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CONFLICT vs. LAUGHTER: THE GREATEST AUTHORIAL BATTLE IN CROATIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

This article will discuss conflict as a source of humour in the young adult novel *Love or Death* (1987) by Croatia's legendary author Ivan Kušan. In 1956 the first novel in the Koko series, *The Mystery of Green Hill*, was one of the publications that marked the beginning of Croatian modern children's literature. After the adventures in novels such as *Koko and the Ghosts* (1958) and *The Mystery of the Stolen Painting* (1972), in 1982 the character of Koko appears during the rebellion of various Kušan's characters in *Terrible Cowboy* (1982) and offers Kušan his own manuscript for revision, titled *Love or Death*. Raising the issue of authorship, authority and truth characteristic of metafictional practices, *Love or Death* is a novel in which the main protagonist Ratko Milić Koko assumes ownership of the narrative, whereas Kušan as the author is "demoted" to the role of a "proofreader", commenting, correcting and doodling with a red pen in the margins of Koko's text. Essentially, *Love or Death* retains the legacy of modernity and its markings in the context of Croatian writing for children, yet, the novel also contains visual deviations, word play, playfulness, irony, cross-genre writing, parody of literary "classics," hyperbolising, intertextuality, trivialising, character/authorial intrusion, mass media synchronicity, and dissolution of language in its standard form, characteristic of postmodern literary practices [Hranjec 2001]. Because of the authorial conflict, the novel is strongly intergenerational, placing the main protagonist on the threshold of adolescence, and its humour resulting from the power struggle between the authors of a different age and their respective discourse. Therefore, Kušan's prose delves into both direct and indirect types of humour arising from the generational gap, peer relations and issues of vulnerability. Furthermore, the author-against-"author" conflict undeniably highlights Kušan's status as the "father of modern children's detective novel" and the "master of Croatian language" (Stamać). Finally, as a surreal authorial battlefield, *Love or Death* paradoxically transcends generations, genres, and national borders, as well as reconciles various aspects of writings for children pertaining to their target audience, modernity and narrative structure, which is why it is a unique example of children's and young adult metafiction in Croatia and worldwide.

Key words: conflict, humor, metafiction, intertextuality, word-play, irony, intergenerational conflict, interpersonal conflict, peer-group relations, vulnerability.

— *The moment of reckoning has come— said Koko, not putting the revolver down.
— We won't take this anymore.<...>The house is surrounded <...>. I looked at him.
I wondered whether any writer had ever experienced his main protagonist threatening*

him like this. I pulled the curtains apart and opened the balcony door. What a sight! In the lamplight in front of my house there were many of our acquaintances. Everyone was looking towards my windows, waving clenched fists, shouting and threatening. <...> There were signs. I read them one by one: GIRLS ARE EQUAL / YOU WEAR GLASSES, TOO / DON'T POKE FUN AT YOUR ELDERS / LIE IS NOT LITERATURE / NO MORE ADVERSITY FOR US FROM THE HOMEWORK / WE WANT TO HAVE OUR SAY / WE WANT TO GROW UP. The last sign was held by little Tom. Nenad's round sign stated: PORTLINESS IS NOT A VICE. And Mickey Horvatic was flying a kite in front of my nose on which he wrote: LOOK AT YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR. I drew the curtains together and retreated into the room. Koko pointed his revolver at me.

Kušan, *Terrible Cowboy*

*Who are the writers?
Kušan, Love or Death*¹

Thus begins the greatest authorial battle in Croatian children's literature between the aging author Ivan Kušan and his protagonist Ratko Milić Koko. The battlefield, Kušan's 1987 young adult novel *Love or Death*, will be analyzed in this paper for examples of conflict and the accompanying instances of humor. Accordingly, *Love or Death* is a unique example of a textual experiment in Croatian children's literature. It is a work wrought with postmodern traits and narrated by the protagonist of most Kušan's novels, Ratko Milić Koko, who assumes authorship over the novel and presents it as his own work, both to the readers and to the author, who is pushed onto the margins where he doodles and comments on Koko's text. This to and fro communication between the author as the proofreader and the narrator as the author is the source of the author-against-author conflict.

However, in accordance with Shantz's statement that "conflict can and should be distinguished from aggression, dominance, competition, influence, and anger" [Laursen, Collins 1994, p. 197], in Kušan's novel conflict is not always a source of frustration but mostly a device that helps him delve into direct and indirect types of humor. By means of intertextual and metafictional insertions arising from the central conflict, this subtle portrayal of an adolescent's state of mind, his relationship to authority, peers and romantic interests manages to touch on the bigger issues of puberty, problems of growing up, first loves, and death, which are subjects typical of a young adult novel².

Love or Death, with its protagonist, narrator, and assumed author Ratko Milić Koko, a thirteen year old boy with untamable hair and a pointy nose he likes to stick everywhere, is the penultimate novel in the so-called *Koko crime series* [Hranjec 2004 (1), p. 95]. The character of Koko first appeared in *The Mystery of Green Hill* (1956), the first

novel of the 23-year-old Ivan Kušan. In order to understand the character of Ratko Milić Koko, as well as the novelty of *Love or Death*, here are a few facts about Koko's "creator" Ivan Kušan and his role in Croatian children's literature. Kušan was born in 1933 in Sarajevo and passed away in 2012 in Zagreb. He was a writer of great imagination and erudition, known better for his children's novels than adult fiction and non-fiction; a translator, painter, illustrator, journalist, editor of children's magazines, film and TV editor, and professor. In short, Kušan was a true renaissance man with a fantastic sense of humor, wry wit and elegant, yet contemporary, phrasing. Due to his work as a translator and his many travels around the world, Kušan was well-acquainted with the trends in world literature and was able to transpose them into his own works for children.

At the time, Croatian children's novels were still under the influence of the 1930s and 1940s poetics, narrated by "an authoritarian, didactic, extradiegetic narrator who can supply the young reader with comments, explanations and exhortations without leaving anything unuttered or ambiguous" [Nikolajeva 1998, p. 222]. Therefore, these novels were mostly set in bucolic rural settings, depicting the lives of good village children working hard in strongly hierarchical groups in order to solve some common problem plaguing the whole community. Adults in these novels were portrayed as fair and just, having the ultimate authority over children. This was especially evident in the characters of teachers and other educators who served the purpose of guiding the children towards the right solution, as well as instilling in them the suitable characteristics of future model citizens and members of their respective communities³. This approach is in accord with Nodelman's view that children's literature is "simple, but not necessarily simplistic; action-oriented rather than character-oriented; presented from the viewpoint of innocence; optimistic and with happy endings; didactic; and repetitious in diction and structure"⁴.

Consequently, when Kušan sent the manuscript of his first novel, *The Mystery of Green Hill*, to a publishing house in Sarajevo in 1956, it was refused on the grounds of having absolutely "no artistic, and even less didactic value" [Hranjec S. 2004 (2), p. 9]. The lack of overt didactic value has over the time become one of the main characteristics of Kušan's writing: what makes him appealing to his young readers is that his primary goal is not to educate and moralize, but to entertain. Additionally, he portrays both children and adults in his novels firstly and foremostly as human beings with all the passions, vices, transgressions, cravings, fears and quirks, which makes his novels, on an implicit level,

more didactic than the ones whose didactic goal is explicit. Accordingly, his well rounded and three-dimensional child characters often seem to come alive on page. They are equal and independent, like to embellish, almost all of them carry nicknames, mostly work in pairs or peer-groups, drink coffee, and their main features are playfulness, hunger for adventure, determination, and optimism. Likewise, they show initiative that the adults (and even members of the authority) often lack, and while solving mysteries they disregard punishment. Because Kušan placed his young protagonists in the foreground, the grown-ups are on the margins, where they remain unless an intervention is needed⁵. Finally, in accordance with the expectations of his young readers, Kušan bases his novels upon mystery and suspense, intense plot, action, in medias res, false clues, play with structure, humor, relevant topics, catchy chapter titles, and ironic play with detective novel conventions⁶.

Furthermore, throughout the series comprised of seven books, i.e. *The Mystery of Green Hill* (1956), *Koko and the Ghosts* (1958), *The Mysterious Boy* (1963), *The Mystery of the Stolen Painting (Koko in Paris;* 1972), *Terrible Cowboy* (short stories; 1982), *Love or Death* (1987), and *Koko in Knin* (1996), Kušan introduced novelties in plot structure which follow and often parody the structure of detective novels, beginning with the appearance of a culprit whom the police are unwilling to pursue, which is why the young detectives take that task upon themselves, following a few false leads, after which all ends with a happy resolution. Moreover, the style of Kušan's novels is de-poeticized, fresh, clear and packed with jargon, slang and dynamic dialogue, as well as original and plastic imagery, which serves to create tension typical of detective novels. Thus, themes, plot structure, characters and style reflect the reality and mentality of urban life on which Kušan focuses most of his novels. According to Hranjec, Kušan became "the father of modern Croatian children's detective novel" and "a classic during his lifetime" by fulfilling the following criteria: a) intending his work for young readers (intentionality), b) transgressing national borders owing to many translations of his works (internationality), c) introducing new topics (detective novel), d) developing interesting plots (singularity), e) remodeling standard language by means of playful, everyday language, and f) creating works loved by people of all generations, and nationalities, as well as reconciling various aspects of writings for children regardless of their target audience, modernity and narrative structure [Hranjec 2004 (1)].

Kušān's 1982 collection of stories *The Terrible Cowboy* ushers in a new period of Kušan's writing, most notably the last story in the collection,

Happylogue, featuring the aforementioned rebellion of Kušan's characters, at the end of which Kušan is presented with the manuscript of the novel written by his protagonist Koko, *Love or Death*. Thus, in accordance with Nikolajeva's definition of metafictional children's literature, "the writer steps back, allowing the character to come to the foreground and straining the events through the character's mind before releasing them to the reader" [Nikolajeva 1998, p. 229].

It is, therefore, evident that Kušan's idea of an experiment with authorship started even before the beginning of *Love or Death*, and continued throughout the novel. The metafictional nature of the story is fuelled by the authorship "controversy" on the title page of the 1987 edition of the book, where, under the name of the author and the title of the novel, the following statement is made: "Don't believe this! It is all a hoax. I wrote this book. Koko" (Figure 1). As a comeback, instead of a dedication, Kušan writes in his own handwriting:

Dear readers, Koko submitted his novel *Love or Death* for my review. I am surprised. And confused. I have never before read a book where there is no mention of school, or nature, or adults. Koko is actually quite literate and I have corrected *only* some of the tiny mistakes. I do not think that there are many writers whose protagonist took the pen from their hands. I feel proud and a little bit scared. Still, I trust that you will like Koko's novel. Have fun! Lovingly yours, Ivan Kušan. (Figure 2) [Kušan 1987]

The issue of authorship is further complicated in the biography of the author which begins with the question: "Who are the writers of this book?", and ends with a rhetorical question: "Do you think that Kušan has written enough and it is time for Koko to continue on his own?" [Kušan 1987, p. 109]. Hence, Kušan's fiction becomes metafictional by means of a distinct shift from the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator — that is, primarily an adult, experienced, authoritarian narrator — toward the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator — that is, an unsophisticated, even naive child narrator, who is often unable to evaluate the events and people around him or her and instead renders the events and people's behavior from an innocent viewpoint [Nikolajeva 1998, p. 229].

Love or Death is, in consequence, presented to the young readers via a metalepsis⁷ as a product of the main protagonist's determination and will to write better fiction than his aging, "old geezer" author, thus disturbing "the relationships between authors, primary narrators, secondary narrators and characters [which] are usually hierarchical". Kušan uses this device because by inverting and transgressing these hierarchical relations, metalepsis can be used to articulate questions about authority, power, and freedom, such as who has control of the story and its characters — the narrator, her narratees, an author, his readers, or the socio-cultural context within and through which stories are told, heard, interpreted and appropriated [Mc Callum 1996, p. 403–404].

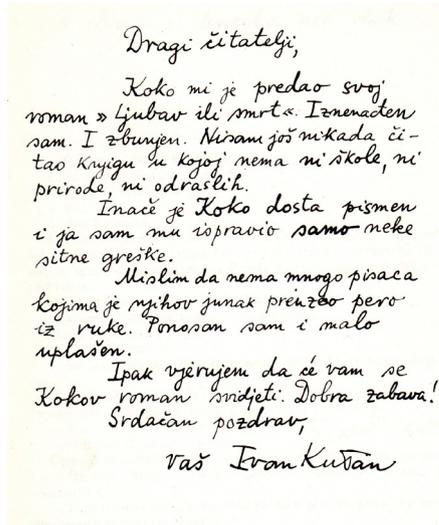
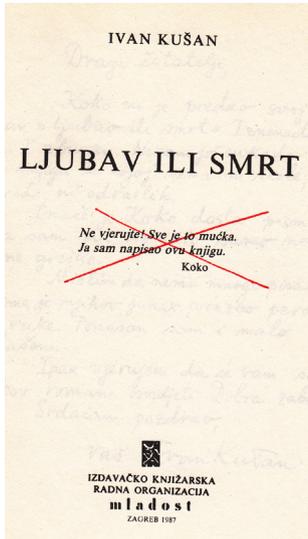


Fig. 1 The title page of Ivan Kušan's novel *Love or Death*. Fig. 2 Kušan's comment instead of a dedication.

Therefore, Kušan as the author is “demoted” to the role of a “proof-reader”, commenting, correcting and doodling with a red pen in the margins of Koko's text, whereas Koko assumes ownership of the text. He often challenges his former creator by means of metafictional and intertextual insertions whose intention is both to define his writing “style”, and to prove that he can write better than his author: “there I saw all the novels about me. I was proud, although I would have written them better” [Kušan 1987, p. 106]. The tension that his observations produce create the humorous effect for a reader familiar with Kušan's other works:

I noticed Mirko Koman in the audience, with his stupid German shepherd Rex. (Kušan wrote about him in 'The Mysterious Boy,' whereas I don't write anything about my dog Tzar, who is better looking and more senile than Remy, because he is not a person. I like dogs, but as a writer I like people better.) [Kušan 1987, p. 30].

Whilst keeping the legacy and markings of modernity in the context of Croatian writing for children, *Love or Death* also contains features of a postmodern novel, such as visual deviations, word play, trivializing, playfulness, irony, cross-genre writing, parody of literary ‘classics’, hyperbolizing, intertextuality, character/authorial intrusion, mass media synchronicity, and dissolution of language in its standard form⁸. These

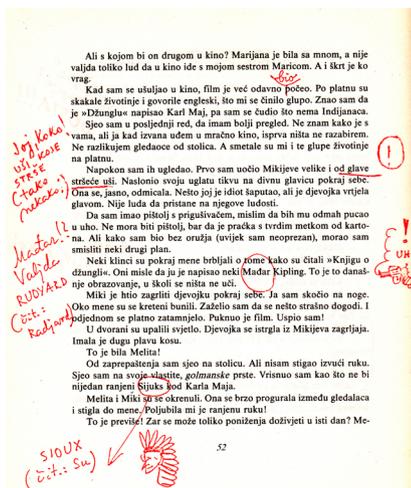


Fig. 3 An example of the features of postmodernism present throughout the book.

features are techniques evident in all metafictional and experimental forms of children's writing according to McCallum⁹. (Figure 3)

The "authorial" battle is the most intense in the category of language and style, i.e., in modes of narration and speech representation. As a thirteen-year-old protagonist, Koko is not well-versed in the subtleties of life, or literature, or, for that matter, language. Kušan's mastery lies in the ability to present the world of literature and culture in general through the eyes of a disinterested and not very well informed teenager, thus making sure that the metafictional story is acceptable to children by being "clearly of their culture, for them"¹⁰. Therefore, the older author takes upon himself the role of a proofreader and educator with the task of setting the younger one straight on some aspects of life, culture and language, which is visible through constant corrections and comments in the margins, thereby creating a certain "tension which reflects the various aspects of the relationship between the young and the old" [Primorac 2001, p. 12]. It is this all-out, author vs. author, old vs. young, experience vs. inexperience, knowledge vs. ignorance conflict that paradoxically produces most of the humor of this novel.

Kušan constantly creates situations in which he, as an experienced and well-educated adult, is "compelled" to help Koko with concepts with which the teenager is either unfamiliar, or too familiar, and these can be ordered into five categories: a) names of persons / works from literature, film and culture in general, i.e. parodic appropriations of other texts, genres and discourses (Dulcinea — Dulcinea; Tata Hari — Mata Hari; Sir Vantes — Cervantes, silly Caribbean — Scylla and Charybdis; Tree

Bored Forest — Could it be the Stribor's Forest?, *Bombed with the Wind* — *Gone with the Wind*); b) dialecticisms, colloquialisms and vulgarisms (line — rope; shit herself — soiled herself); c) misspelled general terminology (vacum — vacuum; parla psychology — parapsychology); d) grammatical and orthographical interventions (Do you have any idea, Koko, what vocative is?); and e) suggestions on style (little black puppy — the puppy is little!), as well as emphasizing his point by adding his own drawings and strikethroughs, which especially occur when a phrase or a concept might be considered shameful or taboo by an elder audience (Shame on you) [Hranjec 2004 (1), p. 103–104].

Hence, Kušan uses metafictional and intertextual devices to create an artificial tension between the world of the old and the world of the young, which ultimately induces laughter in the reader. In order to achieve this, apart from the linguistic interventions, he uses many parodic appropriations of classic works of art, by means of which these works are trivialized:

— It's over. Anna threw herself under a train. — Anna who? — Anna Karenina. — He waved a fat book in front of my face. I was relieved. Another chick from Zlatko's books. He told me about it already last night. It's mostly about horse racing. So the chick threw herself under a train, not horses [Kušan 1987, p. 7].

or famous statements and proverbs warbled and ridiculed, such as “Life is a huge injustice, as Napoleon said when he lost the war” [p. 42]. Since media are a very important part of every adolescent's life Kušan makes sure that there is also a fair amount of mass media synchronicity, “When I snuck into the movies, the film had already started. On the screen the animals were jumping around and speaking English, which I thought was dumb. I knew that *The Jungle* was written by Karl May, so I was surprised that there were no Indians around” [p. 53]. Finally, as mentioned before, Kušan presumes an informed reader who will be able to recognize the humor hidden in references to the other books from the Koko crime series: “I don't care about Zlatko's opinion. I don't want Kušan and the likes of him writing about me. I have had it with their nonsense. What does this Kušan know about me? That I scratch with my left hand behind my right ear? Totally lame and it's not even true. That I love stuffed peppers? Yuck!” [p. 8].

The humor, plasticity and warmth of Kušan's characters, as well as his (auto)ironic style, particularly evident in the irony of narrative discourse, hyperbolizing and the taboo are most certainly the reasons for Kušan's popularity among generations of children spanning almost sixty years. In accordance with Prommer's analysis, “every comical situation has to be exaggerated because exaggeration pushes the character further into the world of comedy” [Prommer, Mikos 2003]. Hyperbolizing

as a source of humor often leads into the grotesque in depictions of characters, situations, and emotions, “I lifted 30 kilo weights, jumped rope a 1000 times, ran 20 kilometers and jumped 1.80 meters high. Then I practiced with the ball. I kick it against the wall with all my might and, when it bounces back, I pounce on it. Like a real ‘Green Panther’ from Green Hill” [Kušan, p. 13]. The conflict and the humor in this example arise from Kušan’s cross-outs of the zeros, as well as his additional comments in the margins, such as, “You’re exaggerating”[p. 13].

Taboo humor is one of the most common types of children’s humor and, “adults’ unrelenting claim that certain disdained expressions are devious lead to their extremely frequent use by children between the age of 9 and 11 for creating a comical effect” [Neuß]. Therefore, in presenting Koko’s story, Kušan does not shrink from using the taboo in portrayals of certain situations:

I actually saw what she was doing and I’m ashamed to write it. As if she couldn’t do it at home. She was squatting next to the bus wreck. I don’t know whether it’s even polite to write about it, but that’s how it was. In school that’s called realism. She had these horrible panties on, black with flowers on them. I was sure that Ana Moser had panties as white as a swan [Kušan 1987, p. 41].

However, Kušan’s adult proofreader reaction is to cross out everything about the panties with the demand to the young author to cut this whole part “OUT” [p. 41].

Although Kušan allows his characters to speak with the everyday language of children in the street using jargon and slang: “— No problem. In the basement. Or in my room. That’s even more shiznit. Nobody enters my place, peeshca?” [p. 20], the proofreader reacts to this language with feigned shock and exasperation with the world of youth: “Who can understand such language?” [p. 72]. The devices Kušan most commonly uses in recreating the everyday language of children are word play and phonological, morphological and syntactic alterations, “To think is to know shit” [p. 8], or, “A sweet spirit in a sweet body, as the Greek philosopher Nero said” [p. 30]. Therefore, the “reactions” of the author revising Koko’s manuscript, such as many strikethroughs of taboo phrases, or simply demanding that he throw something out, the constant urge to teach, as well as shock over most slang and jargon expressions make this a strongly intergenerational novel. According to Vrcić-Mataija, an intergenerational novel is based on the relationship between the child protagonist and an adult person, usually not a family member, who helps the child realize important realities and wisdoms of life [Vrcić-Mataija 2011, p. 152].

Although, traditionally, adults are seen as the “victims” of intergenerational conflict, according to Weber it is actually the youth who suffer the living conditions caused and imposed by adults [Weber 1987, p. 35], although they are “no longer inclined to accept such passive roles today” [Smolkin 2011, p. 38]. It is actually a conflict in which the older generation represents tradition and continuity and the younger one innovation and modification, therefore, in this type of conflict “the worldview component is expressed more starkly; it generally unfolds as a standoff of values and is very often interpreted by participants as a group conflict — in terms of generational identity — rather than an individual conflict” [p. 38]. The youth feels the need to emancipate, to disagree with and oppose the authority of grown-ups. This “overt behavioral opposition” [Laursen, Collins 1994, p. 197] is, actually, the central feature of intergenerational conflict in *Love or Death*. Koko as the new author opposes and directly disrespects his former creator: “I know that the biggest adventure of my life awaits me. Different from the ones that Kušan depicts in his books. He’s an old jerk, he’s bored and therefore he is boring. My novel will be completely different” [Kušan 1987, p. 8], or, “I was surprised how old, fat and grey Kušan had grown. He looks terrible” [p. 108].

According to Laursen and Collins, adolescents report an average of seven disagreements a day [Laursen, Collins 1994, p. 200]. Naturally, this complicates their relationship not only with adults, but also with their peers. Schäfers explains that young people socialize in peer-groups because in such groups they can escape the pressure of the “grown-up society” [Weber 1987, p. 68]. In Eisenstadt’s terms, young people enter peer-groups to practice future grown-up roles in a safe environment which is not burdened by familial emotionality. This gives the child an opportunity to enter into relationships with a certain amount of detachment. However, as already mentioned, some of the wants and needs of an individual can become frustrated within a peer-group and this is when conflict arises [p. 67]. Accordingly, when Koko out of boredom and the need to have someone to love invents Ana Moser, various conflicts with his peers as well as with his sister arise,

— You snake! — I said dramatically. Huh? — she replied, seemingly oblivious. — Serpent! — I growled from the depth of my throat. — Koko, what’s the matter with you? — You betrayed our childhood, a time when we grew side by side like two tall trees.— Mary almost burst with laughter. And I slapped her so hard that a drop of our filial blood dropped from her nose [Kušan 1987, p. 23].

Although Kušan’s characters do not age throughout his novels, in *Love or Death* he does concede some growth. In the beginning of the novel



The «circle of love» as an illustration of adolescent vulnerability.

we find the characters at the threshold of adolescence involved in problems typical of adolescents, and often depicted in young adult novels, such as the many facets of their relationship with peers, whether friends or adversaries, and with romantic interests and/or partners. Consequently, childhood play and mystery-solving are transformed into the problems of falling in and out of love, unrequited love, rejection and refusal, in other words, the problems of adolescent vulnerability. However, Kušan approaches them with a particular brand of humor and irony combined with deep understanding for the problems of growing up. He illustrates the thwarted attempts of his characters at winning the hearts of their love interests with the image of a “circle of love” in which each character is in love with the next person in the circle, “You disturbed this perfect circle of love, this love wheel <...> — Look how stupid life is. We are so close, yet so far. Only one step separates us from each other, from happiness. If only the wheel turned the other way...” [p. 102–103] (Figure 4). When his attempts to win Ana, as well as his football career, hit rock bottom, Koko decides on a drastic measure — to take his own life:

I was thinking about my life. It didn't seem like I'd experienced, or accomplished much. I chased burglars a bit, then ghosts, then the Mona Lisa, solved other people's puzzles and mysteries. Others wrote about me, played me, got fame and money, and I remained little Ratko Milić, called Koko, from Heinzl Street. When I took matters (and the pen) into my hands, I had an unforgettable encounter with Ana Moser. An encounter and fatal love which now ends so tragically [p. 96].

However, just as Kušan uses humor to avoid and dispel ideologizing and social or political connotations in his works, he dispels the potential gravity of a young boy's suicide attempt with humor, warmth and an unexpected resolution: “I almost died, but in freezing cold water, which was not

planned. For me taking a bath is suicide at the best of times, and in cold water! The horror!” [p. 98].

It is interesting to note Laursen and Collins’ statement that “like a play or a novel, a conflict follows a plot or organized sequence, with a protagonist and antagonist (conflict participants), theme (conflict issue), complication (initial opposition), rising action, climax, crisis (conflict resolution and denouement (outcome))” [Laursen, Collins 1994, p. 198]. The conflict depicted in this novel follows the same pattern: the protagonist, Koko, perceives everyone as an obstacle (conflict participants) towards achieving his goal, i.e. winning the heart of the mysterious Ana (conflict issue), the plot thickens when Ana disappears (initial opposition) upon which Koko does everything in his power to find and save her (rising action), with the intention of drawing her attention to him (climax). When all else fails, the protagonist decides to attempt suicide (crisis); however, he is saved by his friends in the nick of time and has explained to him that in his feverish wish to have someone to love he had invented Ana, modeling her after someone he already knows, and peppering his drama with intertextual insertions, such as references to works of art, literature, film, and culture in general. His realization that everything was made up brings the conflict to a resolution whose outcome is the following realization: “I stay eternally alone like a worker with my windmills and horse races. I don’t need anyone. I don’t give a frou frou about anything” [Kušan 1987, p. 102–103].

In conclusion, Ivan Kušan was an innovator, which is especially evident in the analyzed novel, ultimately an experiment in authorship, in which he uses conflict in its various forms not to explore anger and adversity, but to induce humor. In achieving this goal he uses various devices, such as intertextual and metafictional insertions, word play, jargon, slang, visual deviations, trivializing, playfulness, irony, parody of literary “classics”, hyperbolizing, taboo and mass media synchronicity. However, conflict is evident not only in his stylistic and linguistic playfulness, but also in instances of intergenerational and peer-group conflict. Whereas the peer-group conflict is motivated by the awakening of romantic feeling in the adolescent protagonist and the misunderstandings this causes, the intergenerational conflict and the subsequent humor it produces arise from the dynamic relationship of the child protagonist and grown up author typical of an intergenerational novel, evident in the closing quote:

...last night I submitted my novel *Love or Death* to Daniel’s father Ivan Kušan. (The old nerd described the encounter in the end story of his book *Terrible Cowboy*). Whatever. I don’t care what he’ll say. Not the least bit. I don’t give a rat’s ass. I’m not

concerned. I don't care at all. I'm over it. <...> I think I'll never become a writer. It's better to be a normal human being and live decently. Maybe even be in love [p. 108].

Finally, Kušan's ability to (re)create children's language, identify with their culture, and show a deep understanding for problems of growing up, makes him legendary in the context of Croatian children's literature, as well as in the minds and memories of generations of his readers.

References

¹ All examples from Kušan's books, as well as citations from Croatian sources translated by Željka Flegar and Ksenija Švarc.

² Milan Crnković, *Dječja književnost*, 5–6, as discussed in [Sanja Vrcić-Mataija 2011, p. 144].

³ See [Hranjec 2006], for more information on the subject of 1930's and 1940's novels.

⁴ Perry Nodelman, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (190), as discussed [Nikola-jeva 1998, p. 221]

⁵ See Stjepan Hranjec, Sanja Vrcić-Mataija and Dubravka Zima for more detailed descriptions of Kušan's child characters.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the Croatian children's detective novel and its characters see [Hranjec 2012; Težak 2008, p. 214; Zima 2011, p. 172–180].

⁷ For an explanation of metalepsis grounded in Genette's and McHale's definition of the term, see [Mc Callum 1996, p. 403–404].

⁸ Stjepan Hranjec, "Postmodernizam u dječjoj književnosti", 356, as discussed [Sanja Vrcić-Mataija 2011, p. 146–148].

⁹ Mc Callum identifies "four main strategies whereby metafictional novels can be self-conscious about their existence as language: parodic play on specific writing styles; thematised wordplay, such as puns, anagrams, cliché's; variation of print conventions and the use of marginalia, footnotes and epigraphs — strategies which draw attention to the physicality of texts; and deliberate mixing of literary and extra-literary genres" [Mc Callum 1994, p. 405].

¹⁰ Charles Sarland "The Secret Seven versus The Twits: The Cultural Clash or Cosy Combination?" 170, as discussed in [Moss 1990, p. 50].

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