

PSYCHIATRY VERSUS ART:  
THE CASE OF FREDERIK VAN EEDEN'S  
*VAN DE KOELE MEREN DES DOODS*

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In 1964 the well-known Dutch psychiatrist H. C. Rümke published a study which he modestly called an essay, on Frederik van Eeden's famous turn-of-the-century novel *Van de koele meren des doods* ("*Of Death's Cool Lakes*"<sup>1</sup>). The work was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences with the extraordinary aim of having the tragic fate of the heroine, Hedwig Marga de Fontaync, analyzed as if it were a real case history.

Before we begin our discussion of this study, we should first recall the plot of Van Eeden's novel. Hedwig's mother dies while she is still a child. She comes to fear sex and love death. At the family's country estate of Merwestee she meets a young man called Johan who falls in love with her, but she cannot give him real love in return and he kills himself. She marries a man who, like her, is afraid of sex, but she is dissatisfied with this marriage and runs away to Paris. Here she becomes a prostitute, attempts suicide, but is reconciled with life by a saintly woman called Sister Paula. She returns to Holland and lives with a peasant family, the Harmsens, but soon afterwards she dies.

Upon its first appearance in 1900, Van Eeden's book had been severely criticized and called "a medical tragedy," and "science dressed up as art, interesting especially for medical people, and particularly for psychiatrists."<sup>2</sup> (Stroman, 1964:16) In a forward to the second edition of 1904 the author rejected these interpretations, writing that the work owes its existence exclusively to artistic motives, and scientific ones are entirely alien to it. However much the author may have failed in the execution of this goal, there was no other than the rendition of his personal aesthetic emotion in order for others to experience it as well. (Van Eeden n.d.:5)

Although the intention of Rümke, who is an erudite man and well versed in literary matters, to reevaluate the book after sixty-four years is laudable, his "scientific" approach must be characterized as both wrong and dangerous. A psychiatrist dealing with a fictitious character, who of course lacks an authentic medical history and clinical record, can surely not form a diagnosis of the character's symptoms, which in this case are (Rümke 1964:130):

- (1) the psychoses and attempts at suicide;
- (2) the repetitive episodes in which Hedwig is depressed, sleeps badly, etc.;

- (3) the repetitive phenomena, indicative of particularities in her experiences, behaviour and character;
- (4) the development of eroticism and sexuality;
- (5) Hedwig's relation to death;
- (6) directive regulation.

Rümke concludes this list by stating that "the psychiatrist has the task of asking himself whether all these phenomena together form a structural unity." (*ibid.*) After considering this problem, he suddenly asks

What caused Hedwig to become a prostitute? What in Hedwig made it possible to do this? I suddenly notice that I almost entirely forget that I am in the process of judging a character from a novel. If I am fully aware of this, then there is only one answer to this question: because the creator wanted it that way. It sounds almost like a blasphemy. Here I suddenly touch upon a territory where my expertise comes to an end, namely upon the problem of what a character in a novel actually is. What the criteria for a good novel are. (*ibid.*143)

Unfortunately, this perspective frightens him, and he immediately goes on:

At this moment I leave this problem alone and act again as if I am writing about a woman who lives in our reality. I hope to say a few words about the problem of the novel later on. (*ibid.*)

Nowhere in the study is it clearer how preposterous Rümke's approach really is. Far from being blasphemous, it is essential to try to establish how Hedwig's character affects the reader within the framework of the fictitious world created by the author. Moreover, even if it could be proven that Van Eeden depicts a scientifically accountable case of a specific psychological pattern, the book would nevertheless be bad if the narration in it were poor. And so I will now discuss this novel as a literary work.

*Van de koele meren des doods* has in common with such world-famous stories as Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, that the theme of death is announced in the title itself. It is, moreover, repeated in the second sentence of the text: "The history of a woman. How she searched for Death's cool lakes, where the salvation is, and how she found it." (Van Eeden n.d.:7) It is of importance to note that "Death" is capitalized here, and that the reader is thus warned that he should interpret the word differently from the way he would without this sign. But Rümke writes:

Hedwig's desire for death until she met Sister Paula was not the death meant in the title. In that case the introductory lines of the book should have read: 'The history of a woman. How she searched for Death's cool lakes, in an entirely wrong manner, and how she found it, after it had been pointed out to her, in a completely different way.' This does not satisfy me. (159)

In this passage, the dangers inherent in Rümke's approach again come clearly to the fore. Why is a writer obliged to confront his readers at the outset of his artistic creation, which is not a treatise after all, with well-defined concepts? We may, on the contrary, assume that the author made this initial statement ambiguous on purpose. The subsequent text of the novel clarifies for the reader that after an extended period during which she is longing for death as a deliverance from her physical existence, the heroine, under the guidance of Sister Paula, starts to see death in a new light, namely as the death of her personal egoistic desires. The ambiguity in the initial statement concerning the nature of the heroine's search for salvation foreshadows the fact that her subsequently described desire for mere extinction is not final. Thus, we should not dispute the statement but acknowledge its literary effectiveness. Rümke's major fault lies in his assumption that the psychology of real life is identical to that of fiction. This misconception makes his findings simply invalid.

The discrepancy between the two psychologies was well understood by a colleague of Rümke's, Buytendijk, who wrote a study in 1950 with the revealing title *The Psychology of the Novel*. Here we read, for instance:

When participating in situations of the world of the novel, in moods, feelings, emotions, passions of the fictitious character, about whom I care because of the creative power in the word, I am liberated from the world which, in my concrete existence, forces me to rational acts or playful distraction, makes me play a part, or changes me into a spectator. (Buytendijk 1950:26)

Liberated in this fashion, "We have to believe in the novel more than a child in a fairy tale....Not the incidental reality, but the reality of the possible is being discovered by means of our belief." (*ibid.*27; italics in original) As the following investigation hopefully will show, it is precisely the carefully delineated psychological possibilities in Hedwig's literary portrait which cause the novel to be so effective as a work of art.

In general terms, the contents of the novel may be characterized as the description of Hedwig de Fontayne's tragic downfall as the result of her uninterrupted and invincible longing for her physical extinction until the moment that this desire

seemingly, but in fact only temporarily, fades away under the influence of the elevating conversations with Sister Paula. Before her thirteenth birthday, in a dream about a boy who somewhat resembles a tall lad whom she met at a party, her longing for death already comes strikingly to the fore:

Silently he took her by the hand and led her through the vegetable garden where enormous fruits were lying in a strange, golden sunshine, and said: 'here I have to kill you, is that all right with you?' and it was not only all right with her but she thought it marvellous and closed her eyes.... And she preserved this dream as the most precious gem among the treasures of her own emotions which she never showed to anyone. (23)

During the summer following this event, Hedwig falls seriously ill with abdominal typhus, which kills her mother, and "from that moment on everything related to death and dying became so important for Hedwig that she started to be attracted and enchanted by it." (29) The statement is actually redundant because Hedwig's enchantment existed already at the moment of her dream. These and many other instances in the text make it abundantly clear that Hedwig's life was permeated with thoughts and feelings of death. In this connection, it is important to add that the novel does not end with Hedwig's new interpretation of death as the dying off of egoistic strivings as the result of the teachings of Sister Paula, which she thereafter puts into practice during her stay with the Harmsens.

According to the critic Frans Coenen, Hedwig's conversion has, on the contrary, been given exclusive prominence by the author:

The moral recovery, that simultaneously is a physical one and becomes possible because of the goodness and integrity of Hedwig's character, has been described by Van Eeden with great inner satisfaction. (Coenen 1936:17)

And with reference to the end of the novel he writes:

Hedwig's ascetic life with that poverty-stricken family, and with peace of mind, is something we duly note, but it does not move us; in fact we don't believe it, simply because the author fails to convince us. And it is with mixed feelings that we take leave of Hedwig Marga de Fontayne. (18)

But then Coenen fails to acknowledge that the novel ends with Hedwig's premature death at the age of thirty-two. It is true that it is described in just one sentence: "After that, she caught pneumonia during a chilly autumn and succumbed in ten days." (264) But because of the continuous reminders throughout the text of the novel

that the heroine longs for physical extinction, her actual death is the most convincing among the possible endings.

Generally speaking, the mode of narration of Hedwig's history is singularly apt to prepare the reader for all forthcoming calamities. From the very beginning of the novel, the omniscient narrator, who has intimate knowledge of whatever touches his heroine's heart and mind and who follows her like a shadow, not only describes Hedwig's joyful moments but also her sad and frightful ones, and augments their significance by making a fine distinction between an actual experience and its effect on Hedwig's mood when it is revived in her memory. Furthermore, he makes a constant effort to comment on the influence of an important event on the further development of Hedwig's life. Thus, when describing the heroine's youth, he points to joyful and good moments:

In her house in the city, her young life was carefree in the beginning. She found here and there food for joyfulness, like one who is hungry in the morning. There were good hours in the morning at the breakfast table when the quiet sun shone in the conservatory, and also during winter evenings when she was sitting on her father's lap at the open fireplace. And the hours of intimate togetherness with her mother. (8)

But then there is the other side of the coin:

But the joyful hours were scattered like rare flowers on a big bleak moor of dullness which she at first crossed free of care, thinking of the flowers without paying attention to the bleakness of the much bigger intermediate space. (*ibid.*)

In addition, there were moments not only of unpleasant, but even of frightful experiences:

And, being yet a child, she must have been nine years old at the time, the oppressive feeling of something enormous and awful, heavy and sad, already started, and it did not want to go away, although she never really saw it. It was in all kinds of places, when she was occupied with anything, and like a foul odour, it attached itself to all kinds of things. (*ibid.*)

Whereas good and bad moments alternate capriciously without any obvious reason as long as she has to lead the hateful city life, her mood predictably changes for the better as soon as she is in the countryside:

This summer life meant such a mighty and profound change for Hedwig every year, that it seemed to her as if she were actually leading two lives, as though she were two beings.

The strange aridity which poisoned all thought about her city life blossomed in the country into an extremely sweet sadness which was almost sharp because of its loveliness. (15)

Being prone to quick, inexplicable, and therefore unexpected mood changes, it could happen that Hedwig was all set to enjoy something, but that the real experience turned out to be unpleasant:

It was also such a day when she celebrated her nineteenth birthday. In two months she would get married. Now there was something which made her sad and irritable and which she did not understand herself very clearly and could not have explained. It was that she expected to enjoy this birthday with a special spring feeling, with a strong, powerful feeling of happiness because now, after all, she lived in love and had to be happy. The truth was that this expectation turned into a total disappointment. (119)

The heroine's depressive moods are further reinforced by the regular statements of the narrator that what at one time had been a positive experience turns upon revival into a gloomy memory and into a clear awareness that the happiness of yore is gone. The following, for instance, is said about the scattered joyful hours:

Later, when reminiscing, she thought only of the moor, the big somber plain, without thinking of the flowers. And it was a miracle to her how carefree she had managed to be in so much deadliness. (8)

In his comment on Hedwig's disappointing feelings on her nineteenth birthday, the narrator writes:

She noticed for the first time that she enjoyed only the memory of former springtime feelings. She was looking for the feeling that she had had that evening at Merwestee by the mulberry tree. Oh, that had been indescribably wonderful. And what she experienced now was only pleasant because it resembled that feeling. (119)

Quite regularly, the narrator also links certain habits or feelings of the heroine to future experiences and thus, by anticipating them, simultaneously reinforces their credibility and the artistic unity of the novel. At about fifteen Hedwig starts to fight against feelings of sensuous excitement, which strongly attract her but also frustrate her because she thinks that she should condemn them. The narrator then comments:

During her entire life, until her last days, when she was still living according to the strictest rules, she had to fight with

this seemingly so beautiful and attractive licentiousness...But although she later witnessed the most horrendous debauchery in the world, its alluring vision did not leave her until her death. (65-66)

In this subtle way it is foreshadowed that her sensuality will never really fade away.

While still living at home, she develops a panicky fear of a button shop in a quiet back street not far from her house:

Hedwig feared that place more than any horror she had experienced in the world. Saying 'more than death' would have meant little to her because for death she felt the opposite of fear... During the times that her mind become sick and restless, this horrendous vision did not leave her in peace day and night. (81-82)

And, indeed, at the end of the novel the narrator follows up on this passage in his description of Hedwig's mental derangement after the loss of her baby girl, when she is in the huge Parisian hospital La Salpêtrière:

Most of the time they found her busying herself with attentive counting, her finger on the floor or moving along the walls. It seemed as if she were counting money. But when she was asked, she answered in a whisper: 'buttons, buttons,' and continued counting, for hours on end. Then she was in the button shop, the phantom of her youth. (220)

It is not surprising to find that Rümke provides no answer as to what the buttons may symbolize. He writes, however: "It is again proof of Van Eeden's powerful talent as a writer that he depicts such an experience so convincingly and forcefully that the image remains unforgettable." (57) It has to be acknowledged that on other occasions Rümke also refers to the impact of Van Eeden's creative powers, thus demonstrating that he is well aware of their importance. But nowhere does he comment on how that powerful talent operates and for what reasons a particular image is unforgettable. Although I will make no attempt to explain why Van Eeden chose a button shop, it is doubtless possible to comment on its artistic effectiveness. Young Hedwig is brought up in an affluent milieu and has learned to appreciate its glittering parties, but towards its everyday surface dullness her sensitive and imaginative mind slowly develops a repulsion of such intensity that it begins to frighten the heroine at the same time. Being well prepared by the author to accept such conflicting emotions in Hedwig, which also result in a feeling of guilt, the reader can easily imagine that the girl transfers her aversion from her stately parental home to an object, a stuffy and smelly button shop which is much more suitable to evoke her intense feelings of dislike. Quintessential in this respect is not the author's

choice of a *knopenwinkel* but its credibility because of the process of careful preparation of the reader for the emergence of this sort of feeling in the heroine.

When, on the contrary, the reader is not prepared but is confronted with an obviously contrived coincidence, the magic of the psychology of art fails to work. During the short life-span of her baby, Hedwig prefers not to sleep because the moment she dozes off she sees the hideous face of a one-eyed beggar in her dream. But later, after the child's death, when she flees by train from the cottage on the British coast to London, she suddenly sees among the multitude of strangers the familiar face of the one-eyed beggar. Regardless of whether or not such clairvoyance occurs in real life, its sudden appearance in the framework of the novel strikes the reader as contrived.

It was stated earlier that throughout the novel the omniscient narrator follows the heroine like a shadow and comments on her every thought and act. For this reason, the instances where his presence is not obvious, i.e. in the passages where direct speech, interior monologues and, in the final part of the novel, Hedwig's diaries are used, are marked in the text and attract the reader's special attention. For instance, the phrase "here I have to kill you, is that all right with you", uttered by the tall boy who appeared in her dreams, cannot fail to strike the reader both by its unexpectedness and, amidst the narrator's intricate commentary, by the simplicity of its wording.

Another case in point is the short dialogue between Hedwig and her father after her mother's death. Because of the girl's own serious illness, the father has at first hidden this news from her. But then, when Hedwig emphatically asks where her mother is, her father tells her: "She is - with God." (28) Her first reaction is that this must be something beautiful, but when she sees her father's pale face and his trembling hands, she asks:

"Did she have to throw up just like me?" Father shook his head and grew quieter because of the question. "But then everything is beautiful and happy, isn't it?" "Yes, Hetty," father said. (29)

The simplicity of this short dialogue highlights Hedwig's childishness. It is markedly different from the narrator's comment on Hedwig's change of mood after her recovery, when she comes downstairs for the first time and notices several objects that had belonged to her mother:

And the heavy gloom and desolateness of the confused family changed the glory of her initial thoughts into an even darker night. She now saw what had been lost, and how mother's bliss did not give any resplendence to what had

stayed behind, and now she became more inconsolable than the others. (ibid.)

The same discrepancy can be noticed in the description of Hedwig's confusion about the alternating appeal and aversion which she feels for her dawning sexual desires at that time. The narrator's style is elaborate here. It is mentioned that she starts to notice dirty and unmentionable things in the street which formerly would not have made any impression on her:

After she had seen such things once, their image persecuted her and tormented her with aversion, but attracted her nevertheless with an invincible interest. And not only simply dirty things, but also more secretly naked and uncovered figures belonged to them. The height of these feelings was on one occasion reached when she had seen how a heavily built drunkard had stripped off his clothes. The sensation came to her as a shock, intense, oppressive, unexpected and incomprehensible, like a sudden illness, and a feeling of sickness lingered on. (42)

And in her confusion the heroine turns to God. This prayer in the form of an interior monologue is again marked by the greatest possible simplicity:

Father God, why was I so frightened by that man? He was ugly and drunk and I was deathly afraid of him. But I wanted to see it, just the same. And if I saw him again and he did something like that again, then I would like to look again. And why did I suddenly become so sick? And do all men look like that? And do kind, nice boys, like Henri, also look like that? Oh, father God, I think that in that case I would not be frightened but would like it. Please show me that once, too. Oh, I pray to you for that, show me that once, at least once in my life. (ibid.)

After an absence of three years, following the mother's death, the family again spends a summer at their country estate. Hedwig's heart is filled with sweet joy when she sees once more the many familiar places in the house and the garden. But she is also drawn to pay a visit to the village cemetery where her mother is buried. Since the latter was the only one in her life who gave her love and understanding, at the sight of the grave her pent-up feelings burst into a heart-felt cry for her mother. At this highly emotional point the narrator introduces Johan into Hedwig's life. He belongs to the working class and turns out to be an orphan.

At the time of this encounter, Hedwig is about eighteen and entering adulthood. It is therefore proper to summarize here the manner in which her youth is described. It can be said that the narrator uses a wide range of experiences in his presentation of this

period in the heroine's life. There are moments of joy, sadness and great unfocused fear. There is the ongoing battle with sexual desires which Hedwig, for reasons unknown, considers sinful. To the reader it must be obvious that her unfortunate reaction to them is the result of her inability to channel them in a satisfactory manner. And finally, in this maze of feelings and sensuality, fear and guilt, there is the powerful longing for physical extinction.

Thus, well prepared by the narrator's preceding characterization of the heroine as a deeply frustrated girl, the reader can easily believe that on the threshold of adulthood she is totally incapable of reacting naturally to the sincere and deep-felt expressions of love on the part of her new ardent admirer, Johan.

The narrator's comment on their first encounter, immediately after Hedwig's cry for her mother, is as follows: "But the two looked at each other and they both felt that the strangeness which generally separates two people who meet for the first time had been removed." (47) The development of the love relation, however, proves the contrary. There is a basic strangeness between the two which the narrator lays bare by slowly but masterfully revealing the tragic causes of the children's - as he calls them - misunderstanding of the nature of their mutual feelings. Hedwig, deprived as she was after her mother's death of loving care for her personal emotional needs, is startled by the sudden focus of attention which is projected onto her by a seemingly unimportant boy. For Johan the relationship is of an entirely different dimension:

He was not just pleasantly surprised as Hedwig was; his soul opened up, completely and spontaneously, in blind faith. He did not rejoice like her; joy was too weak a word for his emotions. Slowly but surely his life started to be set aglow....Thus, there was a deep emotional difference with a seeming similarity at the surface. But the two, innocent and inexperienced as they were, were unable to see through this. (49)

Johan's future existence depends entirely on Hedwig's acceptance of his deep-seated love, whereas she treats their relationship as a game. In the end this causes the poor boy's tragic death:

Thus she did her first big evil thing to her fellow man, the consequences of which were terrible and a never-ceasing source of pain until her death. And she did it with innocent lightheartedness, as easily as giving alms to a poor creature. And she was doomed to act like that with all the goodness and fine feelings that were in her, because after her mother's death she missed the intimacy and the advice of experienced people, of which she would not have been deprived in a well-organized society. (52)

Moreover, the above-mentioned misconception of the heroine that her sexual desires are sinful cannot fail to have an adverse effect on her relationship with Johan, who is ready to accept and forgive everything if only he is allowed to approach her emotionally and physically:

It meant that in her the unfortunate separation had already evolved which is like a crack in her pure soul...the separation between the intimacy of the soul and the intimacy of the body. She had become acquainted with the sweet joys of physical contact without emotional intimacy. These joys were now forever connected for her with the dark concepts of sin and evil. And she had become the victim of the false idea that what in essence should be a noble and sacred joy is always bad and ugly. And this error resulted in the still more fatal one that the perfect union of man and wife is possible and can be beautiful without bodily union. (86)

Hereafter follows a short interior monologue:

She thought therefore: if only none of all those bad and mean things come between Johan and myself, none of all those sickly sweet feelings of my nights...then everything remains beautiful. (ibid.)

Whereas the simple wishful thinking of her youth could be interpreted as the result of her childishness, the above-mentioned thoughts demonstrate that this kind of thinking continued into her adulthood, and they force the reader to start to consider the heroine as *weltfremd*.

In his portrayal of the tragic relationship between the two young people who fail to understand the nature of each other's emotions, the narrator makes very sparing use of direct speech. He does, however, indicate that they sometimes are involved in long conversations, as, for example, prior to one of Hedwig's departures for Merwestee. Johan, in his attempt to compensate for his inhibitions in giving expression to his ardent feelings which may well be misunderstood by Hedwig, is inclined to make use of theatrical words:

He spoke of his "burning passion for beauty and goodness," of his "ecstasy," of his "amorous pangs," and with special reference to the feelings which Hedwig aroused in him "as if light in golden and silver streams is poured over me by the bucketful." (85)

Hedwig's reaction is rendered in a characteristic manner. Her refusal to become clearly conscious of the genuine passion which she arouses in Johan and of which she is, consequently, only vaguely aware, is depicted by means of a metaphor:

And only then Hedwig realized some of the evil in which she was imprisoned, as if in a self-spun web, like a child who has started a fire while playing, and starts to pay attention to the dense smoke and the crackling of the flames all around instead of to the nice light. (*ibid.*)

What, however, is well-defined in her mind, is expressed in a manner the reader could have expected the heroine to use herself: "But admitting and approving would have resulted in things she did not want, such as kissing and later on marriage." (85) Her inner frustration hereafter, expressed in direct speech, is again childishly simplistic, as a matter of fact, naive, coming, as it does, from the mouth of an eighteen-year-old girl: "Waarom kan het dan toch niet? Waarom moest alle moois bedorven worden?" (*ibid.*; Why is it impossible? Why must everything that's beautiful be spoiled?) The subsequent interior monologue, quoted above, in which she again naively and in an alienated manner hopes for her relationship with Johan to remain pure, only reinforces this impression.

The relationship takes an extremely dramatic turn after Hedwig meets her future husband, Gerard Wijbrands, a law student, during student festivities in Leiden. The prospect of Hedwig's forthcoming marriage throws poor Johan completely out of kilter, and in a flash of uncontrollable temper he deeply disgraces her by sending her a letter in which he calls her, among other things, a whore. In addition to that, he draws a deeply offensive portrait of a woman with a striking resemblance to Hedwig, and succeeds in getting it placed in the window of one of the city's well-known bookstores. And again, in a very naive manner, Hedwig urges Gerard to go and tell Johan that she doesn't deserve the scandalous letter she has received from him:

'Frankie, are you going to help me now? Are you going to be my knight? I'm counting on you now... I went to Jo but he didn't want to talk to me and I became afraid and nervous. But you're strong. Will you go to him and tell him that he's mistaken and that I... don't deserve... all those nasty things.' And after a moment of silence: 'What does it all mean, Frankie? What's a whore?'(115)

Thus, the infrequent instances during which the heroine's direct speech or interior monologue appear in the novel evoke the impression that it is beyond her mental scope to grasp the true nature of the forces, the internal as well as the external ones, which continually shape her destiny in ways she doesn't want.

For this reason, the naïveté characteristic of her Parisian diaries, which may be considered a form of interior monologue, is in keeping with the character portrayal of the preceding parts of the novel:

26 September 1880... Things aren't looking up for me yet. I hoped for the autumn feeling and went for a walk in the Bois de Boulogne. But it didn't come. For a moment in town I felt something Dutch, but dull. The lady says I have to move. Was cold last night. I still have 16 francs. Four earned by sewing for Victorine, 12 by +. I am now decided. First look for a cheaper room. It was the last +. God help me... 4 S. (228; + means that she has succumbed to seduction. 4 S. means four shots of morphine)

It cannot be denied that her existence in a seamy quarter of the French capital, and her surrender to prostitution in order to buy morphine, are in violent contrast to the comfortable way of life she had known in Holland. However, the fact that Van Eeden did not alter his heroine's basic approach to life even in such drastically changed circumstances speaks volumes for his deep understanding of how to draw a convincing fictitious character. If he had altered it, he would have had to prepare the reader for a fundamental change in the young woman's character. But he did not do so. Coenen's sharp criticism is therefore undeserved:

Van Eeden could not cope with this harsh and sad reality. And he did not want to cope, to get involved to the point that it became human. It was an aberration and that is that. And this is the reason that all of this only makes a poor and even grotesque impression, because its essence has been forgotten....With all the hard rough reality there was here no less inner drama than previously, if we may believe the diary. Why then did Hedwig's biographer feel the need to turn away so preciously and pretentiously from that somber background that in his hand could perhaps have become even grandiose? (Coenen 1936:18)

Coenen seems to have forgotten something essential, namely that throughout the novel all the heroine's direct statements are characterized by a certain naïveté, an inability to truly assess her inner reality or that outside of her. For that reason it must be considered, on the contrary, a fine finishing touch of the narrator not to have deviated from the heroine's consistent character trait, her naïveté, even in those completely different circumstances of life.

The major device employed by the narrator to establish unity in the complex and diversified contents of the novel is the recurrent use of the prominent themes of death, longing for death, longing for joy and deliverance, sexual frustration, and faith in God. There is one scene in the Johan episode which is repeated, and because of its artistic effectiveness I will discuss it here. Hedwig's annual visits to the family estate of Merwestee to spend the summer and her absence from town for a considerable amount of time, are plainly unbearable for Johan. Because she feels lonely, Hedwig often finds it difficult

to spend the Sundays at Merwestee. Thus, early in the morning of one of these days of rest, she sets out for a long walk toward the sea:

When she was already close by the long iron footbridge she saw someone lying in the grass at the dike. She thought: he is ill or dead. But there was no reason for this thought as far as she could notice. He was lying comfortably, bareheaded, in the sun, his cheek on his hands, his hat and cane beside him. Coming closer she saw that it was Johan and that he was sound asleep. Hedwig had a strong palpitation. She realized that she had been frightened. Not because she recognized Johan - that had calmed her down - but because she had thought she was seeing a dead person. What was the reason for that? It had occurred quite often that she had seen a man sleeping at the dike. (92)

When Johan awakens, they walk around and have what seems to be a very nice day. Soon hereafter, Hedwig meets her future husband, but, once married, is extremely unhappy, mainly because Gerard Wijbrands has banned all forms of sexuality from his life. Although this purity initially attracts Hedwig because of her conviction of sex being sinful, she, basically being sensuous, cannot stand this unnatural state of affairs for too long. Thus she flees to the only place where she can hope for some peace of mind: Merwestee. On the third day of her stay there she receives a note from Johan: "Do you want to take our last walk again tomorrow? Then I'll let you have your way." (133) After a restless night in which she has a terrifying dream about Johan, the next day, again a Sunday, she nevertheless feels better

because this time the oppressive Sunday feeling was noticeably less... Close to the bridge she was looking intensely in front of her. She was in no doubt that she would see him. And there he was, indeed. She immediately saw his dark figure, and for a moment it was like the last time. He was lying in the grass and sleeping... She was sitting patiently, and that lasted a long time. Time and again she wanted to wake him up, but held back, admonishing herself to be patient. Because she felt good about waiting and nobody knew how their being together would turn out. A light wind made the grass-blades bend and Johan's hair move. But suddenly she noticed that she was staring at a dark spot in the grass, where his arm disappeared under his body. It seemed as if this spot was becoming bigger. Her eyes widened and she clearly saw the red. (135)

In his note, Johan had invited Hedwig to come to the spot where he was going to commit suicide.

The striking effect is obviously not only due to the mere repetition of the scene. Johan's tragic suicide is carefully prepared

for in Hedwig's false impression, at their first meeting on the dike, that he is either ill or dead. Her false assumption this time does not come as a surprise to the reader, because he has repeatedly been informed by the narrator that for the unfortunate heroine death looms in every corner. Furthermore, he will readily believe the narrator's statement that Hedwig is not frightened by Johan's presence, but by her impression that he is dead. He has learned that the heroine is vaguely aware of the evil she has done to her ardent lover, so that she may very well be afraid of some fatal consequences resulting from it. Moreover, the extreme simplicity of Johan's note, which turns out to be the sinister announcement of his death, is in full agreement with the nature of the previous instances where direct speech was used. Therefore, after the foreboding dream about Johan before their second meeting and the realization of Hedwig's fear of seeing a dead man, the scene of Johan's suicide cannot fail to have a shocking effect on the reader. It demonstrates that Van Eeden not only was able to apply a wide range of literary devices but that he was also a master in skilfully combining them.

In this article I have attempted to analyze the most prominent literary themes and devices by means of which Van Eeden narrates the tragic fate of Hedwig Marga de Fontayne. It is not my intention to deny that Van Eeden's training as a psychiatrist contributes to the extraordinary ability with which he portrays the complex life of his heroine. I do argue, however, that the value of this expertise does not lie in Van Eeden's ability to unfold the life of a deeply troubled young woman in accordance with histories of authentic psychiatric cases, but in the intimate knowledge of a wide range of behaviour patterns which these cases provided and from which he could select elements for the creation of his fiction. But it is thanks to his masterful application of the literary devices he uses that the life which he selected for his heroine becomes convincing and effective. For this reason, *Van de koele meren des doods* is not a more or less convincing psychiatric casebook but a work of art.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In the 1902 English title, *The Deepes of Deliverance*, death is not mentioned. Because of the theme's importance in the novel it seems to me essential to keep the word in the title.

<sup>2</sup>All translations from the Dutch are mine.

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