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## Človek s postihnutím v diele Srdce Edmonda de Amicis

### Person with a disability in the literary work Heart by Edmondo de Amicis

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#### Abstract

The aim of the report is to analyse the issue of disability in the literary work Heart by Italian children's writer of the 19th century Edmondo de Amicis, in which there appear several characters with different types of, predominantly physical, disability. The report, in addition to the theoretical analysis, also includes a short empirical part presenting the results of interviews about the book from the perspective of primary education. In conclusion, we present a didactic reflection.

**Keywords:** Disabled person. Italian literature. Heart. Child.

#### Introduction

Italian literature for children and youth of the 19th century, similarly to our Slovak literature, was perceived as a space in which adults tried to raise a child to be a decent person (Kováčová, 2023). It tried as much as possible to contribute in such a way that the child could become responsible as soon as possible, so called small adult (Chanasová, Libertini, 2018). In adults and educators of the 19th century the basic principles of pedagogy and psychology were absent and thus they did not write *for a child*, but they wanted to *raise a child into someone "proper."*

Children's literature was largely focused on re-education of the child and at that time a person with a disability was given a very limited space (Kováčová, Benčíč, 2023). Based on this, the reflection we offer in our article on the book *Heart* by *Edmondo de Amicis* appears to be very interesting, in which the child recipient meets a literary character with a predominantly physical disability.

#### Heart

An important literary masterpiece for children and youth of the 19th century with the title *Heart* (1886) was written by *Edmondo de Amicis* in 1886. He found inspiration in the first school years of his two sons. At the time, the book captured interest. It educated, but mainly formed a sense of belonging to Italy, especially in children and young people who came from different parts of Italy. De Amicis was a huge success, as evidenced by the fact that in 1886 and 1892

more than a hundred issues of this book were published (Anselmi, Fenocchio, Ferrandini, 2010, p. 272). The weaker point of the book is its historical context and the author's efforts to build Italian patriotism. The strong point is its deep moral message intended for children of younger school age focused on forming respect and helping the poor, sick and weak.

The book *Heart* is written as a diary whose author is *Enrico*, a pupil of the third grade of primary school. The story of the school year is recorded in the book in chronological order from 17 October 1881 to 10 July 1882, with each month corresponding to one chapter. The diary ends with the description of the family move and loss of friends, since *Enrico* will have to attend the fourth grade of primary school in a different town. In the form of diary, along with his own reflections, there also appear the advice and thoughts of his parents and sister. Additionally, there are also nine short stories that the teacher dictates to his pupils every month in order to educate them through these narratives.

The main character of each story is a young boy, who each time comes from a different region of the Italian kingdom. These young boys do some heroic deeds to protect their homeland, family or simply out of honesty or love for their neighbour. The main characters of the book *Heart* are the same throughout the storyline. Their characters, attitudes, age remain unchanged.

De Amicis wanted to be the educator of the new Italian generation and therefore in the book he implements his own educational plan on two levels. The first level is manifested primarily in examples. The character of the teacher Giulio Perboni reads and dictates a story to the third-grade boys every month. The boys have to write it down and learn it by heart. There are ten stories. Among others, there is a story called *The little vidette of Lombardy* (De Amicis, 2017, e-book, pos. 496). In this story, the main character accompanies Italian soldiers in the battle against the Austrians until he dies, killed by the enemy bullets. Fallen on the field, he is covered by the Italian flag and all of the Italian army passing by him shows him military honours. In some ways, this part may seem similar to the book by Hana Zelinová - *Jakubko* (Chanasová, Libertini, 2018). However, what can be a great benefit for a Slovak child reader is the dimension in the stories about people with different types of disabilities. In an interesting way, *De Amicis* shows the child reader the essence of a good life. In every story about such poor and poverty-stricken people, he emphasises how important it is to help them, to have compassion for them and to appreciate all that one has.

### **Story 1: Children with rickets**

In one story called *Children with rickets*, the main character *Enrico* writes about his visit with his mother to the institute for disabled. *De Amicis* writes: "*poor children, left to their own devices for hours in a corner of a room or yard, poorly fed and sometimes even ridiculed.*" In this story, Enrico's mother is the person pointing out the complicatedness of the life of a handicapped child. She takes her son to visit the physically disabled to teach him to value health and to sympathise with sick children. Even during the visit to the institute, she says to

her son: "*Oh, Enrico, the rest of you who don't value health, it's not enough for you that you are healthy. I thought of those handsome boys, strong and blooming, carried around by their mothers as if in triumph, proud of their beauty - and I would have loved to hold all these poor heads close to me; I would have desperately hugged them all close to my heart. If I were on my own, I would have said: I will not move from here, I want to sacrifice my life to you, to be your mother until the end of my life*" (De Amicis, 2012, p. 207).

### **Story 2: Blind boys**

In this story, *De Amicis* presents a school and hall of residence for the blind in Turin, where one of the teachers who tells the story in the book worked. The teacher talks about what it means to be blind and what such visually impaired boys experience in their everyday life. He talks about what they can do and how they use their other senses. The teacher describes how they like music, what is the greatest joy in their lives, how they recognise the faces of their loved ones using their hands and how they recognise footsteps by hearing. He says: "*When a person first enters the institute for the blind and in the time for rest one hears those blind boys from all sides, playing the violin and flute, hears them talking loudly and laughing, flying up and down the stairs, with a nimble footstep running freely along the corridors or bedrooms, he would never admit that they are quite so unfortunate*" (De Amicis, 2012, p. 134). The teacher tells the pupils that at the time there were 26,000 blind children in Italy and if they were all to march as an army under the windows of the school where he is telling the story, it would have taken around four hours. The pupils are amazed when he talks, but at the same time they are touched by the wretchedness. In the next part, the teacher explains that: "*All the other senses are softened for them because they have to substitute for sight. That is why they are trained more and better than in case of the sighted. For example, in the morning they ask each other in the bedroom: - Has the sun risen? The one who is able to dress quickly runs to the yard and moves his hands in the air to feel if it is warm, and then runs back to tell the good news*" (De Amicis, 2012, p. 135). But even the writer himself cannot answer the big question in the book, which he, however, reminded by the lips of the teacher. "*Imagine how they must worry and how much they must suffer when they think in confusion of the terrible difference between themselves and those who are able to see. They ask themselves: - Why is there this difference, after all, we have done nothing wrong?*" (De Amicis, 2017, e-book, pos. 1657). The pupils, as well as the child readers, gradually develop compassion for the blind during the teacher's talk. The students ask what they could do for the blind and one of them asks if it would be possible to visit them. The teacher replies: "*Maybe, but you boys cannot go there for now. You will go there later, when you will be able to understand the full magnitude of the unfortunate and feel the compassion it deserves. It's a sad sight, my sons*" (De Amicis 2012, p. 138).

*Through the teacher's lips, De Amicis conveys an important life message in for a child very clear and simple way, using comprehensible words. "I have spent several years among them, and when I think of my class, of all those forever-sealed eyes, of all those sightless and lifeless pupils, and then I look at the rest of you... it seems incomprehensible to me that you are not all happy" (De Amicis, 2012, p. 135).*

### **Story 3: Nelli's protector**

We also find an interesting encounter with disability in one of the stories called *Nelli's protector*. *De Amicis* introduces a boy *Nelli*. He introduces him as a hunchback who does well in his studies, but is very thin, frail and has difficulty breathing. During the first days in school his classmates mocked him and hit him in the back with their briefcases. He never complained. He did not complain especially to his mother, who picked him up from school, since he would not have been able to manage on his own. He did not want to add to her pain. Another important character appears in the story - a boy *Garrone*, whom *De Amicis* already presents in the previous stories as the one whom the main character *Enrico* likes very much and talks about him. *"I find it funny, that he is so big and fat and that his coat, trousers and sleeves are too tight and short for him, the hat does not sit properly at all on his shaved head. Also, his shoes are too big and his neckerchief is always twisted like a rope. Dear Garrone, you only have to look into his face once to feel affection for him. The smallest ones would all like to sit near his bench"* (De Amicis, 2012, p. 30). Precisely this *Garrone* is the one to stand up for *Nelli* the hunchback. We can see it in the scene when one morning *Garrone* announces to his classmates: *"Anyone who dares to touch Nelli I will slap so much they will spin thrice!"* (De Amicis, 2012, p. 45). However, one of the classmates ignores this and gets a good slap from *Garrone*, spins three times and since then no one hurts *Nelli*. The hunchback *Nelli* and *Garrone* become friends. The story clearly points out how very important and good it is to stand up for the weak, defend the disabled and to help them.

### **Didactic reflections and empirical part**

It is important to mention some aspects that appear in the book *Heart*. One of them is a certain prejudice regarding disability. It mainly pertains to the 19th century, and it is also recognisable in the book *Heart*. According to Italian criminologist *Cesare Lombroso*, a physical handicap is a toll or retribution for a crime committed by the disabled person or their parents (Cario, 2014). In the book, we can sometimes find certain hints of this toll in the words of some characters. At the same time, the writer tries to point out those characters who have a strong tendency to help and sympathise with these "poor people". Another aspect is the significance of family. An example of *De Amicis's* pedagogy is that the family is seen as the first place in which a child is formed, and which reflects and processes all the experiences that the boy goes through

at school. The family of *Enrico* was a typical bourgeois family: the father was the absolute authority; the mother, who was the emotional support for the whole family. The family also included various brothers and sisters who were placed in the family hierarchy according to their age. Typical expressions of the family were letters that the father and mother (De Amicis, 2017, e-book, pos. 347) and once even the elder sister wrote to little *Enrico*. In the letters, they used to praise him, scold him, but also thank him. The content of these letters were various events, such as "All Souls Day", or the description of different characters or categories of people, such as "the poor."

In addition to the theoretical part, we conducted two interviews in the empirical part conducted in September 2022 in one of the schools in the Trenčín region. One group interview was with the pupils of the second grade and one with the pupils of the third grade. The pupils were selected at random in both cases, eight in total. A part of the interviews with the pupils was reading of two stories from the book *Heart*. The first one was the story about a boy who had a hump and was called *Nelli*. The second one was the story told by the teacher about the blind boys from the institute. The questions asked in both groups of pupils were identical. We were interested in whether the pupils understood the storyline, whether they understood all of the words, etc. We asked them what characters appeared in the stories, how they behaved. We wanted them to describe the characters' personalities and so on. At the same time, we were interested in whether they know who a person with a disability is, what types of disabilities they recognise. Almost all pupils talked about physically disabled people from their environment, i.e. he does not have a leg, he cannot walk, he limps when he walks (they did not know how to describe a person with cerebral palsy.) With the help of questions, they came to the conclusion that there is a hearing and visual disability. Interestingly, they failed to identify mental disabilities. According to them, a disabled person had a very significant disability that they were able to identify at first glance.

In the story about the blind boys, they were most interested in how the blind find out that the sun is up. In the story about *Nelli*, they reflected on the behaviour of the classmates who laughed at *Nelli*'s disability, but also on the courage of his classmate *Garrone*, who stood up for *Nelli* and helped him. The pupils in both groups were interested in the Italian names of the main characters and they felt the need to ask or talk about Italy as a country. At the same time, they wanted to know more details regarding both stories, i.e. what happened to the blind boy? What happened to the hunchback *Nelli*? Why did he have a pale face and why couldn't he walk?

In general, we can say that pupils recognise a certain type of disability. A disabled person is in some way interesting to them. They would like to know more about him. The stories were somewhat unusual for them, and they felt the need to ask for details. A distinctive discussion arose about whether they find some disabled people funny sometimes and whether they would be able to stand up for them at an important moment. These questions took the direction

rather towards so called philosophising with children. In both groups, there was a strong consensus aimed at the importance of helping people with disabilities.

One primary school teacher says that *a child has no prejudices. He/she is naturally curious and willing to know and communicate with his/her able-bodied and disabled classmates. Especially between the ages of three and six, it is important for adults to prevent the emergence of prejudices and mistrust towards different types of disabilities, so that children can naturally create meaningful deep relationships with each other regardless of their ability.*

### **Conclusion**

The aim of our report was to point out people with disabilities in the Italian literature for children and youth of the 19th century by the writer *Edmondo De Amicis*, who in his book *Heart* talks in a very sensitive and clear way about fellowship and helping people with disabilities. From the statements in the empirical part, it is clear that in inclusion (Kováčová, 2019; Kováčová, Benčíč, 2023) as well as early intervention (Magová, 2020) it is important to create space for dialogue, with the possibility of using the given literary works. The essence is captured by the final quote from the book *Heart*, which highlights why the book bears this title and what is the essence of inclusion. "*Perhaps, now that you finished reading the book, in your memory remained only a mixture of short stories and events, which did not captivate you like a thrilling adventure novel. Do not be disappointed, the meaning of the modest plot remains a hidden treasure of your heart. Listen to how it's beating. It will give you its wealth at a moment that will demand action from you, which will call upon you to take up responsibility*" (De Amicis, 2012, p. 291).

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