Accessed September 22, 2021).

mentioned writers of Christian orientation intensify, sometimes confusing, solution, provoking the recipient's reach of their interpretation. For example, in the Gospel of Matthew, there are seven such moments presented as complete structures: fishing net, weeds, a grain of mustard seed, treasure and precious pearl, and a sower (Botica 2011, 171). Parable is approached by choosing symbols close to the children's world – these are motifs from nature, the world of plants and animals, addressing the youngest (*Bubekovo gnijezdo / Bubek's Nest*) similarly to Christ saying "come, little ones, to me!". Gospel parables are stories in which Jesus speaks in a vivid and understandable way about ordinary things that happen regularly in nature and human life. It was the parable of the sower that Stjepan Lice used to create his own story in order to bring the "eternal truth" closer to children. According to Celestin Tomić, a parable (comparison) is by its nature an appropriate means to illuminate some concepts for ordinary people, to encourage someone to listen to what they would not otherwise want to, to create their own objective judgment. It has a threefold purpose: to attract attention with the beauty and grace of speech; to present the truth in beautiful and attractive speech; to point out one fundamental truth in vivid speech, and in order to notice all these, we must pay close attention to the so-called "tertium comparationis" or the formal type of parable (325). Parables, as already mentioned, have a timeless meaning and indicate correlations between everyday life, spiritual reality, and the Kingdom of God (Vidović, 2007). The parables end with a question and allow the listeners to decide for themselves which path to choose (cf. Matic 2007), which encourages the constant interaction between the author, the text, and the recipient,¹³ because listening means understanding, and understanding means acting (Brnčić 209). We recognize such a stylistic feature in Lice's collection of stories *Bubekovo gnijezdo / Bubek's Nest*, where the author encourages the youngest to think, points to inner search, and opens various questions (Visinko 137). As experiential notions, and also global metaphors, a living portrait of something else, parables or narrative parables always bring in themselves, like proverbs, concrete life data, always reciprocally interpretively applicable (Kekez 171). The power of parables is in the reaction of the listener, therefore in the texts of the authors selected here, a kind of reaction is also expected from the child-recipient.

The question is often raised about how deeply a child's cognitive-emotional apparatus can think about the basic human values that Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić talk about, that is, to what extent will these

¹³ Encyclopedic Theological Dictionary 933-935.

messages reveal children's (in)experience. Such questions usually doubt in general about the need for the child to be burdened with "tough topics". However, if we approach the text, i.e. appropriately interpret it using different methodological approaches (e.g. different drama, dance, or narrative performances), then it is possible for the text to find its way to children.¹⁴

Temptations and applications of Christian doctrine in children's reception – the (im)possible mission of the breeze in the realization of intuitive reality

The stories in *Bubekovo gnijezdo / Bubek's Nest* are short, not burdened with descriptions, they are educational, and dominated by faith in Love and Light (Visinko 137). The story setting is indeterminate, that is, its determinateness is reducible to natural changes. Lice's naive children's, animal and plant worlds imperceptibly mature passing through the stations of the Christian life, from the simpler to the more complex, which Lice further elaborates in his books for young adults. The topics he touches on include: human's harmony with nature ("In nature all beings hear inaudible voices"; Lice 2012, 21), hope (*Plamen / Flame*), perseverance on the path of good, building trust in good, and faith in the sense, which are all united by trust in God as a counterweight to fear. The faith in the sense stems from the acceptance of the individual particularity of all forms of life. When analyzing Lice's texts, we can speak of a kind of transformation of the Christian message to its true essence, which includes understanding the world in totality through fundamental Christian values: the cross – an altruistic, empathetic sacrifice for others (the story *Ševin pjev / The Skylark's Song*). Trust in God results in "dancing through life" (Lice 2012, 31), not as l'art pour hedonism, but rather as enduring limitations and suffering (Lice 2012, 32), and addressing "always the other" (Lice, 2012, 9, 44). Seemingly child-friendly topics culminate in much more complex ones, layered within a text that, with the clarity of expression, takes care of children as recipients. Such themes include death (the story *Pšenično zrno / The Wheat Grain*), the perseverance of following the teaching of Christ in spite of temptations and challenges, the question of authority – the insignificance and the perniciousness of the hierarchy of positions when exploited in the wrong way ("To reign means to help everyone with your

¹⁴ Examples of dance interpretation of the stories *Sretna sjemenka / The Happy Seed* and *Stablo i cvijet / The Tree and The Flower* can be seen in: Vidović Schreiber, T.T. & Malada, D. About children's religiosity see also: Kovačević et al.

beauty to be the most beautiful they can be"; Lice 2012, 16), paradoxical changes – the power of *the little ones* (Lice 2012, 52) as a result of their unencumberedness. It is quite clear that the story *Pšenično zrno / The Wheat Grain* relies on the gospel story of the sower who went out to sow, in which the author again points to a humanistic, human, Christian message that should not even be emphasized, because it can be experienced by "listening", stimulating the recipients to act, draw, and retell it together with children (Babić 64-65). The story *Sretna sjemenka / The Happy Seed* is based on a motif from the parable of the sower. The story, interesting in content, indicates growth in human life on all levels from spiritual, intellectual, emotional to physical growth. The seed chooses between falling on the path or on rocky ground. Namely, in his story, the seed avoids falling on the path, which would be a kind of allusion to avoiding facing life and giving life for the other. Lice's seed at the beginning of the story does not want to fall on the path, does not want to "get dirty", but only in the moment of surrender, confidence, and giving up to the breeze¹⁵ to carry it, in the moment of openness to the action of the Almighty, the seed falls to the ground, giving it the opportunity to grow into a beautiful sunflower. On the one hand, therefore, the seed and the process of germination is an experience of human labor, on the other hand, it is a metaphor of life, but also of Christian maturation – growth in Jesus Christ.

Stjepan Lice portrays Christianity as "engaged well-being", not "decaffeinated Christianity" (Ursić, 2021¹⁶), also as creative courage, faith and wisdom, and well-being as a process and result of Christian action. In his collection for young adults (*S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind*¹⁷), Lice uses more intense metaphorical language to touch on the ontological questions of the meaning of existence, the necessity of existence in accordance with the self, with one's essence. Težak defines the story *S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind* as a "poetic thought story" in which "a strange literary combination of tense and soothing narration is realized through a lyrical expression imbued with anticipation" (125). In other stories, Težak notices, "the lessons are

¹⁵ The wind motif, which is undoubtedly common in the Bible, is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and will be analyzed in more detail below, in relation to Lice's collection of stories *S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind*.

¹⁶ Cf. <https://ivicaursic.com/uvijek-nedjeljom-marko-10-35-45-19-rujan-2021/>.

¹⁷ The collection contains a longer story *S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind* and four shorter stories (*Razgovor s drvom / Conversation with a Tree*, *Svjetlost očiju / The Light of the Eyes*, *Martin kruh / Marta's Bread*, *Vječni poljubac / Eternal Kiss*).

more direct, less hidden, than in the story *S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind* (128).

To feel the wind, which is the writer's central metaphor, means to acknowledge that in addition to tangible reality, there is a transcendental, intuitive reality that is a precondition for achieving wholeness. When two children talk about the wind wondering about its nature, what the wind is at all, one of them concludes: "I don't know. But sometimes I think... sometimes I dream.. that without the wind, we wouldn't even exist. That the wind is in some way in everything. I do not understand why, but I feel so" (Lice 2003, 32). "The wind allowed everything, just everything, to move. And it gave meaning to everything" (Lice 2003, 51). Recognizable, however, in the wind, is the biblical privilege of the right to choose, freedom in decision-making. "There is no life without wind. Without wind it is not possible to choose. And without the possibility of choice, it is not possible to be human" (Lice 2003, 58). Wind is a divine, intuitive force. The removal of the wind, therefore, resembles the ideological removal of faith, and not only faith but everything that opposes the ideology. The mechanism by which this is done is fear, which, in order to save the lives of others, is turned into the opposite - it maintains the physical existence of life, denying its spiritual dimensionality. The theme of fear in the longer story *S dobrim vjetrom / With a Good Wind* could be considered as a separate issue – fear is an obstacle for those who want to make changes, because the fate of those who choose the wind is such that "they and their threats will disappear with it" (Lice 2003, 15), yet it is an equal obstacle for those who are afraid of these changes. The wind, however, is impossible to overcome, and optimism is always Lice's choice. Optimism, however, requires engagement, and to the one "who decides to move forward, if he has enough will and courage, everything opens up" (Lice 2003, 21). Going forward, therefore, necessarily implies remembering good, forgetting evil, which is the fundamental Christian postulate – forgiveness. The Christian worldview is confirmed here precisely in its comprehensiveness, it is not named anywhere, but it springs from everything, especially recognizable in Christ's philosophy of the "little ones" – the characters in Lice's stories (predominantly children, but also adults who have not forgotten the child in them) follow this path when they say that "the ordinary is always the most miraculous" (Lice 2003, 53). It is the characters of children that keep Lice's literary work on the unstable border between "adult's" and "children's" literature.¹⁸

¹⁸ In the theory of children's literature and also in Croatian children's literature, the term crossover literature is becoming increasingly accepted. Cf.

Težak confirms this idea when he says that Lice offers stories that “differ in structure, design, plot construction, message about the world and life from the prose we usually offer to young adults. These are stories for those who are looking not only for a plot, but also for beauty in expression and a thought that will not die the moment they turn the last page” (129). Children possess a natural propensity for meditative contemplation of the world and isolation from the noise of the world. The meaning of life recognizable in the small things presents Lice’s basic message, seen in the shorter stories in the collection as well.

The question of death (Lice 2003, 66) is presented “between the lines”, eternal life continues, and substitution on the earth appears in the form of other people entering our lives compensating or reminding us of the strength of those who have left (Lice 2003, 66).

Lice unquestionably puts Jesus Christ in the center along with a series of recognizable Christian symbols shaped into the structure of the biblical parable.

Sonja Tomić – the path of the Disciple to the Master illuminated by the Word

Tomić’s first book was a collection of texts with religious themes entitled *Marijin križni put / Mary’s Way of the Cross* published in the journal *Brat Franjo / Brother Francis* in 1987. *Svjetiljčica / The Little Lamp*¹⁹ was published from 1990 to 1991 in sequels in the magazine *Kana*, i.e. at the time of the collapse of the communist world. Her literary works are imbued with Christian teachings and values, and she gained her popularity with hagiographies such as *Franjo mironosac i sestrica Neva / Francis the Peacemaker and His Sister Neva*, *Antun-Nani, manji brat / Antun-Nani, the Little Brother*, and *Dnevnik rajske loptice / The Diary of the Little Ball of Paradise*. Bible as a comprehensive book, in terms of its content and meaning, is the subject of a lifelong reading, and its interpretive experiences graduate with the maturing of the reader’s personal experience. It is not easy to pass on such attributed

<https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-176>.

¹⁹ In the following passages a longer story *Svjetiljčica / The Little Lamp* (published in 1992) will be analyzed together with other stories. Namely, the collection *Svjetiljčica i odabrane priče / The Little Lamp and Selected Stories*, published in 1998, along with *Svjetiljčica*, also contains the following stories: *Igračke, ...ili biti? / Toys, ...or to be?*, *Koštica-sanjalica / A Kernel – a Dreamer*, *Ništa na dar / The Present of Nothing*, *Pečat nevidljivog draguljara / The Seal of an Invisible Jeweler*, *Gabrijelov dar / Gabriel’s Gift*.

biblical content to a child. Sonja Tomić did it on several levels. Following the new evangelization,²⁰ Sonja Tomić, in a different way, close to children, approaches the child. While facing a moralizing Christian interpretation of Bible at the initial stage of children's literature, the approach of the new evangelization, whose echoes are visible in children's literature, is quite different, without a threatening finger – perhaps such an approach would best be determined by subtlety and depth. It is important to point this out when we want to find aesthetic value in these works. In the story *Svjetiljčica / The Little Lamp*, Sonja Tomić also uses biblical motifs to convey a lesson about the value of life that God has given to every human being. The characters and events in *Svjetiljčica / The Little Lamp* are inspired by the Bible, so it is not surprising that the author begins the story with a quote from the Bible, and the names of the characters are symbolic. At the beginning, The Little Lamp appears just like at the beginning of the creation of the world when God creates light to drive away darkness, followed by the Disciple who represents Jesus' apostles, and Jesus himself is visible in the form of the Master. Furthermore, similarly to Stjepan Lice, Sonja Tomić is in search of God's word; she opens her story with the biblical word: "And God said: Let there be light!"²¹

The main character is the Disciple, a child, not a particularly exemplary student. He is bright, curious, but also impatient, selfish at times, reckless. He is, we could freely say, a part of the typical modern children's world, with his character resembling all previous heroes of children's literature. The Disciple's everyday life is made up of the *klapa*, a paradigmatic determinant of contemporary children's literature. The members of the company are Filozof/Philosopher, Riba/Fish, and Medena/Honey. They are opposed by a team of the more dominant ones: Kedžo, Crni/Black, Topuz, and Šaka/Fist. The weaker ones agree to Christ's "turn the other cheek", which proves to be a victorious strategy. Initially stubborn and frightened, the Disciple changes with the help of The Little Lamp and realizes God's goodness. The Little Lamp accompanies him on his journey pointing him to the Master, unequivocally Jesus Christ. Typical biblical motifs, desert, water, well, garden, travel are suggestive symbols that are not difficult for children to understand. In addition to easily explainable metaphors, Tomić introduces direct biblical quotations into her stories, not explaining them, only believing in the power of their presence, believing the child will hear them, get to know them, and interpret them when the time

²⁰ About new evangelization cf. Ivančić.

²¹ More about meaning of Logos cf. Časni (178).

comes for her/him to mature. This is the case, for example, with the story *Igračke / Toys* ("Here I am, father, your son is listening"; Tomić, 1999, 51). The author connects the well-known biblical motifs with the contemporary ones, even current (ecology-related) motifs such as the motif of waste with which the Disciple fills the well with Living Water to hide his own negligence from the guests (who come with gifts in which we can recognize the motif of the Three Kings). Burying the well can be read on two levels – as already mentioned, as an environmental problem, but also as burying the soul, choosing sin as an easier path. The world of ideas is an unobtrusive message derived from children's experience – one learns from mistakes, but the Master does not threaten, he forgives and answers prayers. However, prayer requires a dialogue with God. The question posed by the Disciple: "What would the teacher tell me if I asked him: if now I cried out to God as loudly as I could, for the desert to dawn and disappear, would he give me what I asked for?" is answered in the following way: "As far as I know Master, I believe that before answering, he would ask you: What would you give to God?" (Tomić 1999, 19). What needs to be given to God is perseverance on the path, avoiding enticing shortcuts – sacrifice: "One should give up the dream of a shortcut and continue on the old long uncertain path. (...) When you come across a good path, you must not deviate from it (...) You have to walk" (Tomić 1999, 35-36). The Disciple walks through the desert all the time. Here, as in the Bible, the desert represents penance, and coming out of the desert represents finding the right path. After leaving the desert, the Disciple meets the Master. Jesus is often called the Master in the Bible: "Master, what good must I do to attain eternal life?" (Mt 19:16). The student finally reached his goal, what he had longed for all the way: to get out of the desert. Finally, the Disciple leaves the desert as a winner because he has found the Right Path and found a new friendship. The desert is mentioned in the Bible as the place of Jesus' temptation (Mt 4: 1-2)²². Jesus is the Way showing the way to the Father, and the way of life is a form of walking through the desert, through which one must pass in order to enter eternity.

To depict biblical issues, Tomić interpolates stories from the oral literary tradition of biblical origin (the fall of Gavan's palace), stylistically adapted to the child: "God is portrayed vividly, as a nice old man, and the child is the one who accepts him" (Tomić 1999, 19-20). In the story *Profesor/Professor*, Tomić clearly points out the perniciousness of the individualistic, closed concept of life. She inserts allusions to general places of civilization (the term *brave new world*; Tomić 1999, 54) which

²² Cf. Kurečić.

do not represent a significant place for children, but for adults, who may also find Tomić's narrative interesting. Such interventions can represent an interesting narrative shift. Tomić's subtle critique of science without emotions, radical rationalization, but also Christ's openness to forgiveness and change is also interesting. The Professor therefore concludes: "He said only how sorry he was that he wasted his life asking what love is, not loving, that he wanted to name every thing, every feeling and every being. And without second thought, Honey cut him off: 'All your life? Well this is just the beginning! There is a lot of time in God the Father'" (Tomić 1999, 28). The "poetics of the heart" is visible on several occasions – logic is opposed to the heart, not to disqualify it, but to supplement it, to enrich it. Emotions devoid of logic are the meaning of faith: "No one has ever seen him except his Son who revealed him. He should be loved unseen. Because he was the first to love us. And love must be answered with love. If you love people, animals and nature, you love him" (Tomić 1999, 36). The child, mischievous and playful as she portrayed it in choosing her characters, opposes the child from the beginning of the development of children's literature, which falls under the influence of the social atmosphere, shaped by the world of adults, which is also a critique of that world – the child would like to watch the meadow but adults conclude that "now there is no time to admire beauty" (Tomić 1999, 34). It is also significant the way God is addressed – "Daddy God", which is one of the models of approaching the child's communicative skills. Furthermore, Tomić introduces into her narration the characters of animals, natural children's allies, putting them into natural communication. In the story *Uspon / Rise*, the main characters are a girl and a caterpillar.

In her newer collection *Badnja večer / Christmas Eve* (Tomić 2011), the author puts contemporary attire on the essence of Christmas Eve and Christmas. The author does not omit customs, memories of her own childhood, the breath of the past, but also the present time familiar to children. An illustrative example is the story *Isa i robot-kamikaza / Isa and the Robot-Kamikaze*, which brings Jesus' mission closer to the child with modern, IT tools, introducing the theme of religious tolerance very skillfully, by choosing the names of the main characters.

Sonja Tomić's teachings are not read on a tendentious level, in the context of contemporary theories in children's literature, but the author uses the instruments of proven spirituality – piety and unobtrusive and collected pedagogy to shape the reader, without violating all aesthetic values at the level of expression and form of the story itself.

Conclusion

Morality appears in the earliest days of human life (cf. Čudina-Obradović & Težak 1996), thus it is completely understandable that Christian education imposes as part of the inherited cultural identity in Croatia, because it implies part of the generic component in the realization of educational ideal.²³

Returning to the starting point, we can conclude that contemporary Croatian children's story has not given up its immanent Christian paradigms, but has rather dressed them in a new attire, which is typical of the model close to the modern child. In the texts by Lice and Tomić, communication with biblical sources reveals deep semantic layers of spirituality, enabling the child to accept what is understandable to her/him, while at the same time enjoying the plot-appropriate content of the story.

From the above-mentioned, we can conclude that if the goal of raising a child is to help her/him grow into a mature, stable, and responsible person who is happy and who passes her/his life happiness to other people,²⁴ then the choice of stories by Stjepan Lice and Sonja Tomić in working with children is completely justified, because they are primarily located in the context of children's Croatian literature, especially religious literature, and do not present just a kind of migration of their poetics in children's media (as ctd. in Hranjec 2003).

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TRANSFORMACIJA SUVREMENE KRŠĆANSKE DJEČJE PRIČE – STJEPAN LICE I SONJA TOMIĆ

Cilj je ovoga rada razmotriti neke od načina prisutnosti kršćanskih vrijednosti u suvremenoj hrvatskoj dječjoj priči. Suvremena je hrvatska dječja književnost izrazito raznolika. Kršćanstvo je, međutim, imanentno hrvatskoj dječjoj književnosti od samih početaka te se različitim stvaralačkim postupcima interferiralo i u suvremenu dječju priču. Jedan od suvremenih pristupa kršćanskim temama unutar hrvatske dječje književnosti predočit ćemo koristeći se stvaralaštvom književnice Sonje Tomić i književnika Stjepana Licea. Njihove su pripovijetke nadahnute biblijskim temama, motivima i oblicima kao što su prispodobe, priče bogatih simboličkih odnosa i snažnih poruka kojima Isus Krist na slikovit i razumljiv način govori o običnim stvarima, izdižući ih prema svjevremenskom značenju, ukazujući tako na zajedničke veze između svakodnevnice, duhovne stvarnosti i Kraljevstva Božjeg. Sonja Tomić i Stjepan Lice biblijskoj tematici pristupaju suvremenim pripovjedačkim konceptima dječje književnosti približavajući tako izvorni, kompleksni način Kristova učenja dječjem svijetu te mogućnostima dječjeg doživljaja religioznosti.

Ključne riječi: biblijski motivi, hrvatska dječja književnost, kršćanstvo, parabola/prispodoba, suvremeni pristup hrvatskoj dječjoj književnosti, Sonja Tomić, Stjepan Lice.