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Прегледни рад

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ON THE STRENGTH OF THE FRAGILE: CHARACTERS
OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE NOVELS *HEIDI*
BY J. SPYRI AND *ABOUT THE BUTTON AND HAPPINESS*
BY J. PETROVIĆ***

Abstract: The subject of research in this paper are characters of children with disabilities, in selected works included in the school and home reading covered by the teaching and learning syllabi of the Serbian language and literature for elementary school. At the teaching interpretation level, the analysis focuses on the novels *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri and *About the Button and Happiness* by Jasminka Petrović. The paper discusses the degree of understanding of the analyzed works among students of different ages, as well as possible ways of their interpretation in contemporary teaching. It highlights significant forms of work prompted by the texts, which further affirm various interpretative and creative approaches in teaching. Particular attention is given to exploring literary depictions of disability from the perspective of various theoretical modalities (medical and social approaches), the loneliness of characters with disabilities, their fragility, and fears arising from the social and cultural context of inclusion in the community. The work as a whole delves into the educational domain of teaching literature and points to the importance of fostering empathy in students and raising their awareness of the necessity of providing support and assistance to persons with disabilities.

Keywords: characters of children with disabilities in school and home elementary school reading, *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri, *About the Button and Happiness* by Jasminka Petrović, literary issues (disability, loneliness, social marginalization, friendship), teaching.

FROM SOCIAL DISTANCE TO SOCIAL INCLUSION
– THE DISABILITY PHENOMENON IN THE NOVELS *HEIDI*
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Persons with disabilities, and the topic of disability in general, viewed as a social phenomenon, have been perceived in various ways throughout history and society's attitude toward this group has changed over time, but it was not until the 20th century

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that significant progress was made in the rehabilitation of individuals with physical and mental disabilities (see Petrović 2012: 867–882, 877–879). This social group was, for a long time (and to some extent still is, although efforts are being made to improve the situation) stigmatized and considered a taboo subject, rarely discussed, and even less frequently written about. Even when it was addressed, this type of discourse typically involved labels that only deepened and reinforced traditional stereotypical perceptions of people with disabilities and their limitations, which led to their marginalization, complete or partial neglect, and rejection by society, ultimately resulting in their exploitation and discrimination on various grounds (cf. Milošević 2015: 102; Тымпа 2018: 112–113). Despite the social distance towards people with disabilities, which is still evident today, the fact that around 15% of the world's population comprises people with some form of disability cannot (and must not) be overlooked (Petrović 2016: 9). In Serbia alone, 571.780 individuals with disabilities were registered in 2011, accounting for 8% of the total population (Petrović 2016: 10). These figures are significant and clearly suggest that the issue of disability is a complex and important phenomenon that requires special attention in research. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a growing interest in this topic within the humanities (Petrović 2012: 866), and this is the direction that education should also take.

The reformed teaching and learning syllabi have recognized the (educational) potential of the topic of disability as a teaching subject. As a result, certain works in which people with disabilities appear as main or supporting characters have become part of the required school and home reading, even in the lower years of elementary school. Among them are the novels *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri and *About the Button and Happiness* by Jasminka Petrović.

Namely, in the teaching and learning syllabi their functional connection is proposed by analyzing literary works which are thematically related, with childhood and growing up being highlighted as a central theme, both in the third and fourth grades of elementary school (Правилник о програму наставе и учења за трећи разред основног образовања и васпитања 2019: 7–8; Правилник о програму наставе и учења за четврти разред основног образовања и васпитања 2019: 4). Although this topic is of great significance in the teaching of literature, not only because it is closely relatable to students in the lower grades, but also because it raises many other questions relevant to this age group, we think that in addressing works such as *Heidi* and *About the Button and Happiness*, it is equally important to emphasize the issue of disability as a phenomenon which is intriguing in its own right, and, as such, serves as a motivating factor for teaching which encourages students to read and interpret literary works.¹

Therefore, for the purposes of this scientific work, the interpretative possibilities of analyzing the aforementioned works in contemporary teaching are considered, with particular focus on literary depictions of disability and certain themes closely related to it, such as loneliness, social isolation, violence, but also the importance of support from the environment, friendship and love. The characters of children with disabilities will be

1 For more information on motivating students to read, listen to and experience literary works, see: Николић 1999: Милија Николић. *Методика наставе српског језика и књижевности*. Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства.

the primary integrating factor in the teaching interpretation, not only because literary characters are the “most dynamic elements of fine literature”, to which “almost all subject matter in the artistic text” is subordinate (Николић 1999: 227), but also because students are most likely to identify with their peers, and in this regard develop empathy, which is of paramount importance for this topic. In addition to the characters, thematic and motif analysis will also receive considerable attention as another significant factor in unifying the teaching interpretation, while occasional lexical analysis of the text will also explore the linguistic-stylistic world of the interpreted works. From the above, it is clear that the proposed dynamics of interpretation² will be complex, but engaging and stimulating for students, as their intellectual activity will be elevated to the highest level.

In this sense, and in relation to the possibilities of contemporary teaching and the conceptual postulate advocated by this research – namely, overcoming the obstacles on the path from social distance to social inclusion of children with disabilities within the school system – the potentials of interactive teaching could be significantly utilized, particularly those concerning social interaction, which involves the “dynamic relationship within a student group where participants are mutually dependent” (Вилотијевић 2008: 53). Considering teaching as an interactive process aimed at fostering the development of the student’s personality, acquisition of knowledge, skills and habits, as well as the socialization of students (Вилотијевић 2008: 54), it is clear that in lessons addressing the topic of disability it would be particularly important to encourage peer interaction, specifically that which is humane, meaning an interaction in which there is mutual understanding between the participants (Вилотијевић 2008: 80).

In the novel *Heidi* (1880), which was created by combining two books into one (*Heidi’s Years of Learning and Travel* and *Heidi Uses What She Has Learned*), and which is first studied at the level of excerpts in the third grade of elementary school, and later in the fourth grade as part of school reading, when it comes to the theme of disability, we follow the character of Klara, “who, due to paralysis, is confined to a wheelchair”, and is therefore very lonely, needing a friend to keep her company (Шпири 2020: 65–66). From these few brief notes about Klara, we conclude primarily that disability represents an aspect of characterizing this heroine (Milošević 2015: 105), meaning that her physical limitation is what essentially defines her. Additionally, it is noted that the mention of disability instinctively brings up the topic of loneliness as another entrenched stereotype that needs to be overcome in order to improve the level of social interaction for people with disabilities. Moreover, even in the first mention of the topic of disability (some form of muscular dystrophy), one can observe what could be classified as the so-called “language of disability”³, which is later further emphasized by labels such as “crippled girl”

2 For more on the dynamics of interpreting literary works, as well as on the factors of unifying interpretation, see: Николић 1999: Милија Николић. *Методика наставе српског језика и књижевности*. Београд: Завод за уџбенике и наставна средства.

3 Jasmina Petrović has written about the “language of disability” and the analysis of expressions used to refer to people with disabilities in her paper “The Language of Disability and Dominant Theoretical Frameworks of Study as Indicators of the Social Position of People with Disabilities” (2006). This study shows that there is actually no consensus on the matter, and it attempts to determine which terminology is dominant and, as such, reflects the overall societal attitude towards this social group, which has been marginalized for centuries (2006: 259–260). When the concepts from the aforementioned

and her “comfortable wheelchair” (Шпири 2020: 73). On one hand, Klara’s physical limitations are presented euphemistically, but at the same time, this highlights a medical approach to the topic of disability,⁴ under which disability is understood as an illness and as something individual (Петровић 2006: 259). This perspective is later deepened by the idea that disability can and must be cured: “*Up there, everyone must heal*” (Шпири 2020: 247), emphasizing that Klara will certainly enjoy her stay in the mountains and recover from it (Шпири 2020: 258), and that it will take her only four weeks to determine whether the mountain air is beneficial for her. In this way, in a certain sense, disability is diminished and trivialized, as it is expected to disappear by breathing in fresh mountain air. In the mountains, everyone strives to make the girl feel better, especially Uncle Alp, that is, Heidi’s grandfather, which shows human kindness in action, but also an attempt to “fit” disability into the system and accept it only if it also disappears (Милошевић 2015: 105), which eventually happens at the end of the novel. Besides the other characters encouraging her to recover, Klara herself develops the thought: a desire awakens in her “to one day be her own person, to also help others, and not always to have others help her” (Шпири 2020: 280–281), and when she finally walks, it will be the greatest joy in the world for her, as “she did not know of a greater happiness in the world than being healthy and being able to walk like other people, rather than being miserably tied to a wheelchair all day” (Шпири 2020: 284). Therefore, we can conclude that in the novel *Heidi*, the character of the child with a disability adapts to the system, rather than the system adapting to her, as it should, which certainly supports the previously stated thesis about the prevailing medical approach to the phenomenon of disability.

Given that the novel *Heidi* was written in the 19th century, when the public was not sufficiently informed on the topic of disability, it is unsurprising to encounter not only a medical approach to the topic, but also stereotypical representations of characters with physical impairments, which are reflected in their being unable to function independently or think for themselves (as in the case of Klara, whose father largely makes decisions for her). Isolated from the outside world – she does not attend regular schooling and is removed from her primary urban environment – Klara is confined to traditional moulds of representing people with disabilities. This aspect should be emphasized in educational discussions of *Heidi*. Considering the age of the students and the principle of aligning instruction with their developmental stage and abilities, a theoretical approach might not be feasible, as outlined in this work. However, what can be done is to initiate a conversation with students about disability as a phenomenon that should not be treated as an illness, but as a limitation that can be mitigated through better living

study are applied to the analysis of linguistic terminology in the novel *Heidi* - specifically regarding the differences between archaic and modern terminology used to refer to people with disabilities (2006: 260) - it could be said that the 19th-century novel indeed uses archaic vocabulary (“crippled girl”), which mostly carried negative connotations. However, such a conclusion is not surprising, given the historical context in which this literary work was created.

- 4 The main limitations and criticisms directed at the medical model of studying disability revolve around its restrictive nature, which focuses primarily on physical impairment while neglecting the social environment. This approach contributes to the segregation and isolation of people with disabilities (Петровић 2006: 267). For more on the medical model of disability, refer to: Ђумпа 2018: 116, 119.

conditions and a more supportive attitude from the environment toward people with disabilities. This would help raise awareness among students and potentially prevent the formation of ingrained prejudices and possible discrimination.

When discussing the other literary work analyzed in this study, it is essential to outline the process behind its creation. Namely, Jasminka Petrović wrote the novel *About the Button and Happiness* at the request of editor Milan Mihaljčić in 2004, intending to create a story that teaches children to respect diversity. This aspect should be highlighted during lessons focusing on this work. Diversity, which includes disability, is a concept that students should be exposed to from their earliest school years, as they will encounter it throughout their education. It is therefore crucial to incorporate texts that, through their main or subsidiary focal points, address themes showing the many ways in which people can differ, emphasizing that each person is an individual shaped by a multitude of traits and categories, as highlighted by intersectionality theory in the broadest sense (see Collins, Bilge 2020: 12). It is not surprising that the initial idea behind Petrović's work was featured in an excerpt in a fourth-grade reader published by the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids in Podgorica as early as 2007. This marked the beginning of the book's developmental journey, which included a dramatization in 2011 titled *Miljakovac, or New Zealand*, directed by Marko Manojlović at the *Duško Radović* Theatre. Furthermore, a film adaptation titled *Zlogonje* was produced in 2018, directed by Raško Miljković.⁵ These developments not only inspired the author, who expresses gratitude in the latest edition of her novel for the opportunity to write a new, expanded version of *About the Button and Happiness*, but they also provide a wide range of interpretative possibilities for comparative and in-depth study of disability themes across different media. This enriches literary education and encourages students to accept and support individuals with disabilities, who may very well be part of their surroundings, possibly even in their classroom.

The theme of disability in the novel *About the Button and Happiness* is introduced in medias res, with the character Jovan narrating in the first person and saying:

"Some people really have no luck! Take me, for example! Instead of being born a footballer, a pilot or a pianist, I was born as a person with a disability. That's what doctors and psychologists say about me because I suffer from a type of paralysis. My name is Jovan, but the kids call me – Muta, Kljaka, Zrika, Trta, Bangavi, Bleja, Dileja, and so on. After all, I call them by nicknames too, so we're even. The first grade was terrible for both me and them. Just thinking about it makes me cringe! Mum says she wants to make a monument to the teacher because if it weren't for her, my parents would have withdrawn me from this school and enrolled me in a special one. Now it's much easier. We've gotten used to each other. Some kids even invite me to their birthdays. Sometimes I go, when Mum insists. But I find those birthday parties terribly boring. There's too much noise and chaos. So I mostly sit in some corner, watching the others go wild. They only come to me if they need something to look after. They drop their mobile phones, hoodies, plates of cake, or whatever else in my lap ... and keep running around. At those birthday parties, I feel like some old lady. It's awful!" (Петровић 2023: 7–8), (underlined N. L. J.).

5 The information about the genesis of the novel *About the Button and Happiness* can be found in the acknowledgment section at the end of the book (Петровић 2023: 84–85).

The excerpt is presented in its entirety since it represents many important details: firstly, it is evident that the boy has a clear awareness of his disability and his physical appearance in general.⁶ Secondly, the passage features “disability language” in the form of derogatory nicknames which are of an offensive nature, and thus belong to archaic terminology used for naming persons with disabilities, as discussed in the analysis of the novel *Heidi*. In addition, a very important theme of isolation and loneliness, which, as we have seen in the case of the character Klara, often accompanies people with disabilities, is already introduced in the opening privileged section. It is significant to highlight at this point that the social ostracism in Jasminka Petrović’s work is further emphasized by the fact that the boy Jovan, after his leg operation and stay in the hospital, “meets” the Button, an object, and develops a special, friendly relationship with it. This leads us into another crucial thematic field of the novel: friendship. In addition to instilling confidence and providing security, the Button will also help Jovan discover his talent for writing. On one hand, this act could be seen as a certain degree of stereotyping, where the lack or limitation of one aspect (disability) is compensated by the mandatory presence of something else (often a gift), but it will later be shown that this is not the case in this literary work. The interesting stories and poems that Jovan writes will actually be part of what could be called the conceptual layer of the novel in a teaching context. Specifically, within the boy’s literary works, particularly in *The Story of Courage* (Петровић 2023: 20), there are thoughts and messages that could encourage students to engage in more intense reflection on some significant life topics, such as, for instance, the idea that there are always many possibilities and opportunities before a person, which may prevent them from doing something, but these are always just possibilities, not real obstacles, and should be overcome in order to step out of the so-called comfort zone.

In addition to everything mentioned so far, the previously quoted passage is indicative because it reveals the nature of Jovan’s relationships with his peers, as well as how his peers relate to him, illustrating the social environment – first rejection, followed by gradual adaptation and habituation: “The children got used to my appearance, so they no longer notice me” (Петровић 2023: 58). Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, we observe that in this prose work, disability predominantly shapes the identity of the main character. Later on, categories such as age and sexuality, which awakens in early teenage years, are also introduced. Although the boy’s self-awareness is at a high level of development, it is evident that he is significantly influenced by his relationships with those around him, not only with peers, as already shown, but also with adults:

“From my peers, adults are much worse. When they see me on the street, they go out of their way to avoid me, turning their heads the other way. Sometimes they nudge each other, whisper, stare at me, and shake their heads. To some, I’m strange; to others, I’m terrifying. There are even those who sigh sadly and mutter ‘*poor thing*’. Those are

6 This is also evident later in the novel, in statements like this one: “Let’s be clear, I know very well what I look like, I have a mirror, for goodness’ sake, but aren’t these people capable of seeing something beautiful in me?! For example, my eyelashes. Honestly, it’s ridiculous!” (Петровић 2023: 11).

the ones that annoy me the most! That's why I prefer to sit in my room. Alone." [...]
"And while I was sitting in front of the shop waiting for my mum, a woman put fifty dinars in my lap." (Петровић 2023: 8–9).⁷

The excerpt is a representative indicator of how society stereotypically relates to people with disabilities—the boy in a wheelchair is automatically equated with a beggar, and an individual's attitude towards a person with a disability evokes feelings of pity and a desire to provide some form of assistance, but not the essential social interaction that is necessary. For this reason, students should particularly be made aware of this phenomenon so that it does not develop in their consciousness as something affirmative, but rather the opposite.

As the action of the novel progresses, the character of Milica is introduced in the second half of the fourth-grade year. Initially, she becomes Jovan's crush, adding another thematic layer to the story, specifically regarding love, which subtly permeates the entire novel (for instance, Jovan's parents believe that he is more relaxed and that certain changes in him are due to his infatuation. However, the idea of falling in love is nearly unthinkable for Jovan, as he struggles to find even a friend, let alone a romantic interest, due to his physical limitations). However, their relationship will develop into a true and sincere friendship. Milica is a girl whom Jovan describes as having beautiful hands and legs, clearly reflecting what he longs for and what he lacks.⁸ In his first close encounter with Milica, marked by a casual brush of their hands in passing, Jovan experiences a jolt akin to an electric shock. This moment illustrates Jovan's complex relationship with his own body:

"Why did I end up with a body like this? Why?! I don't want to write anymore! I don't want a computer! I don't want to go to school! I don't want to see Milica! I don't want anything! I don't need anything! I just want a different body! I want a real friend, not this stupid button!" (Петровић 2023: 26), (underlined N. L. J.).

However, this attitude towards his body changes because, with Milica, not only does Jovan gain a true friend, but he also discovers what happiness is, which he perceives as "that feeling when you love being yourself and not someone else" (Петровић 2023: 29).

In his search for self-confidence, Jovan discovers the world and his place in it, recognizes his talent – writing – and becomes aware that his physical limitations must not be life limitations that hold him back. He has learned to recognize all of his emotions, and he has also discovered true life values such as love, friendship, and what happiness really means:

7 It is also interesting how the boy, from his own perspective, recognizes this characteristic attitude of society towards people with disabilities through his observations of his mother: "My mum also hates it when people ask her questions. She especially hates it when they ask, 'Why is your son like that?' Mum says there's nothing worse than nosy people" (Петровић 2023: 32).

8 Indicative of this is Jovan's desire to be a cheetah: "Because it's the fastest land animal. It can cover twenty-nine metres in just one second. They say a cheetah is faster than a Porsche. It's considered a vulnerable, or rather an endangered species. Its body is slender, and its legs are long. And one more thing, a cheetah has a huge heart" (Петровић 2023: 33), (underlined N. L. J.). It can be observed that the cheetah has everything Jovan lacks, but there is also one similarity between them, which is the issue of sensitivity, or rather, the endangered status of their 'species'. For this status to improve, changes in society and the state are necessary, and in turn within educational institutions, which is one of the starting points of this research.

“So, that’s how things stand! As for me, I’ve stopped trembling like I did that night when I realized what cerebral palsy was. Now I know how to recognize when I’m sad, when I’m happy, when I’m scared, and when I’m angry. Actually, I know something else too—I know what love is! It’s a wonderful feeling when nothing feels difficult, not even maths, and when everything seems beautiful, even when you see yourself in the mirror! If I’m dreaming all of this, then it’s a lovely dream. If I’m living this, then it’s a lovely life. My life. Some people are really lucky! For example, me” (Петровић 2023: 75).

The novel *About the Button and Happiness* by Jasminka Petrović has a closed structure, and thus, from a reverse perspective, it ends at the point where it began. The main character undergoes a developmental journey in which he matures and realizes that his physical disability is not what fundamentally defines him, and that it is actually the environment that limits him, not the disability itself. Therefore, in this modern children’s novel, there is a step further in understanding the phenomenon of disability – its social conditioning is brought to the forefront, and the solution to the problem lies in social action, specifically in adapting the environment. These are in fact some of the main features of the social model of studying disability (see Петровић 2006: 268). At the core of this model, which is “based on the human rights that belong to everyone” (Ћумура 2018: 117), is society, not disability, since it is society that creates various types of barriers for people with disabilities (Ћумура 2018: 118). For this reason, the school, as an environment where individuals (students) undergo some of the most significant formative experiences, proves to be the starting point when it comes to understanding and relating to the phenomenon of disability. To achieve a satisfactory level of social inclusion for people with disabilities, it is necessary to inform young people about the topic of disability through adequate teaching materials, such as the literary works analyzed in this paper, addressing the status of people with disabilities, their problems, and fears arising from the societal prejudices they face daily. By becoming aware that people with disabilities have equal rights as those without any limitations, students–future democratic citizens–change the world and make it a better place to live.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order for people with disabilities to no longer be a marginalized social group, which is one of the initial initiatives of this research, continuous work and the introduction of systemic changes are necessary. In this respect, in educational institutions, primarily in schools, which besides educating students have an important role in their upbringing, it is important to introduce disability topics into teaching and learning syllabi from the earliest grades of elementary school. Namely, in order to form a student who in the future will be competent to live in a democratically organized society of the 21st century, i.e. a student who will respect human rights and other democratic values, the school as a system must support and encourage the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. In this way, awareness of the importance of this topic will be raised not only among the participants of the teaching process, but also in society as a whole, and as shown in this work, such a step has already been taken, which represents a good starting point for all future activities.

By processing the teaching content that, in its entirety or at least in part, goes into the broad field of disability problems, in this paper, first of all, all the complexity of the given phenomenon was illuminated, but also its potentials, which prove to be particularly effective and stimulating in the framework of literature teaching. Namely, the proposed teaching interpretations at different levels of processing and with students of different ages presented a wealth of interpretative and creative possibilities of genre-diverse works in which the theme of disability is represented. By processing selected literary works, students of junior and senior grades of elementary school, in accordance with their abilities, and guided by the teacher's carefully selected and prepared questions and instructions, become aware of the problems faced by their peers, i.e. literary characters of children with disabilities, and on that the way they emotionally and experientially experience the social position of people with disabilities in their environment, but also in society as a whole. Starting from what students know, students systematically come to know about life values that enrich their intellectual, emotional and social development, so the path from social distance to social inclusion of people with disabilities becomes more accessible and encouraging for further action.

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Невена И. ЛУКИНИЋ ЈАЊУШ
Наташа Б. СТАНКОВИЋ ШОШО

О СНАЗИ КРХКИХ: ЛИКОВИ ДЕЦЕ СА ИНВАЛИДИТЕТОМ
У РОМАНИМА *ХАЈДИ* Ј. ШПИРИ И *О ДУЊМЕЋУ И СРЕЋИ* Ј. ПЕТРОВИЋ

РЕЗИМЕ

Предмет истраживања у раду представљају ликови деце са инвалидитетом који су заступљени у изабраним делима из школске и домаће лектире у програмима наставе и учења Српског језика и књижевности за основну школу. На нивоу наставне интерпретације анализирају се романи *Хајди*, Јохане Шпири и *О дуњмеју и срећи*, Јасминке Петровић. У раду се образлаже степен разумевања анализираних дела код ученика различитог узраста, као и могући начини њиховог тумачења у савременој настави. Указује се на значајне облике рада подстакнуте текстом којима се додатно афирмишу разноврсни интерпретативни, истраживачки и стваралачки приступи у настави. С посебном пажњом се истражују литерарни прикази инвалидности из угла различитих теоријских модалитета (медицински и социјални приступ), усамљеност ликова са инвалидитетом, њихова крхкост и страхови који су условљени социјалним и културним контекстом укључивања у заједницу. Радом се у целини залази у домен васпитности наставе књижевности и указује се на значај у подстицању емпатије код ученика и развијању свести о неопходности пружања подршке и помоћи особама са инвалидитетом.

Кључне речи: ликови деце са инвалидитетом у школској и домаћој лектири за основну школу, *Хајди* Јохане Шпири, *О дуњмеју и срећи* Јасминке Петровић, литерарни проблеми (инвалидитет/инвалидност, усамљеност, друштвена маргинализација, пријатељство), настава.