

SONDERDRUCK AUS:

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(Hg.)

Sprache, Literatur, Kultur:  
*Translatio delectat*

Festschrift für Lothar Černý  
zum 65. Geburtstag

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**“You can’t stay downstairs”:  
Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s  
*In the Closed Room*<sup>1</sup>**

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When Frances Hodgson Burnett’s son Lionel died of consumption in December 1890, she believed that he somehow continued to live on and was still with her.<sup>2</sup> This conviction that the dead live on not only finds its expression in a letter to her friend Emma Anderson, who lost her two sons in 1916 and to whom Burnett wrote, “I am not thinking of your dearests as of conventional angels [...]—I am thinking of them as real” (qtd. in Vivian BURNETT 1927: 378); but Burnett also wrote a story that is based on this idea, *In the Closed Room*. It was published in 1904 and, apparently, Burnett found her own consolation in this story and strengthened her belief that the dead are not “millions and millions of miles away” (BURNETT 1904: 123)<sup>3</sup> but stay close to those who loved them.<sup>4</sup>

Her “conviction about an after-life” (THWAITE 1991: 205) was to become a constant and an important issue in her writing,<sup>5</sup> but her way of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Matthias Bauer and Prof. Dr. Jan Stievermann for their critical comments on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> “[...] she was quite sure Lionel was still Lionel, real, himself, able to look over her shoulder and help her” (THWAITE 1991: 136).

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are based on the original edition, illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. This edition is referred to by page numbers only throughout the text.

<sup>4</sup> THWAITE remarks: “This feeling [that Lionel was still Lionel] she conveyed most strongly in *In the Closed Room*, published in 1904, a work that looks like a children’s book but is not” (1991: 136). For this biographical background see, e. g., GERZINA’s *Frances Hodgson Burnett* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> THWAITE in this context draws attention to the story “The White People”: “The girl Ysobel notices a mother in mourning enter her railway carriage. Clutching at her skirts and clamouring for attention, but totally ignored, is a pale child. Ysobel is distressed that the mother weeping for the dead ignores the living. It is only much later she realizes that the pale child at the mother’s side was in fact the dead one, and only she could see it” (THWAITE 1991: 205). The story is dedicated to Lionel: “The stars come nightly to the sky; The tidal wave unto the sea; Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high Can keep my own away from me” (n. p.).

presenting life and death underwent a change over the years, which becomes evident through the comparison of the concepts of death-in-life and life-in-death in her story *In the Closed Room* and her novel *The Secret Garden* (1911). Whereas the earlier text represents life in this world as death, and the restoration from death takes place through dying and entering 'real', i. e. true life in heaven, in *The Secret Garden*, the restoration from death-in-life takes place and can be found in the realm of this world; the children in *The Secret Garden* 'return' to earthly life from their seclusion and sickness. In the earlier story, it is the dead child who carries life within herself; in her later novel, it is the living child, and Burnett refers to the imagery of the enclosed garden as a place of healing and of the restoration from death.<sup>6</sup>

In Burnett's earlier story, hope and 'real' life are situated within a different realm, namely in the afterlife, in heaven. But this is not the end of the story: before the child in the story dies, she helps the ghost of another little girl to leave a sign for her mother, who is despairing from grief over the death of her daughter. Burnett thus does not leave the story with a view of heaven, but with the mother who finds consolation. Her intention in writing *In the Closed Room* was hence apparently to provide a psychological story of comfort and solace.

### 1 Judith: the charismatic child

At the centre of Burnett's story we find "the child Judith" (3) who lives with her parents in a small flat. From the very beginning, Judith is described as an extraordinary child: "Judith was not like the children in the other flats. She was a frail, curious creature, with silent ways and a soft voice and eyes" (6). Judith likes to play by herself and does not know or

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<sup>6</sup> The topos of 'life-in-death' goes back to the Bible, e. g. John 11:25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." For an overview of the background and history of the topos 'death-in-life' in literature see, e. g., BLAICHER's (1998b) contribution to the collection of essays *Death-in-Life: Studien zur historischen Entfaltung der Paradoxie der Entfremdung in der englischen Literatur* (1998a) where he traces back the topos to Seneca; as well as BERGER's (1998) essay on the denomination of the topos as originating in Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*; HORSTMANN (1998); and LELLE's article (1999) on the motif of death-in-life in nineteenth-century literature. She refers to a whole range of examples, e. g. Tennyson, Coleridge, and Carlyle, that are based on the paradox.

need the company of other children. Even her parents have the feeling that she does not quite belong to them. Her mother states that it “seems sometimes as if somehow [Judith] wouldn’t be mine” (9). Judith is like a changeling, an elf-child, who does not quite belong with her parents because of her being different.<sup>7</sup>

But not only are her parents aware of her being unlike other children and unlike themselves; Judith herself feels strange in this world: “There was in her strange little soul a secret no one knew the existence of. It was a vague belief that she herself was not quite real—or that she did not belong to the life she had been born into” (24).<sup>8</sup> She therefore also has the feeling “that she could not stay long—that some mistake had been made” (24). This expresses her intuition that she will die young, but she does not know “where she was to go if she went” (24).

In many respects, she resembles “her Aunt Hester,” who died suddenly when she was very young: both have a white complexion, big eyes (though of different colours), and they have slender and pointed fingers. Accordingly, Judith’s grandmother “thinks that Judith may turn out like [Hester]” (11).<sup>9</sup> Thus Hester’s early death can be regarded as a foreshad-

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<sup>7</sup> This motif can be found in fairy tales and folk tales, see, e. g., the story of “Hans My Hedgehog” (GRIMM 2006) and the *German Legends* collected by the GRIMM Brothers #82 and #83 (1981: 92–93). For further contexts see also BRIGGS (1976: 69–72); ALVEY (1981: 1328–1339; esp. 1335–1336); THOMPSON (1956: 61–62; F 321.1). It is also reminiscent of Perdita in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. She likewise does not quite belong with the shepherds and is not like them because of her different origin: “This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever / Ran on the green-sward: nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place” (SHAKESPEARE 2003: 4.4.156–159).

<sup>8</sup> This implies an idea similar to Hebrews 11:13–14: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth” (my emphasis).—A similar idea is stated in *Jane Eyre*, namely by Helen Burns, who knows that she will travel ‘home’: “Are you going home?” “Yes, to my long home—my last home” (BRONTË 2006: 96). See Ecclesiastes 12:5–7: “because man goeth to his long home” (cf. BRONTË 2006: 543n7). For further analogies with *Jane Eyre* see below.

<sup>9</sup> “Judith had heard of her Aunt Hester, but she only knew that she herself had hands like her and that her life had ended when she was quite young. [...] The legends of her beauty and unlikeness seemed rather like a sort of romance” (12).—The combination of the name Hester and the elf-child could also be read as an allusion to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

owing: “She wasn’t but fifteen when she died. She never was ill in her life—but one morning she didn’t come down to breakfast, and when they went up to call her, there she was sittin’ at her window restin’ her chin on her hand, with her face turned up smilin’ as if she was talkin’ to some one” (11). As if to dispel any idea that Judith, like her aunt, is destined to die early, her parents prefer not to talk about Hester. They think it unhealthy to speak of the dead: “Children that’s got to hustle about among live folks for a livin’ best keep their minds out of cemeteries” (19).<sup>10</sup>

In depicting Judith as a “frail, curious creature,” who somehow feels out of place, Burnett draws on a long tradition of child figures in nineteenth-century literature that are delicate and destined to die, e. g. Dick in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*,<sup>11</sup> Beth in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and *Good Wives*,<sup>12</sup> and Helen Burns in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, to name only a few prominent examples.<sup>13</sup> Helen Burns is the sickly (and the chosen) child who cannot live on earth but knows of her destiny and believes in her happiness upon entering heaven: “By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings” (BRONTË 1847/2006: 97).<sup>14</sup> Shortly before

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<sup>10</sup> This aspect foreshadows Colin’s fate in *The Secret Garden* who, as long as he thinks of himself as being ill and condemned to die, actually is ill and would certainly have died if Mary hadn’t ‘saved’ him both from being confined to his room and from these gloomy thoughts. In Judith’s case, however, thinking of the dead, i. e. her aunt Hester, has a consolatory, even a redeeming function as it establishes a connection with her.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver sees Dick for the last time at the end of chapter seven, and the little boy says: “After I am dead [I will be well and happy], but not before” (DICKENS 1837/1999: 54).

<sup>12</sup> “The death of Beth in *Good Wives* is one of the most touching in the old tradition” (DUSINBERRE 1999: 134).

<sup>13</sup> Burnett seems to have been rather strongly influenced by the writing of the Brontë sisters, particularly by *Jane Eyre*, as critical studies emphasise, e. g. FOSTER/SIMMONS (1995: ch.8, 172–191); KNOEPFLMACHER (1983: 14–31); THWAITE (1991: 220–221). The influence of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* on Burnett’s writing has been discussed by JAMES (2000/2001); SILVER (2002/2003); and by TYLER (2002/2003). The child that is destined to die can already be found in earlier texts, especially in an evangelical context, e. g. in James JANEWAY’S *A Token for Children*.

<sup>14</sup> “[...] death is so certain an entrance to happiness—to glory” (BRONTË 2006: 71).—“The implications of the death of the child are as complex and varied as the many forms it takes [...]. The little victim is often less horrified by his fate than the adult who witnesses and survives his demise. In fact, for the child death occasionally represents an escape form an intolerable reality. Even more

her death, Helen answers Jane's question "Where is God? What is God?" (97) as follows: "'My maker and yours, who will never destroy what He created. I rely implicitly on His power, and confide wholly in His goodness: I count the hours till that eventful one arrives which shall *restore me to Him*, reveal Him to me'" (97; my emphasis). Helen Burns's tombstone therefore has the inscription "Resurgam"—"I shall rise again" (98). Death, thus, becomes a passage to life in heaven, a return to one's real home, an idea which is implied in Helen's "shall restore me to Him." Helen Burns's happiness lies in death, and she therefore does not fear it; moreover, she knows that she will die, and she knows exactly where she will be going: her suffering in this world is real, and she looks for relief from it in death; whereas Judith perceives her life as something unreal. Judith hence regards her destiny simply as a "fantastic thing" (BURNETT 1904: 25).<sup>15</sup>

Judith feels that not only she herself is not quite real, but also the whole world<sup>16</sup>: "But the building full of workmen's flats, the hot room, the Elevated Railroad, the quarrelling people, were all a mistake" (25). She remembers that only rarely, about "once or twice in her life she had seen places and things which did not seem so foreign" (25), among them a trip to the park where she played with a squirrel and a bird who approached her, and "the woodland things [...] spoke to her" (26). In a natural surrounding she feels less odd and out of the ordinary, and things appear more real to her.

It is actually during this outing in the park that she first meets the girl she will later encounter as a ghost. The other girl's gaze at Judith resem-

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positively, it can sometimes even be a longed-for condition that transcends reality" (KUHNS 1982: 193).

<sup>15</sup> The contrast between Brontë's religious stance—Helen Burns's deep belief in her restoration in God—and Burnett's more secular view is obvious: Judith does not seem to have been religiously educated, and therefore she describes her destiny as being "fantastic": she does not know "where she was to go if she went" (BURNETT 1904: 25).

<sup>16</sup> Life is perceived as a dream; for an overview of the topos see, e. g., ZIRKER (2010: 271–278). It is interesting to note that Judith does not feel "real," and that death is something "fantastic" for her. The notion that the world and her existence are "a mistake" implies a concept of "correctness," as if something were wrong with this world, which is why she "cannot stay long." One might see a secular transformation of the notion of a fallen, i. e. sinful world, here, especially so as the realm of the dead, the world which is more real to Judith, has implicit links to paradise (see below, ch. 3).

bles that of the bird and the squirrel: “They gazed as if they had known each other for ages of years and were separated by nothing. Each of them was quite happy at being near the other, and there was not in the mind of either any question of their not being near each other again” (29). The memory of this ‘encounter’ helps Judith even to bear the hot room of her parents’ flat and the noise from the Elevated Railroad, which “Judith held [...] in horror” (4). Judith very clearly does not belong to this world: she holds parts of it “in horror” and feels as if her existence were some “mistake”; all this points towards her need to leave this world. But before she can do so forever, she has a chance to escape from it temporarily, namely through ‘falling awake’ (cf. 20).<sup>17</sup>

## 2 ‘Falling awake’

Her ‘falling awake’ is a state of mind where Judith feels very much at ease and is able to ‘meet’ her aunt Hester; it is a kind of ‘ecstasy,’ and with her mind fixed on these happy memories, she is able to sleep in spite of the heat. In the morning, she opens her eyes and sees the girl whom she encountered in the park:

“All was quite still and clear—the air of the room was pure and sweet. There was no sound anywhere and, curiously enough, she was not surprised by this, nor did she expect to hear anything disturbing.

She did not look round the room. Her eyes remained resting upon what she first saw—and she was neither surprised by this either. A little girl about her own age was standing smiling at her. [...] Judith knew her and smiled at her.

She lifted her hand—and it was a pure white little hand with long tapering fingers.

“Come and play with me,” she said—though Judith heard no voice while she knew what she was saying. “Come and play with me.”

Then she was gone, and in a few seconds Judith was awake, the air in the room had changed, the noise and clatter of the streets came in at the window, and the Elevated train went thundering by. Judith did not ask herself how the child had gone or how she had come. She lay still, feeling undisturbed by everything and smiling as she had smiled in her sleep.” (32–34)

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<sup>17</sup> The idea of ‘falling awake’ is a paradox that is very much linked to the concept of the world being a “mistake”: it is a world turned upside-down. When Judith falls awake, she can relate to things and people, which is mostly impossible for her in her usual life.

The emphasis on the air being “pure and sweet” hints at the earlier description of Judith’s encounters with her aunt Hester: where they meet, the air smells “like flowers and everything was lovely” (15). Judith is not surprised at the appearance of the girl; it seems natural to her, she does not wonder at it, as if she was used to these visitations. Nor does she seem to be disturbed by the fact that the girl does not utter any words but she understands her nonetheless. Furthermore, there is the resemblance of the other girl’s hand with Judith’s own, the “long tapering fingers” that are also similar to those of her aunt Hester.<sup>18</sup> The stillness is over after the disappearance of the girl, and also the air changes. Judith is back to her reality but more reconciled with it: “feeling undisturbed [...] and smiling.” During the visitation she seems to have been elsewhere—she has fallen awake and thus been able to enter a different realm, the realm where she used to meet her aunt.

As it happens, the family is offered the position of caretakers of a big house that was left suddenly because of “illness and trouble in [the] family” (38). It is only towards the very end of the story that the reader—and the Fosters, Judith’s parents—learn that the trouble consisted in the sudden death of the family’s only child, Andrea.

### 3 The Closed Room

In the house, one room is closed and cannot be entered—at least not by Jane Foster, Judith’s mother, who tries several times during her first tour of the house:

“This one won’t open,” Jane said, when she tried the handle. Then she shook it once or twice. “No, it’s locked,” she decided after an effort or two. “There, I’ve just remembered. There’s one kept locked. Folks always keep things they want locked up. I’ll make sure, though.”

She shook it, turned the handle, shook again, pressed her knee against the panel. The lock resisted all effort.

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<sup>18</sup> The “white little hand” is also reminiscent of the schoolmaster’s favourite boy in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who is characterized by his “little hand” and his frailty (DICKENS 1841/2000: 190).—According to the *OED*, “tapering *ppl. a.*” refers to gradual narrowing or diminishing in breadth or thickness towards one end (*cf.* “taper 2.a.”). One example is from “1893 LIDDON, *Life Pusey* I.i 5 Long hands and tapering fingers,” where it is used in a sense similar to Burnett’s. At the same time, it connotes the rising up of a flame; *cf.* *OED* “taper, *v.* 1.a.”



“Yes, this is the closed one,” she made up her mind. “It’s locked hard and fast. It’s the closed one.” (55–56)

Her insistence in trying is emphasised: not only does she more than once try to open the door, but also are the words “closed” and “locked” repeated within the paragraph, which turns out to be all the more important when later Judith is able to open the door without any force whatsoever. She does not even need a key; Judith carries the key, so-to-speak, within herself: she can open the door, i. e. the door opens for her, while her mother is not able to open it, no matter how hard she tries.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the story, Judith’s different abilities and her higher understanding of the world and her superior judgement are emphasised: she is a “stranger[...] and pilgrim[...] on earth,” which is highlighted in calling her tour of the house a “wandering pilgrimage” (56).<sup>20</sup> It is also then that “the child Judith” (43) feels the stillness of the house “deeply throughout the entirety of her young being” (43), whereas her mother comments on the stillness “with her habitual sociable half-laugh” (43).

Judith is determined to go to the room upstairs again—“she must go to it” (68)—and when she enters it, the first thing she discovers is the extension upon the flat roof, where she finds some withered, “dead flowers” (72): “she stood among the dried, withered things and looked in tender regret at them” (73). In the room, she finds a doll lying on the sofa which “looks almost as if it had died too” (77): “She did not ask herself why she said ‘as if it had died too’—perhaps it was because the place was so still—and everything so far away—that the flowers had died in the strange, little deserted garden on the roof” (77–78). Judith seems to feel that the whole room is dead, or related to death; she feels the stillness while she goes upstairs: “It was as if one had entered a new world—a world in which something existed which did not express itself in sound or in things which one could see. Chairs held out their arms to emptiness—cushions were not pressed by living things—only the people in the pic-

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<sup>19</sup> Judith opens the door ‘non vi,’ without force; cf. Crashaw, “To the Countess of Denbigh”: “‘Tis not the work of force but skill/ To find the way into man’s will/ ‘Tis loue alone can hearts vnlock./ Who knowes the WORD, he needs not knock” (CRASHAW 1927: 236). The notion of “non vi” goes back to OVID’s *Epistulae ex Ponto* (1990: 4.10,5): “Gutta cavat lapidem non vi, sed saepe cadendo.”

<sup>20</sup> The same expression appears in *The Secret Garden* to describe Mary’s exploration of the house: “They saw more rooms and made more discoveries than Mary had made on her first pilgrimage” (BURNETT 2000: 273). – See also above, the reference to Hebrews 11 (note 8).

tures were looking at something” (67–68). The, presumably dead, people in the portraits as well as the inanimate chairs are the only ‘things’ that seem to be alive in this world.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, the other girl, Andrea,<sup>22</sup> appears and they start to play together. Judith and her playmate go outside, where the latter shows Judith her garden:

She went lightly to one of the brown rose-bushes and put her pointed-fingered little hand quite near it. She did not touch it, but held her hand near—and the leaves began to stir and uncurl and become fresh and tender again, and roses were nodding, blooming on the stems. And she went in the same manner to each flower and plant in turn until all the before dreary little garden was bright and full of leaves and flowers.

“It’s Life,” she said to Judith. (82–83)

The flowers, as it were, are restored from death by the closeness of the dead child. That this is “Life”<sup>23</sup> becomes clear through the description of how the rose-bush ‘reacts’ to Andrea’s closeness: the leaves “stir,” the roses are “nodding”; the passage is full of dynamic verbs. The flowers are restored from death, and the roof-garden is alive again.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of the roof-top garden as the place where life is to be found is analogous with a chapter in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*,

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<sup>21</sup> This is why Judith feels that the doll is dead *too*, which presupposes the idea of dolls being alive as expressed in Burnett’s *A Little Princess*. “‘What I believe about dolls,’ she said, ‘is that they can do things they will not let us know about. Perhaps, really, Emily can read and talk and walk, but she will only do it when people are out of the room. That is her secret’” (BURNETT 1996: 22).

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Judith never gets to know the other girls’ name: “She did not know her playmate’s name, she did not remember that there were such things as names” (80–81). This reads like a return to paradise before things were named. For a similar view of a prelapsarian state where things have no names see chapter three in Lewis CARROLL’s *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1998: 155–157) and ZIRKER (2010: 187–197).

<sup>23</sup> See also her later statement: “But no one sees them [the flowers] like that—when the Life goes away with me” (110).

<sup>24</sup> This transformation is reminiscent of the lives of St. Fiacre, who ploughed a piece of land, and a wonderful garden immediately grew from it (*cf.* BUTLER 1987: 156–157), and of St. Dorothy of Caesarea, the patron saint of florists and gardeners (*cf.* PETERSON 1910; BUTLER 1987), who, when she died, had apples and roses sent to Theophilus in the middle of winter. The Saints’ lives seem to be relevant here because they provide one context within the story that draws on fantastic, wonderful, supernatural and religious concepts.

when Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexam are at Riah's house. It is the elevated space, "near" the clouds (74), where real life can be experienced<sup>25</sup>: on the rooftop garden "you see the clouds rushing on" (DICKENS 1865/1997: 279). Jenny Wren's cry "Come up and be dead" (280) expresses her feeling of tranquillity when she is there; she associates this feeling with death. Life is downstairs, but death, meaning real life, can only be found up on the roof; Jenny Wren feels a kind of ecstasy when she is there.<sup>26</sup>

This notion of "ecstasy" is also expressed in Burnett's story. When the other girl is close to her, this also affects Judith in that she feels "[t]here was an ecstasy in looking at her—in feeling her near" (81), an ecstasy similar to Judith's feeling of falling awake. Andrea herself is of "flower whiteness" (81)—white flowers representing death, which is stressed in the story when Jane Foster finds withered white and discoloured flowers in the house, apparently the left-overs from a party, that feel "like cold flesh" (50) and "look [...] mournful" (51).

The paradox in this context is that a dead child would carry life within herself and by her touch can bring withered flowers back to life. But the girl never touches Judith or anything in the room, nor does she allow Judith to touch her: "Once as she went down-stairs she remembered that when she had that day made a wreath of roses from the roof and had one to put it on her playmate's head, she had drawn back with deepened dimple and, holding up her hand, had said, laughing: 'No. Do not touch me'" (88–89).<sup>27</sup> Her touch, as it turns out, is lethal: when she at last touches

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<sup>25</sup> In his study on *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*, Wheeler explains that *Our Mutual Friend* "affirms the hope of a future life in Christ [...]. *Our Mutual Friend* continues Dickens's exploration in his novels of the 1860s of the inner or spiritual life, and of the hope of salvation and transcendence in a fallen world which threatens to return to its original primeval state, expressed in the novel's insistent symbolism of rising and falling" (WHEELER 1994: 2; 221–222).

<sup>26</sup> "Der 'Tod' im Dachgarten ist [...] eine Ekstase, eine Entrückung. Auf dem Dachgarten eröffnet sich [...] der Weg vom Tod-im-Leben in das Leben der Phantasie" (ČERNÝ 1998: 164). There are even more parallels between *Our Mutual Friend* and *In the Closed Room* if one only starts to think of Jenny Wren's dexterous and nimble fingers (223), her transparent skin (279) and her perception of dolls as living beings (223).

<sup>27</sup> I would like to thank Helen Gelinis for pointing out to me that this is reminiscent of Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene in the garden after his resurrection in John 20:17: "Touch me not; for I am not ascended to my Father." John 20 is

Judith, Judith dies. But the story does not end with Judith's death, and it becomes apparent that Judith's death actually means her restoration from the feeling that all is a "mistake," from death-in-life, as she is able to enter heaven.

#### 4 "Life"

Judith's restoration from death-in-life takes place after she has already spent more than two months in the house, playing with Andrea in the closed room every day and growing happier: "She was so happy that her happiness lived in her face in a sort of delicate brilliance. Jane Foster observed the change in her with exceeding comfort, her view being that spacious quarters, fresh air, and sounder sleep had done great things for her" (89).

While playing, Judith actually does not wonder at the fact that she and the other girl never talk; they only communicate with each other through thoughts. The only moment that she is really astonished is after returning to her mother with flowers from the balcony of the closed room: they wither once she goes downstairs. Judith notices this while she "stand[s] at the kitchen doorway, looking with a puzzled expression at some wilted flowers she held in her hand: Jane's impression was that she had been coming into the room and had stopped suddenly to look at what she held" (91). When Judith first ascended the stairs to the room, she had felt as if she "left the movement of living behind" (67). Now she returns downstairs and seems to awaken from a trance—her ecstasy ends upon entering the world that she perceives as unreal. Her astonishment in this situation stems from the fact that she suddenly recognises that the flowers in her hands, which she took from the roof-garden, have wilted. The flowers died when Judith left the room: they apparently can only exist and live in the presence of the dead girl. Life leaves them as they leave "Life." While looking at the dead flowers, Judith tells her mother that she spends her days in the closed room:

"What have you got there, Judy?" she [Jane] asked.

"They're flowers," said Judith, her eyes still more puzzled.

"Where'd you get 'em from? I didn't know you'd been out. I thought you was upstairs."

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significant for the reading of Burnett's story in more than one respect: after Mary has met Jesus, he appears twice in rooms of which "the doors were shut" (John 20:19 and 26). It seems that faith is the key to unlock doors and to ascend to heaven, not only in the biblical story but also in Burnett's.

"I was," said Judith quite simply. "In the Closed Room."

Jane Foster's knife dropped into her pan with a splash.

"Well," she gasped.

Judith looked at her with quiet eyes.

"The Closed Room!" Jane cried out. "What are you saying? You couldn't get in?"

"Yes, I can."

Jane was conscious of experiencing a shock. She said afterwards that suddenly something gave her the creeps.

"You couldn't open the door," she persisted. "I tried again yesterday as I passed by—turned the handle and gave it a regular shove and it wouldn't give an inch."

"Yes," the child answered; "I heard you. We were inside then."

A few days later, when Jane weepingly related the incident to awe-stricken and sympathizing friends, she described as graphically as her limited vocabulary would allow her to do so, the look in Judith's face as she came nearer to her. (91–93)

In this passage, Jane tells her condoling friends that she felt frightened but at the same time tried to understand what her daughter had told her and thought that it was her fancy, or that a girl from next door had come over the roof. After her death, Judith thus becomes a story: the event is only to be told by an imperfect medium, her mother, who can describe it merely as far "as her limited vocabulary would allow her to do" (93). This not only shows that Jane Foster represents ordinary life but also that Judith's experiences are beyond speech; she moves in a realm where there is no need to talk because the girls are able to communicate without language. What Judith experiences is literally too fantastic for words, and this is something that Jane faces when she tries to tell what happened: for a very short moment, she is confronted with the realm of the dead, which is beyond expression.

When Judith goes to the room next day, after the incident of the wilted flowers, the playing is even "lovelier [and] happier" (104) than usual. She feels as light as in her waking dreams of her aunt Hester, and although she does not utter this feeling, Andrea understands her and says: "Yes, [...] I know her. She will come. She sent me" (106). Thus, a connection between Hester and Andrea, the two dead 'children,' and Judith becomes evident: they not only resemble each other with regard to their outer appearance but also in their being destined to die. Judith is soon to become the third dead girl in their 'community'; as Andrea tells her "[she] can't stay downstairs" (79).

But before this is possible, she has to help her friend in fulfilling a task: she is supposed to help Andrea rearrange her room. To Judith this seems to be "a strange game to play" (107), but she does not really mind. To Andrea, on the contrary, this is essential: She wants to leave a message to her mother. As Mrs Haldon relates afterwards, they "put everything away" (126) after her child's death; Andrea herself says to Judith: "They came and hid and covered everything—as if I had gone—as if I was nowhere. I want her to know I come here" (109). After the rearrangement of the room, Judith notices that first it "had looked as if everything had been swept up and set away and covered and done with forever—as if the life in it had ended and would never begin again. Now it looked as if some child who had lived in it and loved and played with each of its belongings, had just stepped out from her play—to some other room quite near—quite near" (108).<sup>28</sup>

This is exactly what Andrea wants to tell her mother: that she is not "millions and millions—and millions of miles away" (123) but still close. And as she "couldn't do it [her]self" (109), Judith had to help her. The reward for this help is that Judith may lie down and 'sleep,' i. e. she dies: "She laid her little pointed fingers on her forehead and Judith fell asleep" (112).

Her death, however, means that she can leave the world and through the garden enter "a broad green pathway—green with thick, soft grass and moss covered with trembling white and blue bell-like flowers" (113). Judith knows that "this is where it was right to be. There was no mistake. This was real. All the rest was unreal—and millions and millions of miles away" (113–14)—and her aunt Hester is actually already waiting for them. Judith thus eventually meets Hester, and Heaven becomes a world that exists parallel to the realm of the earth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I would like to thank Matthias Bauer for pointing out to me that this kind of 'frozen scene' might even be a common Victorian concept, reminiscent of, e. g., the famous painting "The Empty Chair" by Samuel Luke Fildes, showing Dickens's study as if he had just left it for a moment; see <<http://www.dickens-museum.com/vtour/firstfloor/study/emptychair.php>>.

<sup>29</sup> This is representative of a view of heaven that emerged in the nineteenth century: "Perhaps the most characteristic Victorian ideas of heaven are of a place in which family reunions and the 'recognition of friends' are to be achieved after death" (WHEELER 1994: 120). Wheeler argues that the basic idea of heaven in the nineteenth century consisted in its being "'greatly made up of little children' [...]. To emphasize children in heaven [...] is to stress innocence and thus to defer the question of adult sexuality. Children, it was

## 5 The Ending

The story does not end here, upon Judith's and Andrea's entering heaven, but it goes on with the story of Mrs Haldon's consolation, which turns out to be the *telos* of the story. Mrs Haldon understands her daughter's message: "'She has been here—to show me it is not so far!' She sank slowly upon her knees, wild happiness in her face—wild tears pouring down it" (129). Judith hence is the chosen child who dies for the sake of another child's mother who is "stricken and devastated" (120) by the death of her daughter. The children recognise each other as special children, which is not only expressed in their similar appearance but also in their mutual understanding. They move in a different realm where things are less "untrue" (21).

With the return of the narration to this world after Judith's death, the story emphasises the possibility of finding happiness and fulfilment in this life. Burnett does not end her story with a depiction of heaven but rather returns to the two mourning mothers and thus dramatises various spiritual beliefs throughout the story. The child is not restored from death and resurrected, but Andrea is able to return to comfort her mother.<sup>30</sup> Judith, the charismatic child, is chosen to help her and is hence able to open the door and provide access to the dead. Thus, Mrs Haldon is saved from her own death-in-life.

Burnett told her son Vivian that she was inspired to write the story when she saw a little girl from the window of her bedroom in her New York house; in his biography of his mother, Vivian Burnett describes this as follows: "a slim-faced little girl [...] [was] playing by herself on the sidewalk in a strange, lonely way. This child [...] was sufficient to start the imagination on a journey into the realm of the eerie, which resulted in that pathetic, psychic little tale about a spirit playmate" (1927: 304–305).

By calling her story a "pathetic, psychic little tale," Burnett directly refers to contemporary psychic stories by women. A common denominator of the genre is the reappearance of dead relatives in this world as ghosts in order to either save their beloved ones from their grief (*cf.* Josephine Daskam BACON's "The Children"), to lead them to the otherworld

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generally agreed, would not somehow grow to 'adulthood,' and those who wrote on the 'recognition of friends in heaven' consoled bereaved parents by stating that their children would be 'among the first to welcome' them on their arrival" (WHEELER 1994: 132).

<sup>30</sup> Andrea thus becomes a kind of Persephone figure, who, however, can only return once to leave a sign.

(cf. Mary E. WILKINS-FREEMAN’s “The Lost Ghost”), or to point to a crime or some neglect that caused their own death (cf. Mary E. WILKINS-FREEMAN’s “The Wind in the Rose-Bush”; and Charlotte Perkins GILMAN’s “The Giant Wistaria”). In “The Wind in the Rose-Bush,” for instance, the dead girl lives on as a single rose in a rose-bush and is thus able to ‘communicate’ with her aunt. It is the rose-bush moving when the wind is actually still that gives her the sign that something is amiss, and she subsequently finds out the truth about her niece’s death who most probably died through neglect by her step-mother. The ghosts in these tales thus point to crimes committed and they are unable to move on to heaven until the reason of their death has been recognized or avenged.<sup>31</sup>

In Burnett’s tale, this is different: her ghost-child returns to save her mother from grief. Burnett wanted *In the Closed Room* to be a story of consolation that showed that the dead live on somehow and somewhere and have not gone “millions and millions of miles away.”

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<sup>31</sup> The probably most famous example of this topos is Hamlet’s father in Shakespeare’s play.



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