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# The Power to Pray

*Models for Prayer in Children's Books by Willem G. van de Hulst*

*David J. Bos*

VU University and University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

*d.j.bos@uva.nl*

## Abstract

Drawing on Marcel Mauss, this article contends that historians and sociologists should not focus on what prayer brings about, but on how it is brought about or “produced.” Specifically, it aims at bringing to light normative conceptions of prayer, through content analysis of Protestant children’s books, written by the Netherlands’ most important twentieth-century author of juvenile literature, W.G. van de Hulst. A recurrent theme in his earlier works is a “breach” in the prayer life of the (male) protagonists – their “conversion” from conventional, “ritual” prayer to individualised, improvised, “sincere” prayer. In his later works, by contrast, Van de Hulst suggested that “real prayer” can be learned gradually, in an intimate relationship between children – notably girls – and their mothers. The gender- and age-specific nature of these models for prayer is shown by mapping out differences between prayer scenes, e.g. with respect to social setting, body postures, and forms of address.

## Keywords

spirituality – religious socialization – history of prayer – Protestantism – content analysis – children’s books – The Netherlands – gender differences

## 1 Introduction: Prayer as a Social Act

Whether one defines spirituality as a form of religion or as an alternative to it, prayer is a case in point. According to the 2012 European Social Survey, praying is not uncommon for Europeans who do not belong to any specific religion or denomination, and who never attend a church, mosque, synagogue or temple (apart from special occasions such as burials or weddings). In the Russian

Federation, less than 10% of these non-members and non-attenders aged 15 and over say they occasionally pray “apart from at religious services.” In the Czech Republic the figure is even less than 5%, but in Italy this holds for almost one fifth, in Germany and Switzerland for almost a quarter, and in Finland for *more* than a quarter. In Europe as a whole, 13.5% of the aforementioned citizens sometimes pray, with 2.4% doing so every day. If one further narrows down this category by also excluding those respondents who have ever belonged to a specific religion or denomination, this percentage decreases of course; but even in this case, it remains at about 11% – and about 18% in Italy and Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this endurance of prayer, historians and sociologists of religion have largely left the study of prayer in the modern era to psychologists.<sup>2</sup> The latter tend to focus on what prayer brings about – not so much in the outside, material world as in the minds and lives of those who pray. This paradigm dates from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when liberal Protestant theologians and scholars of religion such as Louis-Auguste Sabatier, Cornelis Petrus Tiele, and Friedrich Heiler contended that prayer is the essence of religion, and that it is primarily a personal, individual way of relating to transcendent reality. “The miracle of prayer,” Heiler wrote, “does not lie in the accomplishment of the prayer [*Gebetserfüllung*], in the influence of man on God, but in the mysterious contact which comes to pass between the finite and the infinite Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

1 ESS6–2012, ed.2.1; data retrieved from <http://nesstar.ess.nsd.uib.no/webview> (my calculations). I leave aside countries with less than 100 respondents from the ranks of the “non-members and non-attenders.” The six consecutive European Social Surveys do suggest a slight decrease, from about 13% – of the non-members and non-attenders who never belonged to a religious denomination – in 2002, and 14% in 2004 to 12% in 2006 and 2008, and 11% in 2010, 2012 and 2014 (ESS1–2002 ed. 6.3, ESS2–2004, ed.3.3, ESS3–2006, ed.3.4, ESS4–2008, ed.4.2, ESS5–2010, ed.3; ESS6–2012, ed.2.1; ESS7–2014, ed. 1.0). This decrease is partly an artefact of changes in the list of countries where the surveys were held, but in France, Belgium, and the UK the percentages were indeed lower in 2010 and 2012 than they were in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. In the Netherlands, the percentage remained fairly stable for many years (12% in 2002, 15% in 2004, 14% in 2006, 2008 and 2010) but strongly decreased in recent years (10% in 2012, 7% in 2014).

2 See for an excellent exception, Rick Ostrander, *The Life of Prayer in a World of Science: Protestants, Prayer, and American Culture, 1870–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead, eds., *A Sociology of Prayer* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

3 Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press 1932), 357. Original version: “Nicht in der Gebetserfüllung, in der Einwirkung des

A very different view of prayer was put forward by the French social scientist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). In his unfinished doctoral thesis, *La prière* (1909), he exposed the liberal Protestant bias of Sabatier and Tiele, whose scholarly appraisal of prayer seemed to aim at proving that true religion could well do without confessional statements, sacraments, and all such “externals.”<sup>4</sup> Mauss, by contrast, emphasised that prayer is an essentially social phenomenon: “[W]hile it takes place in the mind of the individual, prayer is above all a social reality outside the individual and in the sphere or ritual and religious convention.”<sup>5</sup> Both in its forms and in its contents, he argued, prayer is a social act, being sometimes reserved to a specific category of people, and usually involving specific postures and word-formation, timing, and location. It is by analysing all these *rules*, how they evolved over time, and how they are taught to individual believers that one can get insight into prayer, Mauss argued – not by interviewing people about their experiences because this method depends too much on respondents’ introspection. “If there is one subject for which introspective observation is totally inadequate, that subject is certainly prayer.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, instead of focusing on what prayer *brings about*, research should focus on how it is *brought about* or “produced” – not only by individual believers, or by the small communities they constitute, but by the larger society or culture to which they belong. This article takes up Mauss’s suggestion by analysing a genre of texts that may have played an important role in prayer socialization: not prayer books, which he explicitly mentions, but religious children’s books. More specifically, it will look into the oeuvre of the Netherlands’ most prolific and popular twentieth-century author of juvenile literature.

## 2 W.G. van de Hulst *alias* Willem G. Vandehulst *alias* Van Holst

In 1963, Willem Gerrit van de Hulst was buried in Utrecht – the Dutch city where he was born in 1879, and had lived almost all his life. The funeral,

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Menschen auf Gott, liegt das Wunder des Gebets, sondern in der geheimnisvollen Berührung, die sich zwischen dem endlichen und dem unendlichen Geist vollzieht.” *Das Gebet: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung*, 4th ed. (Munich: Reinhardt, 1921), 491.

4 Cf. W.S.F. Pickering, “Introduction to an Unfinished Work,” in Marcel Mauss, *On Prayer* (New York: Durkheim Press), 1–15.

5 Mauss, *On Prayer*, 36.

6 Mauss, *On Prayer*, 32.

attended by a large crowd, took place at the cemetery where his father had worked as a stone-cutter until his untimely death in 1887. As a boy, Willem had initially been expected to follow in his father's footsteps, but he was selected for a teaching traineeship instead. After completing this training at age 18, he was appointed schoolmaster at a Protestant parish school, in a poor brick-makers' neighbourhood.<sup>7</sup> "It put up a really very poor population, living rough lives, internally weakened by alcoholism, inbreeding and excess labour, with a lamentably low intellectual level."<sup>8</sup> He would work there until his retirement in 1940; from 1913 onwards, as the school's headmaster.

Van de Hulst derived many of his views on education from Jan Ligthart (1859–1916), the most influential representative of educational progressivism (*Reformpädagogik*) in the Netherlands. Ligthart – “the Dutch Pestalozzi” – pleaded for recognising children's individual talents and needs, and granting them the freedom to try, explore, and question. Education, both at home and in school, should be *vom Kinde aus*: from the children's point of view and understanding.<sup>9</sup>

Van de Hulst's position in the field of institutionalised religion was less outspoken. His second wife – the first had died during childbirth – was the daughter of a minister of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands: a denomination established in 1892 by (Neo)Calvinists like Abraham Kuyper who were dissatisfied with the liberal regime in the mainstream Netherlands Reformed Church. Van de Hulst himself however remained a member of the latter. He attended

7 In *Zoeken naar de ziel: Leven en werk van W.G. van de Hulst* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1994), 34, Daan van der Kaaden points out that Van de Hulst often depicted social injustice, but neither called his underprivileged readers to acquiesce in their poverty, nor to protest against it. See also Adriana Balke and Pieter Stokvis, “De ‘sociale kwestie’ in boeken voor de Nederlandse jeugd tussen 1870 en 1920,” in: *Pedagogiek*, 21 (2001), 8–20. See also Lea Dasberg, *Het kinderboek als opvoeder: Twee eeuwen pedagogische normen en waarden in het historische kinderboek in Nederland* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981).

8 “Ze huisvestte een wel heel arme bevolking, ruig van leven, door alcoholisme, inteelt en overmatige arbeid innerlijk verzwakt en intellectueel van een bedroevend laag peil,” W.G. van de Hulst, in *De boom groeide: Historische schets ter gelegenheid van het tweehonderdjarig bestaan der Ned. Hervormde Gemeente-scholen te Utrecht, 1748–1948* (Utrecht: Bijleveld, 1948), 71–72. See also W.G. van de Hulst, *Herinneringen van een schoolmeester* (Kampen: Kok, 1942); Rie van Rossum, *De jongen met de toverfluit: W.G. van de Hulst 70 jaar* (Nijkerk: Callenbach 1949); Jacques Dane, “Zelfportret van een schoolmeester: Het eeuwige leven van W.G. van de Hulst,” *Biografie Bulletin* 6 (1996), 140–148.

9 Nelleke Bakker, Jan Noordman, and Marjoke Rietveld-van Wingerden, *Vijf eeuwen opvoeden in Nederland: Idee en praktijk, 1500–2000* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2006).

church almost every Sunday, and rented a pew in his local church, but never accepted any ministry as an elder or a deacon. "I now work for tens of thousands," he once said.<sup>10</sup>

As a teaching trainee, Van de Hulst – who was then hardly older than the children, and wore shorts like them – had difficulty keeping order, until he discovered his talent for story-telling. Soon, he also started writing. From 1899 onward, several of his stories were published and, in October 1909, he published his first children's book, *Willem Wycherts*, the story of "a brave boy" at the time of the Dutch Revolt.<sup>11</sup> Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors of children's books – who were much more likely to be Protestants than Catholics – showed a predilection for this sort of historical setting.<sup>12</sup> Also in 1909, Van de Hulst was awarded two prizes by the Netherlands Sunday School Association: one for a booklet for young children (*Van een klein meisje en een grote klok*, translated as *The Little Girl and the Big Bell*) and another one for a more voluminous book for somewhat older children (*Ouwe Bram*, translated as *The Mystery of Old Abe*).

After this, Van de Hulst published almost one hundred more children's books, including a children's Bible (1918) and many school books. For half a century, his books were used at virtually all Protestant schools in the Netherlands – despite the objections of orthodox Protestants against his using *Heer* instead of *Heere*.<sup>13</sup> Since the time of Abraham Kuyper, the latter way of writing

10 "Ik werk nu voor tienduizenden." Source unknown; quoted in Van der Kaaden, *Zoeken*, 24. Van de Hulst did join the board of the – mainline Protestant – Nederlandsche Zondagschool-Vereeniging (Netherlands Sunday School Association) in 1935.

11 Van de Hulst published this book under the pseudonym Jan van de Croese. At the time – from 1907 until 1913 – he lived in Utrecht's Croesestraat. Cf. Van der Kaaden, *Zoeken*, 31. Historical fiction like *Willem Wycherts* is not taken into account in this article because of the additional problems of interpretation it offers.

12 Lea Dasberg, *Het kinderboek als opvoeder: Twee eeuwen pedagogische normen en waarden in het historische kinderboek in Nederland* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981); Jacques Dane, *De vrucht van bijbelsche opvoeding: Populaire leescultuur in protestants-christelijke gezinnen, ca. 1880–1940* (Hilversum: Verloren 1996); Jacques Dane, "Het eeuwige leven van W.G. van de Hulst? Over de veldtheorie van Pierre Bourdieu en de schrijverscarrière van W.G. van de Hulst," in *De smalle marge van de multiculturele samenleving: De multiculturele leescultuur in onderwijs en bibliotheek, boekproductie en beleid*, eds. Karen Ghonem-Woet and Piet Mooren (The Hague: NBD Biblion 2001); G.J. Schutte, ed., *De geschiedenis aan het volk verteld: Populaire protestants-christelijke geschiedschrijving in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2008).

13 Van der Kaaden, *Zoeken*, 41, 55.

TABLE 1 *Reviews of Van de Hulst by the league of Puritan Sunday School (NHZGG) 1930–1999*

	Total number of reviews	Positive verdict	References to “Heer/e”	References to prayer
1930–1939	72	54 75 %	31 43 %	11 15 %
1946–1949	26	17 65 %	16 62 %	2 8 %
1950–1959	92	71.5 78 %	58 63 %	16 17 %
1960–1969	97	86 90 %	56 58 %	26 27 %
1970–1979	36	32 89 %	6 17 %	6 17 %
1980–1989	44	40 91 %	19 43 %	6 14 %
1990–1999	19	18 95 %	5 26 %	4 21 %
TOTAL	385	318.5 83 %	191 50 %	71 18 %

Legend: “Positive verdict” = “recommended” or “warmly/strongly recommended”  
Data from <http://www.achterderug.nl/boekbeoordeling.php> [my calculations].

“Lord” – and pronouncing the final, silent *e* – has functioned as a shibboleth of orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup> Well into the twentieth century, reviewers of the league of “Puritan” Sunday Schools – *Nederlands[ch] Hervomde Zondagsschool-vere[e]niging op Gereformeerde[n] Grondslag* – seem to have regarded this an issue of major importance. In 1968, for example, a reviewer wrote: “A great pity that on p. 42, the name *Heere* is rendered as *Heer*.” Therefore, although this was “a good story,” it could not be *warmly* recommended.<sup>15</sup> Equally controversial was Van de Hulst’s use of the expression (*Onze*) *Lieve Heer* (“[our] Dear Lord” or “Blessed Lord”), which strict Protestants deemed “papist.”

### 3 “Spiritual Distress in a Child’s Heart”

Van de Hulst criticised early twentieth-century Christian children’s books for their religious conformism. “They all drip with virtue and demureness and

14 Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes: Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1570–1990* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996). See also Anne de Vries, *Wat heten goede kinderboeken? Opvattingen over kinderliteratuur in Nederland sinds 1880* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1989).

15 NHZGG 1968 review of the 11th edition of Van de Hulst’s *Kareltye*.  
See <http://www.achterderug.nl/boekbeoordeling.php>.

piety. There's not a trace of guilt and redemption, sin and grace."<sup>16</sup> In his view, Christian children's books should not be "no admonitions, no sermons in disguise, larded with Bible texts, no puppet-shows with soulless creatures" but should dare to address "the spiritual distress, which can be great also in a child's heart."<sup>17</sup> The primary aim of telling religious stories was "not the transference of knowledge, neither the explication, nor the recommendation of spiritual values, but: to make children kneel with deep *reverence* in the temple of God's holiness."<sup>18</sup>

And kneel is what many of his protagonists did. For example, in his 1934 Christmas narration *Jantje van de Scholtenhoeve* (translated as *The Night before Christmas*), Van de Hulst narrates how the five-year old son of a rich, rough, haughty farmer – who sees Christmas merely as an opportunity for showing off his wealth and importance – sets out to look for the Christ-child. He has heard about this child, and about this thing called prayer, from the servants. "Riek, the dairy-maid, told him about it yesterday night, when *she* put him to bed, because mother didn't have time."<sup>19</sup> Jantje gets lost, and almost freezes to death, but is saved by an old, poor, pious woman, who thanks God for saving the boy's life. The story ends with the conversion of the proud, selfish farmer and his wife.

"God is calling us ... O, let us pray that we may become different people; let us pray for forgiveness, for mercy ..." [...] The farmer folded his hands. "Shall we pray?" he whispered. Mother quietly cried ...<sup>20</sup>

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- 16 Van de Hulst, "Het Boek voor het Kind, hoe het groeide" (1938), quoted in Van der Kaaden, *Zoeken*, 58.
- 17 "Waar het Christelijk kinderboek niet is een vermaan, een gecamoufleerd gepreek, doorsponnen met Bijbelteksten, niet is een marionettenspel van ziellose wezens [...] maar – waar het de zielenood, die ook in 't kinderhart groot kan zijn, aandurft [...]," W.G. van de Hulst, "Waarom verdient het goede kinderboek onze diepe belangstelling?" in *Verslag van het congres "Boek en Jeugd," gehouden te 's-Gravenhage op 2 en 3 November 1951* (The Hague: Stichting voor Jeugdlectuur, 1952), 13.
- 18 "... àllereerst: het kind in diepe eerbied te doen knielen in de tempel van de heiligheid God," W.G. van de Hulst, *Herinneringen van een schoolmeester* (Kampen: Kok, 1949), 179.
- 19 "Riek, de melkmeid, heeft ervan verteld, gisteravond, toen *zij* hem naar bed bracht, omdat moeder geen tijd had ..." *Jantje van de Scholtenhoeve* (Nijkerk: Callenbach 1934), 5.
- 20 "God roept ons ... O, laten we toch bidden àndere mensen te mogen worden; laten we bidden om vergeving, om genade ..." [...] De boer vouwde zijn handen. 'Zullen we bidden?' fluisterde hij. Moeder schreide zacht ..." *Jantje*, 31–32.



This story has many standard ingredients, but is not quite representative of the way in which Van de Hulst wrote about prayer, since it only describes how *adults* are brought to their knees – not how children pray, or learn to do so. Already in his 1909 award-winning *The Little Girl and the Big Bell*, the author gave such an account. The story's protagonist, the daughter of a custodian, climbs the church tower because she wants to send God a prayer for her sick little brother. Her nightly expedition turns out to be just a dream, and yet the mission is accomplished. "The Lord Jesus did hear it, even though He is very far, in heaven high. He hears all little children who pray to Him and really *mean* it."<sup>21</sup>

This message is repeated again and again in Van de Hulst's *oeuvre*, for example, in a 1941 Christmas story, which was later published in English as *Better than Anything Else* and as *The Search for Christmas*. Despite its setting in the Middle Ages, it has many resemblances with *Jantje*. Two children – one rich, the other poor – set out to find the Christ-child, get lost in the snow, and are saved by an old, poor, pious woman. Crucially different, however, is that they themselves learn to pray: "[...] when you are back in your warm, little beds, you must pray; ... very *quietly*, very *alone*. The Lord Jesus will hear it. You looked for Him here, in the dark forest. And you couldn't find Him. But if you *pray*, He will be very close to you."<sup>22</sup>

#### 4 "For Our Youngsters" (*Voor Onze Kleinen*; VOK)

The aforementioned story makes up part of a series of booklets, *Voor onze kleinen* ("For our youngsters"; VOK), which some experts regard as the heart of Van de Hulst's *oeuvre*.<sup>23</sup> The 21 issues were published over a long period of

21 "De Here Jezus heeft het wel gehoord, al is Hij heel ver in de hoge hemel. Hij hoort alle kindertjes, die tot Hem bidden en het heusch ménen," *Van een klein meisje en een groote klok*, 5th ed. (Nijkerk: Callenbach 1925), 30. Johannes De Vliet translates the second sentence as follows: "He hears all children who pray to Him from their hearts," *The Little Girl and the Big Bell* (St. Catharines: Paideia, 1979), 43. Unless mentioned otherwise, all translations in this article are mine, and all Dutch editions of Van de Hulst are by Callenbach, Nijkerk.

22 "[...] als je weer in je warme bedje ligt, moet je *bidden*; ... heel stil, heel *alleen*. De Here Jezus zal het horen. Jullie gingt Hem zoeken, hier, in het donkere bos. En je kon Hem niet vinden ... Maar als je *bidt*, zal Hij heel dicht bij je zijn," VOK#15: *Kerstfeest*, 36.

23 See Andries Hibma's exceedingly informative website about Van de Hulst senior and junior: <http://www.wgvandehulst.com>.

time (1920–1958), but in a steady form: about 48 pages, with illustrations, and suitable both for being read by children – which was facilitated by hyphens or spaces between the syllables – and for being read out to them. For the publisher, Callenbach, this series would prove a goldmine.<sup>24</sup> Each of the issues had more than ten editions; seven had more than twenty, and one (#5) had no less than 25. The series owes much of this success to Sunday Schools that often gave these books as a Christmas present to their pupils. All but two issues (#4 and #8) were also published in Belgium, sometimes with minor adaptations for Flemish, Catholic readers.<sup>25</sup> All issues were translated into English, nine into German, eight into Afrikaans, and two issues into Frisian: a regional minority language in the Netherlands.<sup>26</sup>

In the following sections, these 21 booklets will be systematically analysed. It will be argued that they not only describe, but advocate specific ways of praying. In other words, they offer models *for* prayer, not merely models *of* prayer. These booklets are particularly suitable for such analysis because of their fixed format and their simplicity. To begin with, an overview will be given of more formal, external characteristics.

#### 4.1 *Protagonists' Gender, Number, Age and Class*

In a slight majority of stories (12/21), both boys and girls play a role (see table 3). The remaining stories have only girls (4) almost as often as only boys (5). This gender distribution of “characters” – children who are referred to with a proper name – remained almost constant over time. This is not surprising, since Van de Hulst and his publisher probably wanted to appeal to children of either sex. In reviews, indeed, these stories were usually referred to as “boys- and girls-books.”

24 Jacques Dane et al., “For Religion, Education and Literature: A Comparative Study of Changes in the Strategy and Profile of Traditionally Religious Publishing Houses in Belgium and the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century,” in *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 42:707–726.

25 According to the Dutch publisher, G.F. Callenbach, his Belgian colleague proposed using notaries instead of pastors. Van de Hulst objected but in the 5th Flemish edition (1962) of *VOK#18*, Annelies’s father is a doctor instead of a pastor. Moreover, instead of *de Here God* (“the Lord God”) and *de Here Jezus* (“the Lord Jesus”), *Onze Lieve Heer* (“Our [Dear] Lord”) and *de lieve Jezus* (“Sweet Jesus”) are used. Similar adaptations were made in the 7th Flemish edition (1960) of *VOK#15* and the second Flemish edition of *VOK#20*, <http://www.wgvandehulst.com/site/framesenior.html>, consulted on November 13, 2011; see also *Ouwe Bram leeft nog* 1 (1996) 10.

26 The English translations were published in Woudstra’s Bookhouse in the mid-1950s, by Paideia Press in the 1960s, and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s and by Neerlandia in association with Inheritance Publications in 2014.

TABLE 2 *The issues of the VOK-series, with their Dutch and English titles*

#	Year	Original title	English title/s
1	1920	<i>Fik</i>	<i>The Boss and I</i> alias <i>My Master and I</i>
2	1921	<i>Van Bob en Bep en Brammetje</i>	<i>Through the Thunderstorm</i>
3	1922	<i>"Allemaal katjes!"</i>	<i>Good and Naughty Kittens</i> alias <i>Kittens, Kittens, Everywhere</i>
4	1923	<i>Van den boozen koster!</i>	<i>To-morrow will be Sunday</i> alias <i>The Pig Under the Pew</i>
5	1924	<i>Het huisje in de sneeuw</i>	<i>Lost in the Snow</i>
6	1925	<i>Van drie domme zusjes</i>	<i>Three Foolish Sisters</i>
7	1927	<i>Bruun de Beer</i>	<i>Bruno the Bear</i>
8	1928	<i>"Zoo'n griezelig beest!"</i>	<i>The Secret in the Box</i>
9	1929	<i>Het wegje in het koren</i>	<i>Keep Out!</i> alias <i>The Forbidden Path</i>
10	1930	<i>Grote Bertus en kleine Bertus</i>	<i>Bert and Little Bert</i> alias <i>Herbie</i> <i>the Runaway Duck</i>
11	1931	<i>De wilde jagers</i>	<i>Three Little Hunters</i>
12	1932	<i>Anneke en de sik</i>	<i>Annie and the Goat</i>
13	1935	<i>Het plekje dat niemand wist</i>	<i>The Secret Hiding Place</i>
14	1940	<i>Kareltje</i>	<i>The Basket</i>
15	1941	<i>Het kerstfeest van twee domme kindertjes</i>	<i>Better Than Anything Else</i> alias <i>The Search for Christmas</i>
16	1945	<i>Het zwarte poesje</i>	<i>The Black Kitten</i>
17	1948	<i>Het klompje dat op het water dreef</i>	<i>The Little Wooden Shoe</i>
18	1951	<i>Annelies</i>	<i>The Rockity Rowboat</i>
19	1953	<i>Voetstapjes in de sneeuw</i>	<i>Footprints in the Snow</i>
20	1956	<i>De bengels in het bos</i>	<i>The Woods Beyond the Wall</i>
21	1958	<i>Kleine zwerver</i>	<i>Dear Little Tramp</i>

What did change, though, is the gender distribution of the *protagonists*: the characters around whose experiences the stories revolve. Ten stories have only girls as protagonists, eight have only boys, and only three (#2, #14, and #15) have both boys and girls in these roles. In the most recent stories (#15–21), female protagonists clearly dominate (5/7). This shift is connected to one in the Van de Hulst *oeuvre* at large. Initially, he – like other early twentieth-century male authors of children's books – wrote almost exclusively stories about, and for, boys. *The Little Girl and the Big Bell* is the exception that proves the rule. In 1927, though, he published a complete book about a little girl, *Gerdientje* – and,

TABLE 3 *VOK issues by protagonists' gender and number, per "set" of seven*

Issue #	Published in	Protagonists' gender			Protagonists' number	
		Boy/s	Boy/s and girl/s	Girl/s	Single	Plural
1–7	1920–1927	3	1	3	2	5
8–14	1928–1941	4	1	2	2	5
15–21	1945–1958	1	1	5	5	2
TOTAL		8	3	10	9	12

more importantly, her father<sup>27</sup> – soon followed by a whole series of books about another girl: *Rozemarijntje* (1933–1954).

In the VOK series, also the protagonists' *number* changed over time. Whereas the vast majority (10/14) of stories that were published before or during World War II have plural protagonists, five of the seven post-war stories just have one. This change is relevant because it increases the probability that a child prays without anyone else being present. Indeed, such "solitary" prayer by children repeatedly occurs in the seven latest stories, for example, in *Lost in the Snow* (#19), where the heroine gets lost in the fields and sprains her foot.

Poor child! This pain, so bad! You *couldn't* get up. And you were so alone; so *frightened* alone. O, and when it would get dark ...! What did you do then? Then you folded your cold, numb little hands, and respectfully closed your tear-filled eyes. And very softly your lips said something. So softly ... Would *that* help? Who would hear it? But you; – you *knew* who would hear it. God, in heaven, would hear it; even though your words were so soft, so afraid. Mother wouldn't. Grandpa and grandma *wouldn't*. They didn't even know where you *were*. But God, in heaven, did see you, you foolish girl, in that wide, white, and lonely land of winter. And *that* is why you had folded your little hands, and closed your eyes. *That* is why you had told *Him* about your fear, your grief, your pain. Then you were not alone after all. And Bello [the girl's dog] had come.<sup>28</sup>

27 Although this book is named after the girl, it does not describe her own life of prayer but that of her pious mother and impious father, who is eventually brought to his knees.

28 "Arm kind! Die erge pijn! Je kón niet opstaan. En je was zo alleen; zo báng alleen. O, en als het donker worden zou ...! Wat heb je toen gedaan? Toen heb je je koude, verkleumde

In another story with one protagonist but plural characters, Van de Hulst deliberately stages solitary prayer – but not by the heroine herself. When her illness comes to a crisis, her father, mother, brother, and sister pray simultaneously but separately, in three different rooms.

Night comes. In the darkness, mother *prays* for Santje ... Santje *herself* cannot say her little prayer; she is far too ill. In the attic, father, too, prays for his sick child ... Geertje and Gijs [Santje's sister and brother] pray on their knees, in front of the bed. Then they quickly duck in, but they still hear Santje moaning downstairs. And in their beds, deep under the blankets, they pray *again*; they silently pray for their little sister who is ill. God in heaven surely hears silent prayers.<sup>29</sup>

With this poignant, heart-breaking setting, and the assertion at the end of this scene, Van de Hulst underlines the value of solitary prayer<sup>30</sup> – something he also does in many books for somewhat older children.

The age of the leading characters is not by far as clear as their number or gender, but an indication is the age of the children for whom these stories were intended. Sunday school reviewers – who probably followed the publisher's

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handjes saamgevouwen; en je ogen, vol tranen, heb je eerbiedig dichtgedaan. En heel zacht hebben je lippen wat gezegd. Zo zacht ... Zou dat helpen? Wie zou het horen? Maar jij; – jij *wist* wel wie het horen zou. God, in de hemel. zou het horen; al waren je woorden zo zacht, zo bang. Moeder niet. Grootva en groetmoe *niet*. Zij wisten niet eens, waar je was. Maar God, in de hemel, zag jou, dom meisje, wel in het wijde, witte, eenzame land van de winter. En dáárom had jij je handjes gevouwen, je ogen dichtgedaan. Dáárom had jij *Hem* verteld van je bangheid, je verdriet, je pijn. Toen was je tòch niet alleen. En Bello was gekomen," VOК#19: *Voetstapjes*, 19.

- 29 "De nacht komt. Moeder, in het donker, *bidt* voor Santje ... Santje zèlf kan haar gebedje niet opzeggen: ze is veel te ziek. Op de zolder bidt vader ook voor zijn zieke kind ... Geertje en Gijs bidden op hun knieën voor het bed. Dan duiken ze er gauw in, maar ze horen wel, hoe Santje kreunt beneden, En in hun bed, diep onder de dekens, bidden ze wéér, bidden ze stil voor hun zieke zusje. God in de hemel hoort het stille bidden wel," VOК#16: *Poesje*, 32–33. In a much earlier book, *Zoo'n vreemde jongen* (1917), Van de Hulst also describes how the protagonist, his father, and his sister all pray separately for his safe return. After he has come back safe and sound, prayers of thanksgiving are said by him, his sister, and his mother, separately.
- 30 In a 1967 compilation, the penultimate sentence of the above quotation has been slightly revised: "And in their bed, deep under the blankets, very alone, they pray again, they quietly pray for their little sister who is ill." ("En in hun bed, diep onder de dekens, heel alleen, bidden ze wéér, bidden ze stil voor hun zieke zusje.") *Voor de kleintjes*, 87.

advice – usually deemed them suitable for 6- to 8-year olds, but sometimes also for children of age 4 to 6. In five stories (#7, #8, #13, #16, #17) children go to school. In all but one of these instances, they are boys, and the story's protagonists.<sup>31</sup>

The social class of the characters can be inferred from clues that may have escaped the young readers of hearers, such as the fact that children wear clogs (#1 and #2), or that they live next to a physician (#3). In others stories, however, the class position of the children and their families is explicitly discussed. According to custom in twentieth-century religious children's books, this position is often rather lowly – serving the edifying notion that one can be “rich” while owning very little. In #5, the protagonists' father is a railway worker, equipped with a cap and a spade, in #7 father is a chimney-sweeper, and in #16 he is a clog-maker. In #19, indirect indications are given of the protagonist's social position: her parents and grandparents are not on the telephone, her father is called “Jan” – a typically common name – and, again, wears clogs instead of shoes. Similarly, in the last story (#21), it is said that the family lives in a small house, and that the father wears clogs. *Annelies* (#18), by contrast, is the daughter of a minister of religion, while her best friend is the son of a farmer. Many other stories also offer this social chiaroscuro of a high-status and low-status character. For example, in #4, another clergyman's daughter, who wears a golden ring, gets to know three country boys who chase after a little pig, and in #10, the son of a peasant or agricultural labourer, Bertus, befriends the daughter of a physician (“Elly,” a rare name at the time). Bertus seems to notice the class difference: “My pa is not even called ‘pa.’ My father is called ‘father.’”<sup>32</sup> In #15, which is set in the Middle Ages, the young heroine lives in a castle, whereas the young hero lives in a small, lowly house. In #9, the class difference between the two girls is explicitly discussed.

Toos is wearing very pretty little shoes: patent leather shoes. And she is wearing a delicate, white apron, with lace. And she has a beautiful red ribbon in her hair. Her cheeks are red, too. Toos looks like a poppy in person. Tineke is wearing little clogs: old little clogs. And she is wearing a coloured little apron, with lots of squares, red and white. And she is wearing an old, black little bonnet. Her cheeks are pale. No, Tineke does not *at all* look like a poppy. [...] Toos lives far away in the big city. [...]

31 The exception is *VOK*#16, in which the protagonist is a little girl; her brother and sister go to school.

32 “Mijn pa heet niet eens ‘pa.’ Mijn vader heet ‘vader,’” *VOK*#10: *Bertus*, 27.

Her grandpa is the old village pastor. Tineke lives in a small, poor house. Tineke *doesn't* have such pretty clothes. Her little skirt is old, and her little bonnet is old, and one of her clogs has an iron bandage.<sup>33</sup>

Whereas Van de Hulst's female characters – as Toos and Tineke clearly show – can be rich, poor, or something in between, there is a strong link between gender and social class in these stories, as children with a high social status are almost always girls. In #6, for example, “three foolish sisters” get to know the bedridden little daughter of the local nobleman. Similarly, in #11, three boys – the sons of the local baker, schoolmaster, and milkman – get acquainted with a bedridden girl, whose parents have a maid-servant, which suggests they belong to the upper, or upper middle class. The only exception is Tom, one of the principal characters in #13, who is the son of a clergyman. Tom's buddy is the son of a baker, which indicates a much lower position, but the class difference between the two boys is not explicitly discussed.

#### 4.2 *Prayer Scenes in the VOK-Series*

The first and last stories (#1 and #21) strongly resemble one another, and differ from all the others because they are written in the first person singular. Moreover, in both stories, this narrator happens to be a dog, which opens a naive perspective on human behaviour – notably prayer.

But then ... then she did something strange. She folded her hands; closed her eyes; bowed her head a little ... Was she asleep, then? ... No, she didn't sleep! I saw she said something with her lips; but I couldn't understand anything. Sometimes, she lifted her hands a bit ...<sup>34</sup>

33 “Toos heeft heel mooie schoentjes aan; lakschoentjes. En ze heeft een fijne, witte schort voor; met kant. En ze heeft een prachtige rode strik in het haar. Ze heeft rode wangen ook. Toos lijkt zèlf wel een klapproos. Tineke heeft klompjes aan; oude klompjes. En ze heeft een bont schortje voor; een schortje van allemaal hokjes, rood en wit. En ze heeft een oud, zwart mutsje op. Haar wangetjes zijn bleek. Nee, Tineke lijkt helemaal niet op een klapproos. [...] Tineke woont heel ver weg, in de grote stad. [...] Grootva is de oude dominee van het dorp. Tineke woont in een klein, arm huisje. Tineke hééft niet zulke mooie kleren. Haar rokje is oud, en haar mutsje is oud, en om haar éne klomp zit een bandje van ijzer,” VOK#9: *Wegje*, 13. From the 15th edition (1966) onwards, Toos's grandfather is said to be the old village *doctor*, which enhances the class difference.

34 “Maar toen ... tóén deed ze iets vreemds. Ze vouwde haar handen samen; ze deed haar ogen dicht; ze boog haar hoofd een beetje ... Sliep ze toen? ... Nee, ze sliep niet. Ik zag, dat ze wat zei met haar lippen; maar ik kon niets verstaan. Soms tilde ze haar handen een beetje op ...,” VOK#1: *Fik*, 34.

Watch this! ... Beppie sits on her knees in front of the bed. She folds her hands, on the blanket; she closes her eyes ... *Why* does she do that? *Why* doesn't she quickly jump into that comfy bed, just like I have jumped into my box? She's sitting very quietly. And she's *saying* something, very softly. *Not* to mother. *Not* to me. To whom then? I don't know.<sup>35</sup>

Prayer is described in all but two of these 21 stories, and often more than once. The average number of "prayer scenes" – descriptions of prayer at a specific time, and in a specific place – is a bit higher in stories with only girls as protagonists than in stories with only boys (1.8 versus 1.4), but these differences almost disappear if we only take into account the 27 scenes in which the juvenile protagonists pray (1.3 versus 1.1). Likewise, the average number of prayer scenes is slightly higher in stories with one single protagonist than in stories with plural protagonists (1.8 versus 1.5); but if we only count scenes that involve the protagonists, it is the other way round (1.1 versus 1.4).

The two stories in which no prayer occurs are #4 and #13. These two also have something else in common because in both, a leading part is played by a son or daughter of a minister of religion. Can such children, by virtue of their reverend fathers, do without prayer? The third story featuring a pastor's child, named Annelies, suggests otherwise.

What I have to tell you is very difficult ... You will grow up, Annelies, and become a person. You will often do wrong: sins to God; you will not know what to do, just like this afternoon when you were so dirty and afraid. But then, my child, the Lord God will be waiting for you ...<sup>36</sup>

Apparently, ministers' children also have to learn how to pray; not from their fathers, as one might expect, but from their mothers – possibly with a little help from Van de Hulst.<sup>37</sup> While the author did not give explicit guidelines, his

35 "Kijk nou! ... Beppie gaat op haar knieën zitten vóór haar bed. Ze vouwt haar handen samen op de deken; ze doet haar ogen dicht ... Waaróm doet ze dat? Waarom springt ze ook niet gauw in dat lekkere bed, net als ik in mijn kistje? Ze zit heel stil. En ze zegt wat, heel zacht. *Niet* tegen moeder. *Niet* tegen mij. Tegen wie dan? Ik weet het niet," VOK#21: *Kleine zwerver*, 34.

36 "'t Is heel moeilijk wat ik vertellen ga ... Je zult groot worden, Annelies, een mens. Je zult vele verkeerde dingen doen, zonden voor God; je zult geen raad weten, net als vanmiddag toen je zo vuil was en bang. Maar dan, mijn kind, wacht de Here God op je ...," VOK#18: *Annelies*, 38–39.

37 This division of labour is standard in Van de Hulst's stories: whenever children pray with



TABLE 4 *Prayer scenes by the story's stage, per "set" of seven VOK-issues*

Issue #	Prayer scenes, by the story's stage			
	Before the crisis	During the crisis	After the crisis	TOTAL
1–7	0	4	6	10
8–14	1	1	6	8
15–21	1	7	8	16
TOTAL	2	12	20	34

descriptions of prayer do suggest normative conceptions of prayer. The following sections will try to bring these “models for prayer” to light by systematically analysing all the prayer scenes. This content analysis will be guided by a set of simple questions: Who prays? When? Where? How? Why? What is told about the contents of these prayers and what they bring about?

#### 4.3 *Where and When? Occasion and Location*

While two stories (#4 and #13) do not refer at all to prayer, many (12/21) do so more than once. Interestingly, it is notably in the seven most recent stories (#15–21), published after World War II, that prayer is described. They contain almost as many prayer scenes as the fourteen older stories taken together, and almost all (6/7) have more than one (see table 4). One story (#16) even offers four scenes. Invariably, in these most recent stories, prayers are said both during the crisis around which the plot revolves, and after its solution. In the previous seven stories (#8–14), by contrast, prayers are almost exclusively said after the crisis – as a mere affirmation of the happy ending.<sup>38</sup>

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an adult they do so with their mothers, grandmothers or some elderly woman. Apparently, prayer education is women's work. This may seem a matter of course, given that the *For Our Youngsters* series was intended for young children, but Protestant pedagogues of the early twentieth century – unlike their Catholic, Liberal, Socialist and Feminist peers – emphasised that fathers should play an important role in the education of their children. See Nelleke Bakker, *Kind en karakter. Nederlandse pedagogen over opvoeding in het gezin, 1845–1925* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis 1995), 239–240.

38 Maybe this is why these stories received much less favourable reviews from the Puritan or “experiential reformed” Sunday-School association (57% “recommended” or “warmly/strongly recommended”) than the first and third set (76% and 78% respectively) (NHZGG

As for the occasions of praying, it is remarkable that not a single story mentions saying grace before or after meals, whereas this was customary in most of the Protestant families for which these stories were primarily intended. Neither is mention made of prayer before or after class – which was the order of the day in Protestant schools – or in church or Sunday school. Church service is mentioned only once, and rather casually, in the aforementioned story about the minister's little daughter and “the pig under the pew” (#4). A possible explanation for this silence about religious institutions and public worship is that these stories were intended for children who are too young to appreciate church services or even Sunday school. But the stories are also completely silent about domestic forms of worship, such as singing psalms and hymns, which was an equally important element of early twentieth-century Protestant domestic religious culture in the Netherlands. More than that, there is not even one single reference to reading the Bible.<sup>39</sup> Must we conclude, then, that Van de Hulst did not think much of these quotidian rituals?

Whereas Van de Hulst never writes about church as a, let alone *the*, setting for prayer, merely two of the 34 prayer scenes are set outdoors, in the open air. In both instances, the protagonists do not pray because nature's beauty inspires awe in them, but because they are lost and at risk of freezing (#5 and #19). All the other prayer scenes are set indoors, at home. More specifically, the overwhelming majority (28/32) are set in a bedroom. To some extent, this preferred setting can be understood as a reflection of an old Christian ideal: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret ...” (Mt. 6:6a, King James Version). Equally important, however, could be the widespread tradition of tucking in young children after having them say their bedtime prayer, or saying it with them. In Van de Hulst's time, some parents – notably middle-class Protestants – seem to have expanded this evening ritual by reading from a book for their young ones.<sup>40</sup> In view of this *Sitz im Leben*, setting prayer in a bedroom was an obvious choice, prompting children to follow the example of the protagonists. Bedtime prayers can be as much a routine as saying grace or morning prayers, as they often came down to a fixed formula; but judging by Van de Hulst's descriptions, they could be made more individual, authentic, and profound –

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reviews 1930–1993, my calculation). For some reason, VOK #8 did not even receive one single NHZGG review.

39 Saying grace and reading from the Bible do have a prominent place in the children's books about a boy and his dog, *Snuf* – written by PietPrins – which will be discussed at the end of this article.

40 Dane, *Vrucht*.

for example, by adding a personal note: “Mum said: ‘Kees and Ko [two boys], what must you do now?’ That they knew. They said their little bedtime prayer. And they also prayed: ‘Dear Lord, forgive us the bad things ... We’re so sorry.’”<sup>41</sup>

In the books he wrote for somewhat older children, which we will look into later, Van de Hulst repeatedly described how the protagonists grew from simply “saying [literally, “reciting”] their bed-time prayer” – an expression he uses no fewer than ten times in the *VOK* series – or even saying grace over meals to a more improvised, personal, sincere way of praying.

Hein said his bed-time prayer, quickly and promptly, as if he was in a hurry to also say that other thing.<sup>42</sup>

And when grace was being said, and Jaap quietly whispered the prayer he always said after meals at home, he quickly added: “Dear Lord, thank you for the pants I got, amen!”<sup>43</sup>

[...] after he had said his bed-time prayer, slowly and attentively, he felt so happy and contended that he prayed further [...]<sup>44</sup>

[...] he said his little bed-time prayer, which grandfather had taught him, but after it had come to an end [...], he *still* prayed on.<sup>45</sup>

Hans had also prayed [...]; not only with the words of the bed-time prayer he always said before going to sleep, but *also* with words that came from deep inside his heart.<sup>46</sup>

41 “Moes zei: ‘Kees en Ko, wat moet je nu doen?’ Ze wisten het wel. Ze hebben hun avondgebedje opgezegd. Ze hebben ook gebeden: ‘Lieve Heer, vergeef ons het kwaad ... Ze hebben er zo’n spijt van,’” *VOK#7: Bruun*, 47.

42 “Hein zei zijn avondgebed op, vlug en prompt, alsof hij haast had ook dat andere nog te zeggen,” *Ouwe Bram*, 50.

43 “En toen er gedankt werd en Jaap zachtjes het gebed fluisterde, dat hij thuis ook altijd opzei na het eten, zei hij er nog gauw achteraan: ‘Lieve Heer, ik dank U, dat ik een nieuwe broek heb gekregen, amen!’” *Jaap Holm*, 36–37.

44 “... toen hij zijn avondgebed had opgezegd, langzaam en aandachtig, gevoelde hij zich zo blij en tevreden, dat hij nog verder bad ...,” *Jaap Holm*, 83.

45 “[...] hij bad zijn avondgebedje, dat grootvader hem geleerd had, maar toen ’t al ten einde was [...], bad hij tòch verder,” *Peerke*, 33.

46 “Hans had ook gebeden [...]; niet alleen met de woorden van zijn avondgebed, dat hij altijd opzei, vóór hij slapen ging, maar óók met woorden, die kwamen van diep uit zijn hart,” *Zoo’n vreemde jongen*, 115.

TABLE 5 *Social setting of prayer (number of scenes) per “set” of seven VOK-issues*

Issue #	Child/ren, w/o adult present	Child/ren, with adult present	Adult, together with child/ren	Adult, w/o child/ren present	TOTAL
1–7	2	6	1	1	10
8–14	1	3	3	1	8
15–21	6	3	5	2	16
TOTAL	9	12	9	4	34

He actually forgot to say grace over his *sandwich*: his prayer actually turned into quietly *thanking* [God] for what had happened, quietly *asking* God to help him also furthermore [...]<sup>47</sup>

#### 4.4 *Who? Social Setting of Prayer*

While Van de Hulst famously focused on the experiences of children, many prayer scenes also – or even exclusively – involve adults. In a few instances, a parent or grandparent prays without their child or grandchild, who is the object of their prayer, being present or awake – for example, in #1, where mother prays for the recovery of her little girl. Much more common is the opposite setting: children praying without parents or any other adults being present. Dramatic examples of this are the aforementioned snow adventures in #5 and #19. In the majority of prayer scenes, however, both a child (or children) and an adult are involved. This takes two forms. Either the adult – who is invariably a woman – merely supervises the child’s or children’s prayer or she prays together with them. In the seven oldest VOK-issues, the former model is dominant: in more than half of the prayer scenes, a child prays “under supervision.”<sup>48</sup> Later on, this happens but rarely: in eight consecutive stories (#12–19) “supervised prayer” does not occur. Instead, children either pray all by themselves or – almost as often – they do so closely together with their mother or grandmother (see table 5).

47 “Hij vergat eigenlijk te bidden voor zijn *boterham*: zijn gebed werd eigenlijk een stil *danken* voor wat er gebeurd was, een stil *vragen* aan God, hem ook verder te helpen [...]” *Gerdientje*, 82.

48 “Supervised prayer” first occurs in VOK#3 and in *Gerdientje* – a much more voluminous book, for somewhat older children. Interestingly, both books date from 1922. I am not familiar with any other older examples in Van de Hulst’s oeuvre: see Table 13.

TABLE 6 Social setting of prayer (number of scenes), by the story's phase

Story's phase	Child/ren, w/o adult present	Child/ren, with adult present	Adult, together with child/ren	Adult, w/o child/ren present	TOTAL
Before the crisis	–	1	1	–	2
During the crisis	5	1	2	4	12
After the crisis	4	10	6	–	20
TOTAL	9	12	9	4	34

To some extent, the social setting of prayer scenes seems to depend on the phase of the story at which they take place. During a crisis, children and adults usually (9/12) pray separately from each other. After the crisis, by contrast, children usually (16/20) pray in the presence of adults, or closely together with them. The latter form in particular emphasises the happy ending: a reunion of children, parents or grandparents, and God. As we will see later, the social setting of prayer scenes is also associated with the young protagonists' gender.

#### 4.5 How? Bodily Expression of Prayer

In the vast majority of relevant scenes, Van de Hulst describes prayer as something that involves the body as well as the mind. For example: "And then they both sat down on their little *knees*. They respectfully bowed their little *heads*. They folded their *hands* and closed their *eyes* ... and very softly they said something."<sup>49</sup> Bowing one's head is mentioned in merely two other stories (#1 and #19), and both these times it is an adult who makes this humble gesture (see table 7). Much more frequently, in roughly one third (12/34) of the prayer scenes, children or adults close their eyes, which seems to have been much more typical of Protestant than of Catholic prayer practices. Folding one's hands is described even more often, in more than half the prayer scenes. Kneeling is also frequently mentioned, about as often as closing one's eyes. This is not a matter of course because in Dutch, Reformed churches, kneeling was – and is – done very rarely, on special occasions such as the solemnisation of marriage or the installation of a minister of religion. Interestingly, in these stories,

49 "En toen gingen ze allebei op hun *knieljes* zitten. Ze bogen eerbiedig hun *hoofdjes*. Ze deden hun *handen* samen, en hun *ogen* dicht ... en ze zeiden heel zachtjes wat," *voκ#5: Huisje*, 28 (italics added).

TABLE 7 *Bodily expressions of prayer (number of scenes), per "set" of seven VOK-issues*

Issue #	Prayer scenes (total number)	Kneeling	Folding hands (of which hands-in-hands)	Closing eyes	Bowing head
1–7	10	5	5	3	2
8–14	8	4	4 (2)	3	–
15–21	16	4	10 (4)	6	1
TOTAL	34	13	19	12	3

only children kneel; adults never do. Moreover, whereas in the stories published before and during World War II (#1–14) kneeling occurs in half of the prayer scenes – that is, as frequently as folding one’s hands – in the post-war stories it occurs in less than one quarter of these scenes. Did Van de Hulst change his mind about the value of kneeling? Did it go out of fashion after World War II? A reason might be that the humility expressed by kneeling was less appreciated in this more egalitarian era.

An alternative explanation is that this change is related to the aforementioned shift in the cast of these stories, to “girls only.” In many respects, Van de Hulst’s depictions of prayer are gendered. In the prayer scenes that involve only one or more girls – with or without adults – kneeling occurs one third (6/16) of the time. In prayer scenes with only boys, however, this occurs *two* thirds (7/10) of the time.<sup>50</sup> With respect to closing one’s eyes, there is no such difference between boys-only and girls-only prayer scenes (3/10 and 6/16, respectively), but with respect to a third element, the difference is striking. Folding one’s hands is mentioned in one third of the boys-only scenes (3/10), but in *three quarters* (12/16) of the girls-only scenes.

At the basis of this gender difference in depicting bodily aspects of prayer is the social setting. Whereas boys pray more than half the time (6/10) without an adult present, girls only rarely (2/16) do so (see table 8). And whereas boys do not pray even once together with their mother or grandmother, girls do so almost half the time (7/16). Each and every time girls pray together with their mother or grandmother, they do so with their little hands between the hands of the adult woman. “Mum took the hands, the clean hands of Annelies in hers.

50 I leave aside one of the boys in VOK#7, Kees, who folds his hands, but does not pray, because he doesn’t dare to.

Like this, very close to one another, they prayed *together*.<sup>51</sup> The first VOK issue in which Van de Hulst depicts this intimate form of praying together is at the end of #9, published in 1929.

Grandma is sitting on the edge of the bed. Toos is sitting [literally, lying] on her little knees next to Grandma's lap. "First pray, Toos." "Yes, Grandma." "Have you been a sweet and obedient girl, today?" "No, Grandma." "Shall we pray together, Toos?" "Yes, Grandma." "Put your little hands in my hands, then; together we shall tell everything to the dear Lord." And Grandma speaks very softly. Toos listens ... Tears come in her eyes. [...] She quietly prays along. And her heart grows quiet and happy.<sup>52</sup>

In the next issue, *Bert and Little Bert* (#10), the young hero also prays kneeling "next to mother's lap." But he does not put his little hands in her hands, and instead of listening to his mother's prayer, he "very respectfully" recites his bedtime prayer, under her supervision. "Mother listens. The Lord in heaven listens too."<sup>53</sup> Praying hands-in-hands *never* occurs between boys and their parents or grandparents – let alone in other relationships.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4.6 What? Prayer Contents

The gender-specific way in which Van de Hulst staged prayer deserves further analysis, but before we venture into that, let us first see what he wrote about the contents of prayer. In the vast majority of prayer scenes, Van de Hulst either simply writes that children "recite their little bed-time prayer," or suggests that

51 "Moes nam de handen, de schone handen van Annelies in de hare. Zo, heel dicht bij elkander, hebben ze *samen* gebeden," VOK#18: *Annelies*, 39.

52 "Grootmoe zit op de rand van het bed. Toos ligt, op haar knietjes aan grootmoe's schoot. 'Eerst bidden, Toos.' 'Ja, grootmoe.' 'Ben je en lief en gehoorzaam meisje geweest vandaag?' 'Nee, grootmoe.' 'Zullen we samen bidden, Toos?' 'Ja, grootmoe.' 'Leg dan je handjes maar in mijn handen; – dan zullen we samen alles aan de lieve Heer vertellen.' En grootmoe spreekt heel zacht. Toos luistert ... Er komen tranen in haar ogen. [...] Ze bidt zachtjes mee. En Toos haar hartje wordt stil en blij," VOK#9: *Wegje*, 45.

53 "Moeder luistert. De Heer in de hemel luistert ook," VOK#10: *Bertus*, 34.

54 Just one scene comes close to this. In VOK#2, an old woman gives shelter to Bob, Bep, and Brammetje (two boys, one girl), and prays with them, holding her arms around them. One of the boys, Bob, closes his eyes, folds his hands, and prays along. As one of the children, Bep, is a girl, this scene does not count as "boys-only." In a 1931 book that does not belong to the VOK-series – *Ergens in de wijde wereld*, translated as *The Window in the Roof* – Van de Hulst did depict a boy praying hands-in-hands with his mother.

TABLE 8 *Social setting and bodily expressions of prayer (number of scenes), by scene cast*

Cast of prayer scenes	Number of prayer scenes	Social setting of prayer				Bodily expressions of prayer			
		Child/ren w/o adult present	Child/ren, with adult present	Adult, together with child/ren	Adult, w/o child present	Kneel	Fold hands	Close eyes	Bow head
Boy/s*	10	6	4	–	NA	7	3	3	1
Girl/s*	16	2	7	7	NA	6	12**	6	1
Boy/s & girl/s*	4	1	1	2	NA	1	1	1	–
Adult only	4	NA	NA	NA	4	–	2	2	1
TOTAL	34	9	12	9	4	14	18	12	3

Legend: \* = with or without an adult; \*\* = 7 of these 12 scenes involve praying hands-in-hands

an extempore prayer is said, without disclosing its tenor. Several times, he emphasises the strictly private nature of prayer.

[...] she is *saying* something, very softly. *Not* to Mother. *Not* to me. To whom, then? I don't know. I can't properly hear what she is saying ...<sup>55</sup>

No one saw it, and no one could hear what he said. But the dear Lord *could*.<sup>56</sup>

Who could hear those soft little voices? O, but those frightened little boys knew who could hear them ...<sup>57</sup>

Then something else happened; – the most beautiful thing. But no one saw it, only God.<sup>58</sup>

55 “[...] ze zègt wat, heel zacht. *Niet* tegen moeder. *Niet* tegen mij. Tegen wie dan? Ik weet het niet. Ik kan het niet goed verstaan, wat ze zegt ...,” vOK#21: *Zwerver*, 33.

56 “Niemand zag het, en niemand kon horen, wat hij zei. Maar de lieve Heer wel,” vOK#2: *Bob*, 40.

57 “Wie zou die zachte stemmetjes horen? O, maar die kleine, bange jongetjes wisten wel, wie hen horen kon ...,” vOK#5: *Huisje*, 28.

58 “Toen is er nóg iets gebeurd; – het allermooiste. Maar dat heeft niemand gezien dan God alleen,” vOK#15: *Kerstfeest*, 48.



The fact that no one, not even the narrator, can hear what the characters pray for highlights all the more that God, by contrast, does hear. This assurance is also given in two instances of a child and an adult praying together. The fact that God hears prayer is then not contrasted with its inaudibility, but paralleled with a mother's loving attention to her child – or vice versa.

And very respectfully you recite your little bed-time prayer. Mother listens. The Lord in heavens listens, too. You know that.<sup>59</sup>

Mother also prayed. She whispered, [but] Santje could hear it. And Santje knew that the dear Lord in heaven would also hear it ...<sup>60</sup>

The first VOK issue in which Van de Hulst literally renders prayer is #7, published in 1927. "They said their little bedtime prayer. And they also prayed: 'Dear Lord, forgive us the bad things ... We are so sorry.'"<sup>61</sup> In the subsequent stories, he does so slightly more often; in #11, #14, #16, #17 (twice), #19, and #20. In #17, like in #7, he has the protagonist add a short personal note to his ritual bedtime prayer: "He said his usual evening prayer. And then he also whispered: 'O, dear Lord! The little wooden shoes ... are my fault. I ... I ... I will tell everything.'"<sup>62</sup> The story ends with a similar scene, and the protagonist is by then filled with joy and gratitude: "He had said his evening prayer. He also whispered: 'O, dear Lord, I'm so happy! The little wooden shoes were my, *my* fault. And now they are back after all. I'm so happy! He crawled into bed."<sup>63</sup> In each of these three instances, the child's prayer is very short, simple, and rather informal. This is even more true of the fourth example (#11), where it is not even clear if the main character – a bed-ridden little girl – formally prays, or simply speaks to God.

59 "En je zegt, heel eerbiedig, je avondgebedje op. Moeder luistert. De Heer in de hemel luistert ook. Dat weet je wel ...," VOK#10: *Bertus*, 33.

60 "Moeder heeft ook gebeden. Ze fluisterde; Santje kon het wel horen. En Santje wist wel, dat de lieve Heer in de hemel het ook horen zou ...," VOK#16: *Poesje*, 21.

61 "Ze hebben hun avondgebedje opgezegd. Ze hebben ook gebeden: 'Lieve Heer, vergeef ons het kwaad ... We hebben er zo'n spijt van,'" VOK#7: *Bruun*, 47.

62 "Hij bad zijn avondgebed van altijd. Toen fluisterde hij ook: 'O, lieve Heer! Ik ... ik ben de schuld van de klompjes. Ik ... ik ... ik zal alles vertellen,'" VOK#17: *Klompje*, 21–22.

63 "Hij had zijn avondgebed opgezegd. Hij fluisterde ook: 'O, lieve Heer, ik ben zo blij! Ik ... ik was de schuld van de klompjes. En nu zijn de klompjes toch terug. Ik ben zo blij!' Hij kroop in bed," VOK#17: *Klompje*, 46.

Then the room became quiet. Mother said nothing. Dieneke, too, said nothing. But Dieneke looked outside with her happy little eyes. She looked through the trees, to the blue sky – so very high, and so far ... and Dieneke said something, but so *softly*, so softly ... Even Mommy could not hear it. She said: “Dear Lord, I’ll always be very patient.” Here little eyes sparkled with joy.<sup>64</sup>

To “simply speak to God” is an ideal form of prayer, which was already promoted in nineteenth-century Protestant children’s books like *Jessica’s First Prayer* – Hesba Stretton’s 1867 classic about a neglected, abused street girl, who is rescued by a minister of religion, who tells her about the Heavenly Father and how one can relate to Him.

“I never had any father,” she said sorrowfully. – “God is your Father,” he [the minister] answered [...] “We cannot see Him, but we have only to speak, and He hears us, and we may ask Him for whatever we want.” [...] Jessica gazed round the room with large wide-open eyes, as if she were seeking to see God; but then she shut her eyelids tightly, and bending her head upon her hands, as she had seen the minister do, she said, “God! I want to know about You. And please pay Mr. Daniel for all the warm coffee he’s give [sic] me.” Jane and Winny listened with faces of unutterable amazement; but the tears stood in the minister’s eyes, and he added “Amen” to Jessica’s first prayer.<sup>65</sup>

Protestant children’s books from the mid-nineteenth-century Netherlands, too, paid much attention to prayer, oftentimes promoting individual, improvised prayer as the essence of Christian religion. One of the pioneers of the genre, the Utrecht schoolmaster Hendrik Jan van Lummel (1815–1877) did so, for example, in his 1865 book *De smidsgezel van Utrecht* (“The Utrecht journeyman smith”), which is set in the time of the Protestant Reformation. While the young hero’s mother – who blindly follows the clergy and her prayer book – worries about her son’s lack of religious conformism, his father holds the

64 “Toen werd het stil in de kamer. Moeder zei niets. Dieneke zei ook niets. Maar Dieneke keek met haar blije oogjes naar buiten. Ze keek tussen de bomen door, naar de blauwe lucht, – die zo heel hoog was, en zo ver ... en Dieneke zei wat, maar zo zacht, zó zacht ... Moes kon het niet eens horen. Ze zei: ‘Lieve Heer, ik zal altijd heel geduldig zijn.’ Haar blije oogjes schitterden,” VOК#11: *Jagers*, 46.

65 Hesba Stretton (ps. of Sarah Smith, 1832–1911), *Jessica’s First Prayer* (Minneapolis: Curio-smith, 2008 [orig. 1867]), 32–33.

view “[...] that one may pray without crossing oneself and without folding hands; that the Lord God does not look at the hands, but at the heart of those who pray.”<sup>66</sup> Similar ideas were put forward by the prolific Protestant author children’s books Eduard Gerdes (1821–1898), Van de Hulst’s nineteenth-century predecessor. For example, in his 1858 book *In de duinen* (“In the dunes”), which is also set in the era of the Reformation, prayer is discussed at length.

I wish I could also pray and say grace, Wouter! But I don’t know what to say [...] the priest has taught me some prayers, but in Latin [...] Wouter [said]: “To pray, my dear Dirk, is simply to ask God for something for which one feels the need. [...] One does not have to seek beautiful words, nor does one have to pray for a long time. The Lord looks at our hearts. We must speak to God in all sincerity and simplicity. He hears us, and if we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, He also answers us.”<sup>67</sup>

In his 1882 book *Twee zwervelingen* (“Two wanderers”), Gerdes contrasted his Protestant ideals about prayer not with the conceptions and practices of Catholics, but with those of Jews.

“You’ve read well,” said the Israelite. “Do you also have a prayer book?” “I don’t,” said Rinus, “and neither does grandmother. There are a few prayers in the back of our psalter and hymnal, but grandmother and I never say them.” “What do you pray then?” asked Nathan. “One must pray, after all; pray in the morning, pray in the afternoon, pray in the evening, pray at night if one cannot sleep. What do you pray then, if you don’t have a prayer book?”<sup>68</sup>

66 “[...] dat men wel bidden kon, zonder een kruis te slaan en zonder de handen de vouwen; dat God de Heer niet naar de handen van den biddende maar naar zijn hart zag,” H.J. van Lummel, *De smidsgezel van Utrecht* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1865), 4.

67 “Ik wenschte dat ik ook bidden en danken kon, Wouter! Maar ik weet niets te zeggen. [...] de pastoor heeft mij wel wat bidden geleerd, maar dat was Latijn [...]” Wouter [...] zeide: “Bidden, lieve Dirk, is eenvoudig God te vragen om iets, waaraan men behoefte gevoelt. [...] Men behoeft ook niet naar schoone woorden te zoeken, noch lang te bidden. De Heer let op ons hart. Wij moeten in alle opregtheid en eenvoudigheid tot God spreken. Hij hoort ons, en indien wij in den naam van den Heere Jezus bidden, verhoort Hij ons ook,” Eduard Gerdes, *In de duinen* (Amsterdam: De Hoogh, 1858), 108–109.

68 “‘Gij hebt goed gelezen,’ zeide de Israëliet. ‘Hebt gij ook een gebedenboek?’ ‘Ik niet,’ antwoordde Rinus, ‘en grootmoeder ook niet. Wel staan er achter ons psalm- en gezangboek eenige gebeden, maar die bidden grootmoeder en ik nooit.’ ‘Wat bidt gij dan?’ vroeg Nathan. ‘Een mensch moet toch bidden, bidden ’s morgens, bidden ’s middags, bidden ’s

Maybe it was because of this rejection of formulaic prayer that Protestant authors such as Gerdes only in a few instances literally rendered the prayers their heroes and heroines said.

As for Van de Hulst, the four remaining instances of literally rendered prayer in the VOK series (#14, #16, #19, and #20) are not mere additions to a bedtime prayer, but complete, improvised prayers. They are not said by children themselves but by their mothers or grandmothers, who pray with them, on their behalf.

And mother prays. And the children listen. "O, dear Lord, we are so often naughty. Help us to be obedient children; to be Your children."<sup>69</sup>

Then they *pray* together: mother whispers; Santje listens. Mother says: "O, dear Lord! We are so happy; all of us. You have made Santje a bit better. You made it so that the red mixture helped ... We thank You! O, make Santje completely better again. O Lord, and also make us, all of us, love You!"<sup>70</sup>

Grandma [...] is praying. [...] "Dear Lord, I thank You, that Miep has returned home after all from that dreadful snow. It was so bad! ... But You have made it so that Bello found her and went to call grandfather. O, Miep has been so foolish and Bello is just an ignorant animal; but You have made everything so good. I thank You. Miep also thanks You. All of us together, we thank You. Amen."<sup>71</sup>

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avonds, bidden 's nachts als hij niet slapen kan. Wat bidt gij dan als gij geen gebedenboek hebt?"; Eduard Gerdes *Twee zwerfelingen of Jood en Christen* (Nijmegen: Milborn, 1882), 27–28.

69 "En moeder bidt En de kinderen luisteren. 'O, lieve Heer, – wij zijn zo dikwijls ondeugend. Help ons, dat wij gehoorzame kinderen zijn; dat wij Uw kinderen zijn ...' Moes is weer heengegaan. [...] O, nu is alles tóch weer goed, tóch weer blij," VOK#4: *Karel'tje*, 42.

70 "Dan *bidden* ze samen: moeder fluistert; Santje luistert. Moeder zegt: 'O lieve Heer! Wij zijn zo blij; wij allemaal. U hebt Santje weer een beetje beter gemaakt. U maakte, dat het rode drankje hielp ... Wij danken U! O, maak Santje weer helemaal beter. O, Heer en maak ook dat wij, wij allemaal U liefhebben! ...'" VOK#16: *Poesje*, 44.

71 "Grootmoe buigt haar hoofd, sluit haar ogen. Ze bidt. Ze spreekt tot God. Miep hoort de zachte, eerbiedige woorden wel ... 'Lieve Heer, ik dank U, dat Miep tóch weer thuisgekomen is uit de barre sneeuw. 't Was zo èrg! ... Maar U hebt gemaakt, dat Bello haar vond en dat Bello grootvader roepen ging. O, Miep is zo dom geweest en Bello is maar een onnozel beest; maar U hebt alles zo goed gemaakt. Ik dank U. Miep dankt U ook. Wij allen samen, wij danken U! Amen,'" VOK#19: *Voetstapjes*, 43.

[...] and grandmother prayed, in a soft voice. The girls, respectfully closing their eyes, listened. “Lord, You love us all; also Carla, also Rie ... O, give them little hearts that therefore they also love You. That’s the most wonderful thing there is for them in the whole world. Forgive them all the bad things. And may they also once go into Your beautiful heaven.”<sup>72</sup>

With these four scenes – in which adults play leading roles, while children listen – Van de Hulst offered examples of what he apparently considered “good prayer.” Exemplary about these prayers seems to be, among other things, that they do not merely beg God for temporary help – most of them are said *after* the crisis has been resolved – let alone material benefits, but express gratitude, and ask for spiritual guidance, and forgiveness.

Although most other prayers are not rendered literally, and not even paraphrased,<sup>73</sup> their tenor can be inferred from the problems the characters are facing. These problems are fairly standard. In many stories, a child is ill; in the second set of seven stories (#8–14) this is also true of several parents (see table 9). Compared with the first set, this second set has a somewhat higher number of problems, notably in the form of external danger or material damage, which makes these stories more suspenseful.

#### 4.7 *The Power of Prayer: Effects*

While Van de Hulst oftentimes – notably in the seven most recent stories – assures the reader that God hears sincere prayers, he rarely explains exactly how the Almighty answers them.<sup>74</sup> Instead of expounding such examples of

72 “[...] en grootmoeder, met zachte stem, bad. De meisjes, eerbiedig de ogen gesloten, luisterden. ‘Heer, U hebt ons allen zo lief; ook Carla, ook Rie ... O, geef hun hartjes, die daarom ook U liefhebben. Dat is het heerlijkste wat er is voor hen op de hele wereld. Vergeef hun al het kwaad. En laten zij ook eenmaal binnen mogen gaan in Uw schone hemel!’” VOK#20: *Bengels*, 14.

73 This is done elaborately in #9: “Grandma asks the Lord to forgive Toos all the bad things. Toos wants to be a sweet and obedient girl; but that is very difficult. She forgets, *time and again*. Grandma also asks the Lord to help Toos. Grandma also prays for Tineke’s *father*, who is so ill, and cannot work.” (“Grootmoe vraagt, of de Heer Toos al haar kwaad vergeven wil ... Toos wil een lief en gehoorzaam meisje zijn; – maar dat is heel moeilijk. Ze vergeet het tēkens wēer. Grootmoe vraagt ook aan de Heer, of Hij Toos *helpen* wil ... Grootmoe bidt ook voor Tineke haar *vader*, die zo ziek is, en niet werken kan”), VOK#9: *Wegje*, 45.

74 Two notable exceptions, from adult prayers of thanksgiving, were already quoted above: “You have made Santje a bit better. You made it so that the red mixture helped ...” and “You have made it so that Bello [the dog] found her [the young protagonist] and went to call grandfather.”

TABLE 9 *Problems of the protagonists (number of stories), per "set" of seven VOK-issues*

Issues	Nature of the problem/s				
	Illness (of which illness of an adult)	Outward danger (e.g., being lost), loss or damage	Guilt	Suspicion/exclusion	TOTAL
1–7	3	2	4	1	10
8–14	5 (3)	6	4	–	15
15–21	3	4	3	2 (1 × dog)	12
TOTAL	11 (3)	9	10	3	33

providential rescue, Van de Hulst often highlights the psychological effects of prayer on the believer's state of mind. In the very first story, the narrator – a dog – describes the miraculous effects of prayer on human mood.

Very slowly, the sadness went away from Mum's face, very slowly. Yes, and when she opened her eyes again, she almost looked a bit happy. No, I don't understand that at all. Would *that* help? When you're sad, does it go away if you close your eyes, and fold your hands, and very softly *say* something? O, I'm just a stupid dog, I don't understand things like that. Do you? Yes, and listen! Mum saw me sitting under the dresser. I already trembled. How cross she would be! ... But, no! [...] Would that also have been because of those hands folded and those eyes closed?<sup>75</sup>

In many subsequent stories, too, Van de Hulst suggests that prayer primarily takes away fear, worries, or loneliness, and makes a person feel happy and safe.

75 "Het verdriet ging heel langzaam wèg van moes' gezicht, heel langzaam. Ja, en toen ze haar ogen weer opendeed, keek ze haast een beetje blij ... Nee, daar begrijp ik niets van. Zou dat nu helpen? Als je verdriet hebt, en je doet je ogen dicht, en je handen samen, en je zègt heel zachtjes wat, – gaat het dan over? O, ik ben zo'n domme hond, ik begrijp dat niet. Jullie wèl? Ja, en hoor eens! Moes zag mij onder de kast zitten. Ik beefde al. Wat zou ze boos zijn! ... Maar nee, hoor! [...] Zou dat óók als gekomen zijn van die handen samen en die ogen dicht?," VOK#1: *Fik*, 37.

O, now everything was so wonderful. Now all fear had gone.<sup>76</sup>

Then it was as if they were no longer quite so frightened. Then it was as if they were no longer quite so *alone*.<sup>77</sup>

Now you're suddenly happy ...<sup>78</sup>

Then Beppie says: "Amen!" And then she gets up – happy.<sup>79</sup>

And Toos her heart becomes quiet and happy.<sup>80</sup>

O, now everything is good after all, happy after all.<sup>81</sup>

Her little eyes were shining with joy.<sup>82</sup>

Now they are sound asleep. Now everything is back in order.<sup>83</sup>

Koosje and Toosje have fallen asleep. Now their little hearts were quiet.<sup>84</sup>

In three stories, though, Van de Hulst shows that prayer as such does not automatically procure positive psychological effects. In #7 the two boys who play the leading roles feel guilty, and therefore don't dare to pray – at least, not "really" pray – which makes them feel even worse.

Kees quietly folded his hands. He wanted to pray; but he didn't really dare. A minute ago, when he went to bed, he hadn't prayed *either* ... Instead, he had quickly dived under the blankets in. He didn't *dare* to pray. Ko *had* recited his little prayer; on his knees in front of the bed; but very hastily ... O no, that was not *really* praying ... Ko didn't dare *either*. They had done

76 "O, nu was alles zo heerlijk. Nu was alle bangheid weg," VOK#20: *Bengels*, 40.

77 "Toen was het, of ze niet zo erg bang meer waren ... Toen was het, of ze niet zo erg alléén meer waren," VOK#5: *Huisje*, 28.

78 "Nu ben je opeens blij geworden ...," VOK#6: *Zusjes*, 46.

79 "Dan zegt Beppie: 'Amen!' Dan staat ze op; – blij," VOK#21: *Zwerver*, 34.

80 "En Toos haar hartje wordt stil en blij," VOK#9: *Wegje*, 45.

81 "En nu is alles tóch weer goed, tóch weer blij," VOK#14: *Kareltje*, 42.

82 "Haar blijte oogjes schitterden," VOK#11: *Jagers*, 46.

83 "Nu slapen ze heerlijk. Nu is alles weer goed," VOK#7: *Bruun*, 47.

84 "Koosje en Toosje zijn in slaap gevallen. Nu waren hun hartjes gerust," VOK#3: *Katjes*, 30.

something wrong. That they knew ... And they hadn't even told Mother. No, then you didn't dare to pray. God sees everything.<sup>85</sup>

In the next story (#8), Van de Hulst again opposes "real prayer" to merely reciting one's bed-time prayer. At the beginning, the protagonists do the latter:

Prayed? ... O, no! They completely forgot *that*. But they quickly sit down on their knees, and recite their bed-time prayer – also quickly. They pray for Mummy *too*. That's what they do every evening, but now ... o, *now*, they are thinking much more about their wonderful *secret* than about their *prayers*.<sup>86</sup>

At the end of the story, however – after the crisis has been solved – they "really" pray, "very quietly, very respectfully."<sup>87</sup> The third example is from a much later story, *The Little Wooden Shoe* (#17). Just like one of the boys in *Bruno*, the protagonist feels guilty, and therefore does not dare to approach God, while he feels that he should. Moreover, his mother, who usually tucks him in, is not there.

A little boy was sitting on his knees, by his bed; – his hands folded, his eyes shut. But – two big tears rolled down his cheeks. He was so alone. And in his heart was a great fear. [...] Father had said: "Big boys turn in *on their own*." And now the little boy on his knees in front of his bed also had to *pray*; all by himself. That little boy with the great fear in his heart. [...] Yes, and it was his own fault. [...] But now, – he had to pray.<sup>88</sup>

85 "Kees deed stil zijn handen samen. Hij wilde bidden; maar hij durfde niet goed. Straks, toen hij naar bed ging, had hij óók niet gebeden ... Hij was er maar gauw ingedoken. Hij dũrfde niet bidden. Ko had zijn gebedje wél opgezegd; op zijn knieën vóór het bed; maar heel haastig ... O nee, dát was niet ècht bidden ... Ko durfde óók niet. Ze hadden kwaad gedaan. Dat wisten ze wel ... En ze hadden het niet eens aan moeder gezegd. Nee, dan durfde je niet bidden. God ziet alles," vOK#7: *Bruun*, 24.

86 "Gebeden? ... O nee! Dát hebben ze helemaal vergeten. Maar ze gaan gauw op hun knieën zitten, en zeggen hun avondgebedje op; – ook al gauw. Ze bidden óók voor moes. Dat doen ze elke avond, maar nu, ... o, *nu* denken ze veel meer aan hun mooie *geheim*, dan aan hun *bidden*," vOK#8: *Zoo'n griezelig beest*, 26.

87 "Ze hadden ook voor moes gebeden, ècht gebeden, heel stil, heel eerbiedig gebeden," vOK#8: *Zoo'n griezelig beest*, 45.

88 "Er zat een jongetje op zijn knieën voor zijn bed; – zijn handen samen, zijn ogen dicht. Maar – er rolden twee dikke tranen langs zijn wangen. Hij was zo alleen. En in zijn hart was een grote bangheid. [...] Vader had gezegd [...]: 'Grote jongens gaan *alleen* naar bed.'



Eventually, the boy does say his usual bed-time prayer, and adds a personal note, in which he confesses his wrong-doing, and promises to also tell his father. After that, he falls asleep; not because he feels relieved – like Van de Hulst describes in so many other stories – but simply because he is exhausted. At the end of the story, though, he prays again – expressing his gratitude to God – and only then “[a]ll that fright was *gone* from his heart.”<sup>89</sup>

Interestingly, each of these three instances of opposing “real” prayer to merely customary, ceremonial prayer are from stories with only *boys* as protagonists (#7, #8, and #17). Moreover, all of these boys go to school, and while they themselves are said to be “little,” their hands, knees, and eyes are not.<sup>90</sup> The fact that in these stories, prayer is not only presented as a solution but as challenge in itself may therefore have something to do with their protagonists’ age and gender.

The relevance of these two characteristics is also shown by different forms of address used in literally rendered prayer (see Table 10). Whereas girls *always*, and boys usually say their prayers to the “Dear Lord” – the expression orthodox Protestant reviewers so much objected to – women but rarely, and men *never* do so. The two other forms of address boys use – “Lord Jesus” and variations on “Father” – happen to be the ones most frequently used by adult males. The word usage of adult females is harder to assess, because they often pray with their children. Nevertheless it is striking that only once a woman addresses the “Lord Jesus.” This may be partly due to the fact that Van de Hulst stopped using this expression after 1922 (*Gerdientje*), while it was particularly in his later books that he literally rendered women’s prayer. Unlike men, women also rarely address the Almighty as “(my) God.”

## 5 “To Quietly, Really Pray”: The *Rozemarijntje* Series

In order to gain more insight into the ways in which Van de Hulst’s depiction of prayer relates to the gender and age of the characters he created, it is useful to look into some of his other children’s books. One set seems particularly suitable to begin with: a series of five books about a girl called *Rozemarijntje*. The first book was published in 1933 (that is, between VOK #12 and #13); the

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En nu moest het jongetje op zijn knieën voor zijn bed ook *bidden*; – alleen. Dat jongetje met de grote bangheid in zijn hart. [...] Ja, en ’t was zijn eigen schuld. [...] Maar nu, – moest hij bidden,” VOK#17: *Klompje*, 21–22.

89 “Al die bangheid was wèg uit zijn hart,” VOK#17: *Klompje*, 47.

90 I leave aside the sister and brother of Santje, the protagonist of VOK#16.

TABLE 10 *Forms of address in literally rendered prayer (times used), by age and gender, in the VOK and Rozemarijntje-series plus 14 other popular\* books by Van de Hulst*

	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
(My/Our/Holy) Father (in heaven)	8	5-1**=4	6	0
Lord Jesus [ <i>Here Jezus</i> ]	7	1	8***	0
(My) God	4	1	0	0
Lord [ <i>Heer, Here or Heere</i> ]	3	6-2**=4	0	0
Lord God [ <i>Here God</i> ]	2	2	0	0
My Saviour [ <i>Mijn Heiland</i> ]	1	1	0	0
Dear Lord [ <i>Lieve Heer</i> ]	0	4-3**=1	20***	12
TOTAL	25	20-6**=14	34	12

Legend: \* = Books that had more than ten editions; see Table 13 for an overview  
 \*\* = Number of times this expression is used by women praying with children  
 \*\*\* = Twice “Dear Lord Jesus” is used, which is scored once in each category

last one in 1954 (that is, between VOK #19 and #20). These books, too, became immensely popular.<sup>91</sup> They are much more voluminous than the VOK booklets, and were meant for girls of roughly 8–12 years. The protagonist herself is quite a bit younger, though. It is only in the second book that Rozemarijntje starts going to school – which Dutch children in the 1930s would do at age 6 – and not until the third book that she can properly read. The series has 23 prayer scenes, which we will now look into, plus two more references to prayer.<sup>92</sup>

Just like in the VOK-series, the vast majority (16/23) of prayer scenes are set in or around a bed. If prayers are said elsewhere, it is almost always (6/7) by an adult.

In the VOK-series as a whole, as we saw, the most common social setting of prayer was that of children supervised by an adult (12/34) and the least

91 The first book had 27 editions, the second 25, the third 17 and the last issues 14 each. Moreover, a compilation ran through seven editions, and translations of the individual books were published in Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (but not in any English-speaking country).

92 In the second book, a poor old man promises he will pray for Rozemarijntje, because she may have to face difficulties in her future life. See R#2, 92. In the fourth book, Rozemarijntje's mother tells her that she should pray for her new friends – not only for their material and physical, but for their spiritual happiness. See R#4, 61–62.

TABLE 11 *Social setting of prayer (number of scenes) in the Rozemarijntje-series, by issue*

Issue	First publ.	Prayer scenes	Social setting of prayer			
			Child, w/o adult present	Child, with adult present	Child, together with adult	Adult, w/o child present
R#1	1933	7	4	1	2	–
R#2	1934	2	–	–	1	1
R#3	1944	4	–	–	2	2
R#4	1949	5	1	(1)*	–	3
R#5	1954	5	1?	1?	1?	4
TOTAL		23	5 or 6	1 or 2	5 or 6	10

Legend: \* = the scene in which Rozemarijntje sees how a much younger girl prays is hard to classify.

common was solitary prayer by an adult. The two remaining forms – children praying on their own or closely together with an adult – finished joint second (each 9/34). In the Rozemarijntje-series, too, the latter two forms come joint second (each 5 or 6 out of 23 times), and even in almost the same proportion of prayer scenes (roughly a quarter) as in *VOK* – which seems to corroborate the significance of the pattern we discerned. But in stark contrast with the *VOK* stories, in the Rozemarijntje-books, supervised prayer occurs *least* often (2/23), whereas adult solitary prayer is the *most* common form (10/23). Interestingly, in the course of the series, the latter form occurs more and more, whereas solitary prayer by Rozemarijntje initially dominates, and then all but disappears. This increase of adult solitary prayer can be explained from a general characteristic of the series – or any series about one and the same protagonist. Whereas the first book (R#1) focuses on the adventures and spiritual development of the young heroine herself, the sequels revolve around the vicissitudes of the new people – both children and adults – she befriended: “the Bear-Biter” (R#2), “Red Pete” (R#3), “the old Miss” (R#5) and “the black-haired boy” and his father (R#4).

A possible explanation for the comparative scarcity of supervised prayer is that Van de Hulst may have begun to dislike it. In the *VOK*-series, as we saw, this form occurs less in the more recent issues. But then again, he still uses it in the last two booklets (#20 and #21). An alternative explanation is that he did not deem it suitable for the somewhat older girls for whom the Rozemarijntje-books were intended.

Interestingly, the series’ very first prayer scene revolves around a crisis that resembles the one in *VOK* #17 and many other earlier books by Van de Hulst: the

challenge of solitary prayer. Rozemarijntje has to meet this challenge because she stays with her stepmotherly aunt, who is not used to children – let alone to tucking them in, playing, singing, and praying with them. Then, almost accidentally, Rozemarijntje discovers that she does not need the supervision or assistance of any adult for praying to God.

Rozemarijntje was so *alone*. And she still had to pray. But she couldn't. Mummy wasn't there; and Dina [the maid, DJB] wasn't there; and no one came and sat down, and held her little hands, no one. And if she would recite her little bedtime prayer, no one would listen. [...] And then, in her grief, she sobbed and very softly said: "Dear Lord, I ... I ... I am so alone." But that, o yes, that was also *prayer*. And through her grief suddenly came a strange joy ... Yes, that was *also* prayer. And the dear Lord would *also* hear it. [...] O, and then she suddenly knew that she was *not* alone. The dear Lord did see that she was lying there so alone in this big room, and the dear Lord also *listened* to her. And with her little hands folded against her cheek, and her eyes closed, Rozemarijntje began to pray – *really* pray, also for mummy. No one but God could understand those silent words.<sup>93</sup>

Rozemarijntje's solitary, silent, improvised prayer not only procures a psychological effect in that it comforts and soothes her, but is also answered in a material way because the dog comes and joins her in bed. This discovery of the power to pray – without kneeling, folding one's hands or closing one's eyes, and without reciting fixed phrases – does not lead to a radical change in Rozemarijntje's way of praying, though. On the evenings that follow, she is tucked in by the maid, whom she has taught to play, sing, and pray with her just the way her mother does – taking Rozemarijntje's little hands in hers. Her aunt seems to avoid such intimacies. When Rozemarijntje hurts her knee, one day, her aunt

93 "Rozemarijntje was zo *alleen*. En ze moest nog *bidden*. Maar dat kon ze niet. Moes was er niet; en Dina was er niet; en niemand kwam bij haar zitten en hield haar handjes vast, niemand ... En als ze haar avondgebedje ging opzeggen, luisterde niemand. [...] En toen, in haar verdriet, snikte ze heel zacht: 'Lieve Heer, ik ... ik ... ik ben zo alleen.' Maar dat ... o ja, dat was ook *bidden*. En door haar verdriet heen kwam opeens een vreemde blijheid ... Ja, dat was óók *bidden*. En de lieve Heer hoorde het óók. [...] O, en toen opeens wist ze dat ze *niet* alleen was. De lieve Heer zag wel, dat zij zo alleen lag in de grote kamer, en de lieve Heer *luisterde* ook naar haar. En haar handjes tegen elkaar gevouwen bij haar wang, haar ogen dicht, begon Rozemarijntje te *bidden*, – écht te *bidden*, ook voor moes. Niemand kon die stille woorden verstaan, dan God alleen," *Rozemarijntje*, 31–32.

“neatly” bandages it – instead of kissing it, like Rozemarijntje’s mother would have done. That evening, her aunt brings Rozemarijntje to bed herself because the maid is off, and something similar happens.

That evening aunty *herself* brought her to bed; neatly brought her to bed. [...] Aunty made Rozemarijntje kneel in front of her little bed, to say her little evening prayer. Rozemarijntje hastily rattled off her little prayer. But then she got scared. And she would have wanted to say: “Oh, aunty, that’s wrong. The dear Lord hasn’t heard. O, aunty, that’s really bad.” But that’s something Rozemarijntje didn’t *dare*.<sup>94</sup>

In this scene, kneeling – or at least *making* children kneel in front of their bed – is put in a rather bad light, by associating it with parental aloofness and conformism: doing things “neatly” instead of intimacy and sincerity. The story continues with something like a conversion, though, on the part of the adult. Once Rozemarijntje is alone in her bedroom, she sits on her knees, not before but *in* her bed, and prays again – unknowingly watched by her aunt, who then realises she has failed. At the end of the book, niece and aunt have learned to get along, also in prayer: “Then – with Rozemarijntje’s little hands in *her* hands – aunty would thank the Heavenly Father for his goodness.”<sup>95</sup> In the subsequent sentences, however, Van de Hulst makes clear that Rozemarijntje had not simply returned to her trusted, somewhat childish way of praying: “Rozemarijntje would listen, yet sometimes, when aunty had already left and Rozemarijntje was lying there so alone, then sometimes she would fold her little hands *again*; she could not hold back all her joy, all her gratitude ... ‘Oh, dear Lord, I’m so happy ... so *very* happy!’”<sup>96</sup> Apparently, Rozemarijntje had not only learned to pray on her own, but also to express her gratitude to God, instead of only voicing her needs or desires. Before that she had also learned

94 “Die avond heeft tante-zèlf haar naar bed gebracht; keurig naar bed gebracht. Ja, en dat werd een *vreemde* avond, – voor allebei. [...] Tante heeft Rozemarijntje voor haar bedje laten neerknielen om haar avondgebedje te bidden. Rozemarijntje heeft haastig haar gebedje afgebrabbeld. Toen schrok ze. En ze wilde wel zeggen: ‘O, tante, dat mag niet. De lieve Heer heeft het niet gehoord. O, tante, dat is heel erg.’ Ja, dat *durfde* Rozemarijntje niet,” *Rozemarijntje*, 68–69.

95 “Dan – Rozemarijntjes handjes in háár handen – dankte tante de Hemelse Vader voor zijn [*sic*] goedheid,” *Rozemarijntje*, 68.

96 “Rozemarijntje luisterde; maar soms, als tante alweer weg was en Rozemarijntje zo alleen lag, soms vouwde ze [*sic*] wéér haar handjes; al haar blijheid, al haar dankbaarheid kon ze niet inhouden ... ‘O, lieve Heer, ik ben zo blij ... zo héél blij!’” *Rozemarijntje*, 84.

not to negotiate with the Almighty, by making promises – something Van de Hulst apparently regarded as inferior.

[...] and she said, *again* very softly: “Dear Lord, I will always be obedient to aunty.” But then she got scared. O, the dear Lord *heard* everything and *knew* everything. And what if she would not be obedient, once in a while, if she would completely forget? And very quietly she prayed: “Dear Lord, make me always obedient. I do *want* to be obedient, but I forget it again and again.” And she worked even more diligently.<sup>97</sup>

In the 1934 sequel *Rozemarijntje gaat naar school* (“Rozemarijntje goes to school”), prayer has a far less prominent place than in the first book. The heroine prays only once, when her mother has received good news from father.

“Rozemarijntje,” she whispered ... “shall we pray – the two of us *together*? Shall we *thank* the dear Lord for having saved our dad?” ... “Yes,” whispered Rozemarijntje, and she slid down from the daybed, sank on her little knees, hid both her hands in mother’s hands, bowed her little head ... Mother prayed; mother thanked God for his great love. [...] This soft, whispered prayer was singing so beautifully, so strangely around Rozemarijntje’s head. O, and she *couldn’t* help it. It made her weep, but not at all from grief ... Softly, very softly she whispered through mother’s words: “O, dear Lord ... I also thank You, I also thank You! ... for my dad!”<sup>98</sup>

This scene once more underlines the importance of thanksgiving as a motive for praying, and while it depicts an ideal of spiritual intimacy between parent

97 “[...] en ze zei, wéér heel zacht: ‘Lieve Heer, ik zal altijd gehoorzaam zijn bij tante ...’ Maar toen schrok ze. O, de lieve Heer *hoorde* alles en *wist* alles. En als ze nu eens niet gehoorzaam was, als zij het nu eens helemaal vergat? En heel stil bad ze: ‘Lieve Heer, maak dat ik altijd gehoorzaam ben. Ik *wil* wel gehoorzaam zijn, maar ik vergeet het tēlkens.’ En ze werkte nóg ijveriger [...],” *Rozemarijntje*, 50–51.

98 “‘Rozemarijntje,’ fluisterde ze ... ‘zullen we bidden – wij *samen*? Zullen we de lieve Heer *danken*, dat Hij onze pa heeft bewaard? ... Ja?’ ‘Ja,’ fluisterde Rozemarijntje terug, en ze gleed van de divan af, zakte neer op haar knietjes, borg haar beide handen in moeders handen, boog haar hoofdje ... Moeder bad; moeder dankte God voor zijn grote liefde. [...] Dat zachte, fluisterende gebed zong zo mooi, zo vreemd om Rozemarijntjes hoofd. O, en ze kón het niet helpen. Ze moest schreien, maar ‘t was toch helemaal niet van verdriet ... Zacht, heel zacht fluisterde ze door moeders woorden heen: ‘O, lieve Heer, ... Ik dank U ook, ik dank U ook! ... voor mijn pa!’” *Rozemarijntje gaat naar school*, 64.

TABLE 12 *Bodily expression of prayer (number of scenes) in the Rozemarijntje-series, by social setting*

Social setting	Prayer scenes	Bodily expressions of prayer				Contents rendered literally (L) or paraphrased (P)
		Kneel	Fold hands	Close eyes	Bow head	
Child, w/o adult present	5 or 6	1	5	3	0	4L
Child, with adult present	2	2	1	1	0	0
Child, together with adult	5	1	5	1	0	2L + 2P
(Subtotal children)	(12 or 13)	(4)	(11)	(5)	(0)	(6L + 2P)
Adult, w/o child present	10	0	8	3	2	5L
TOTAL	22 or 23	4	19	8	2	11L + 2P

and child – or, more specifically, mother and daughter – it also emphasises the child's own religious agency, by making her both *listen to* her mother's prayer, and *whisper through* it. This unusual, somewhat illogical combination indicates ambivalence about children's prayer. On the one hand, Van de Hulst seems to praise religious intimacy between parents and children, but on the other hand spiritual individuality or autonomy.

In the series' third book (*Rozemarijntje en Rooie Pier*, 1944), Van de Hulst merges the aforementioned two ideals in a somewhat different way. He starts out by informing the reader that Rozemarijntje has grown up, and is already eight years old – roughly the age of the girls for whom these books were intended. Instead of listening to her mother's bed-time stories, she can now read by herself.

No more bed-time singing and story-telling but the other thing, *praying*, had remained; that should be *kept* for life. Now they were lying together in the big bed, knee to knee. Now mother had taken Rozemarijntje's little hands in *her* hands. Now they both softly prayed, each their own prayer. That's how Rozemarijntje learned to also *quietly* pray; – to *really* pray.<sup>99</sup>

99 "Geen zingen, geen vertellen meer bij 't slapen-gaan, maar het andere, het *bidden*, dat was bewaard gebleven; dat moest bewaard *blijven* het hele leven lang. Nu lagen zij samen in het grote bed, knie aan knie. Nu had moeder Rozemarijntjes kleine handen in háár handen

The above description suggests that “real prayer” is not necessarily solitary, but should be individual; in one’s own words. In the next prayer scene – which follows Rozemarijntje’s close escape from drowning – Van de Hulst makes Rozemarijntje once again pray silently, but in close physical contact with her mother, who prays audibly.

And mother slides her hands under the blanket. They seek Rozemarijntje’s hands. Which are glowing. Mother bends her head near to Rozemarijntje, and closes her eyes; whispering she thanks the Lord for so miraculous a salvation, for such glorious protection ... “O, Father, we thank You; Rozemarijntje and I, we thank You ...” Rozemarijntje’s eyes are closed, her lips softly move. And when mummy gets up again, Rozemarijntje says: “Mummy, I’ve told everything; the dear Lord has seen everything, hasn’t He?”<sup>100</sup>

Despite the author’s assertion that Rozemarijntje has reached the age of discretion, and is now capable of both reading and praying on her own, in this book he focuses on adult prayer, for example, by quoting a 230-word eloquent prayer by Rozemarijntje’s mother. In the fourth book, the author does something similar. He elaborately describes the life of prayer of an adult, namely, the poor father of Rozemarijntje’s new friend. In this book, Rozemarijntje herself prays only once, at the instigation of her mother, who tells her that she should pray for her new friend Pietro and his family, not merely for their health or wealth.

“[...] you must pray and ask the Lord God to make them *really* happy [...]; that they may [know that they] belong to the Lord Jesus, who forgives them their sins. [...]” After mother had left [...] Rozemarijntje folded her hands. [...] It was difficult to properly understand all the things mother had said ... “O, dear Lord, – I don’t know these things [so] well. You *do*

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genomen. Nu baden ze beiden zacht, ieder het eigen gebed. Zó leerde Rozemarijntje ook *stil* bidden; – *echt* bidden,” *Rozemarijntje en Rooie Pier*, 24.

100 “En moeder schuift haar handen onder het dek. Ze zoeken Rozemarijntje’s handen. Gloeiend warm zijn die. Moeder buigt haar hoofd dicht naar Rozemarijntje toe, en sluit haar ogen; fluisterend bidt ze; dankt ze de Heer voor zo wonderlijke redding, voor zo heerlijk bewaring ... ‘O, Vader, wij danken U; Rozemarijntje en ik, wij danken U ...’ Rozemarijntje’s ogen zijn dicht, haar lippen bewegen zacht. En als moes weer opstaat, zegt Rozemarijntje: ‘Moes, ik heb alles verteld; de lieve Heer heeft alles gezien, hè?’” *Rozemarijntje en Rooie Pier*, 79–80.



know.” And before she went to sleep, she whispered: “Yes, that’s what I’ll do.” ... A beautiful plan had come to her mind.<sup>101</sup>

New about this scene is, first of all, the immediate effect of prayer it suggests: not comfort or peace of mind, but a good plan. In other stories, too, Van de Hulst suggests that prayer can work this way. A more important new element is that Rozemarijntje prays – at the instigation of her mother, but on her own – for non-relatives, and that she specifically prays for their, as well as her, spiritual welfare. Finally, another new element is the child’s acknowledgement of her lack of knowledge, and consequent submission to the Almighty. The fact that Rozemarijntje has grown older is highlighted by an unobtrusive scene, in which she takes a much younger girl to bed. This scene – the only other one in which a child prays – casts Rozemarijntje in the role of a little mother.

Isabel sinks to her little knees. Her little hands folded together, her little eyes closed, she recites her little bed-time prayer ... From whom would she have learned that? From her father? From Pietro [her brother]? Rozemarijntje quietly listens and waits.<sup>102</sup>

In the fifth and final book of this series, published another five years later, Rozemarijntje seems to revert to a younger stage of psychological and spiritual development.<sup>103</sup> The story starts with the heroine being hospitalised, and lying next to an “old miss,” who fears being evicted from her house. The author focuses on the experiences of this new friend, with detailed descriptions of her prayers. Rozemarijntje’s life of prayer however is only discussed in the beginning of the book, which describes her first evening in hospital.

101 “[...] je moet bidden, of de Here God hen *echt* gelukkig maken wil [...]; dat ze de Here Jezus, die hun zonden hun vergeeft, *Hem* toebehoren. [...]’ Toen moeder was heengegaan [...], vouwde ze haar handen. [...] ’t Was moeilijk dat alles, wat moeder gezegd had, goed te begrijpen ... ‘O, lieve Heer, – ik weet het niet goed. U weet het wel ...’ En vóór ze slapen ging, fluisterde ze nog; ‘Ja, ja, dàt doe ik’ ... Een mooi plan was in haar hoofd gevaren,” *Rozemarijntje en de zwarte jongen*, 61–62.

102 “Isabel zakt op haar knietjes. Haar handjes gevouwen, haar oogjes dicht, zegt ze haar avondgebedje ... Van wie zou ze dat hebben geleerd? Van haar vader? Van Pietro? Rozemarijntje, stil, luistert en wacht,” *Rozemarijntje en de zwarte jongen*, 84.

103 This may be the reason why the omnibus editions of the Rozemarijntje-series put this issue *before* the fourth.

The old Miss folded her hands on top of the bedclothes, and closed her eyes. [...] “Rozemarijntje, do you know how to pray?” Pray? “Yes, yes, I do,” the girl nods. [...] “But do you also know how to *really* pray? Not just reciting your little bedtime prayer, but praying on your own? Telling everything to God? Also your sorrows ...” “Yes,” Rozemarijntje nodded. “O, my dear little sheep, then you *aren’t alone* tonight. Feel free to do it; I will do so, too.” And again silence fell in the two beds in the corner. [...] Only God knew what was in the heart of the woman who was ill, and the heart of the girl who was ill.<sup>104</sup>

It is hard to say to which of the aforementioned four categories this scene belongs – it can be classified as “solitary,” “supervised,” or “shared” prayer – but the challenge it describes strongly resembles the one in the very first book: to pray without mother’s loving presence and spiritual guidance. What is more, it resembles the spiritual struggles Van de Hulst described in the three issues of the *VOK*-series (#7, #8, and #17) we looked into at the end of the previous section. Each of these scenes describes the process of children’s spiritual separation or individuation from their parents – notably their mothers. An important difference, though, is that the difficulty Rozemarijntje has with praying on her own is totally unrelated to any feelings of guilt, which so deeply trouble the boys in *VOK* #7, #8, and #17 – and the male protagonists of four of Van de Hulst’s earliest books.

## 6 “He *Couldn’t* Pray”: Gender and Failed Prayer

In his first voluminous book, *Ouwe Bram* (1909) (*The Mystery of Old Abe*), Van de Hulst extensively wrote about the challenge of “real,” “sincere,” solitary prayer. The first chapter already gives a probing description of the young protagonist’s moral and spiritual distress.

104 “De oude juffrouw vouwde haar handen op ’t dek, sloot haar ogen. [...] ‘Rozemarijntje, kun je bidden?’ Bidden? ‘Ja, jawel,’ knikte het meisje. [...] ‘Maar kun je ook écht bidden? Niet alleen je avondgebedje opzeggen; maar zelf bidden? Alles vertellen aan God? Ook je verdriet ...’ ‘Ja,’ knikte Rozemarijntje. ‘Och, m’n lieve schaap, dan bèn je ook niet *alleen* vannacht, hoor! Doe het maar; ik doe het ook.’ En weer werd het stil in de twee bedden in de hoek. [...] Wat er leefde in het hart van de zieke vrouw, in het hart van het zieke meisje, – dat wist God alleen,” *Rozemarijntje en de oude juffrouw*, 20.

That evening Hein Hoever's knelt down, as usual, before his bed, in the dark attic. [...] He said his everyday prayer, but time and again he got lost. [...] [H]e had merely rattled off the prayer, without thinking of *what* he was praying. That was bad, now God would not answer the prayer either, oh no, and God knows everything, God also knows that he had pestered Old Abe ... that was bad, after all ... And – now [that he is] safe and warm – Hein starts again to say his prayer, quietly and slowly: “Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for saving all of us, and ...” [...] No, no, oh no, Hein could not pray, he *couldn't*, he was so anxious and restless, it was as if God did not want to hear him ... no, oh, he *couldn't* pray. Things were so dark and so evil around him and so threatening. Ah! That was because Hein's *heart* was so dark and so evil ...<sup>105</sup>

Hein's distress is soon solved. At the instigation of his schoolmaster, who senses something is wrong, he confesses his sins and fears to God – kneeling not by, but *in* his bed, and pouring out his heart in a rather incoherent, un-ceremonial way: “It was a strange, confused prayer, but a *good* prayer [...] It was a prayer of the heart, sent to God from distress. And the Lord, who knows what lives and cries even behind confused, unclear words, the Lord *heard* the anxious begging of that little boy with his dark heart in that dark attic.”<sup>106</sup> After this conversion – which is described in detail – more is told about Hein's further life of prayer; how he asks God for forgiveness and the courage to repair his wrongdoings, and thanks God. Meanwhile, though, the story's focus shifts to the spiritual distress of Old Abe, whose heart is full of hatred against the boys who are responsible for the death of his child.

105 “Die avond knielde Hein Hoever's als gewoonlijk neer voor zijn bed, op den donkeren zolder. [...] Hij bad zijn avondgebed van elken dag, maar telkens kwam hij in de war. [...] [H]et gebed had hij zo afgeraffeld, er niet eens bij gedacht, wàt hij bad. Dat was slecht, nu zou God het gebed niet verhooren ook, wel neen, en God weet alles, God weet ook dat hij Ouwe Bram heeft geplaagd ... dat was toch slecht ... En – nu veilig en warm, begint Hein nogmaals zijn gebed op te zeggen, zacht en langzaam: ‘Lieve Vader in de hemel, wij danken U, dat Gij ons allen spaarde en ...’ [...] Neen, neen, o neen, Hein kon niet bidden, hij *kon* het niet, hij was zo angstig en onrustig; 't was, alsof God hem niet horen wilde ... neen, o, hij *kon* niet bidden. 't Was zo donker en zo boos om hem heen en zo dreigend. Ach! Dat was omdat Hein's *hart* zo donker was en zo boos ...,” *Bram*, 10–11.

106 “'t Werd een wonderlijk, verward gebed, maar een góéd gebed [...] 't Was een gebed des harten, in benauwdheid tot God opgezonden. En de Heer, die weet wat leeft en roept ook achter de verwarde, onduidelijke woorden, de Heer hóórde het angstig vragen van de kleine jongen met zijn donker hart op die donkeren zolder,” *Bram*, 42.

Pray, he had to pray ... tell God his sorrow. Frenetically he folded his hand, as if he wanted to squeeze that hatred to death. His lips murmured, but could not pray ... no, swearing, *that's* what they could. [...] no, he *couldn't* pray ... the old man shivered before his own evil heart. And while he let his head sink down again onto his arms he sobbed in acute terror ... "O, Lord Jesus, I am so bad ... I am so bad!"<sup>107</sup>

Old Abe's inability to pray is described in two more poignant scenes. With the help of the local pastor he eventually overcomes his hatred, saves his enemies from drowning, and passes away peacefully. Close parallels to this story about the conversion of an adult man who is torn between hatred and prayer can be found in two other books by Van de Hulst: *Peerke en z'n kameraden* (1919; trans. *Pierre and His Friends*) and in *Gerdientje* (1922).

Peerke or Pierre is a Belgian war victim, who has lost both his parents and both his legs, and is terminally ill. His patience, friendliness, and child's faith – exemplified by his artless prayers – are contrasted with the spiritual struggles of his grandfather, who cannot forgive the enemy: "Oh, I cannot pray nor trust as much as my little boy does. [...] This hatred pushes me further and further away from my Saviour. And *yet* ... Oh, Lord Jesus, help me, help me!" he exclaimed. He fell onto his knees, wringing his hands, bending his head in acute inward struggle [...] He tried to pray."<sup>108</sup>

Gerdientje is the little girl of a farm hand, who is intent upon revenge on the farmer who has done him wrong. "If only he could pray: 'O, Father in heaven, I will be quiet, also when my life becomes difficult and sad [...]' But *that* ... that he couldn't."<sup>109</sup> Father's vengefulness and defiance are contrasted not so much with the faith of his daughter, his teenage son, or even the local pastor, but with that of his wife, who quietly submits to the will of God. "[...] his wife

107 "Bidden moest-ie, ... aan God zijn verdriet vertellen. Krampachtig vouwde hij zijn handen, als wilde hij zó die haat doodknippen. Zijn lippen prevelden, maar bidden konden ze niet ... neen, vloeken, dát zouden ze kunnen ... [...] neen, bidden kon hij niet, ... de oude sidderde voor zijn eigen boze hart ... En terwijl hij zijn hoofd weer liet neerzinken op zijn armen snikte hij in hevige angst ... 'O, Here Jezus, ik ben zo slecht ... ik ben zoo slecht!'" *Bram*, 67.

108 "'O, ik kan niet zó bidden, en zó vertrouwen als m'n jongetje. [...] Die haat dringt mij weg van mijn Heiland, hoe langer hoe verder. En tóch ... O, Here Jezus, help mij, help mij! ...' barstte hij uit. Op z'n knieën viel hij neer voor 't kleine ledikant, wrong de handen ineen, boog in hevige zielestrijd het hoofd [...] Hij probeerde te bidden," *Peerke*, 102.

109 "Kón hij maar bidden 'O, Vader in de hemel, ik zal stil zijn, ook als mijn leven moeilijk en verdrietig wordt [...]' Maar dát ... dat kon hij niet ...," *Gerdientje*, 107.

lived much closer to God than he did. She was much more patient, much more contented than he, much more good-natured.”<sup>110</sup> Mother prays with the pastor, asking God “to bend her husband’s rebellious heart” and at two instances she silently prays, holding her little girl. About the latter’s own religiosity nothing is told but the fact that she “says her little bedtime prayer.” This lack of a child’s religious agency makes *Gerdientje* not only markedly different from *Pierre and his friends* and *Old Abe*, but also from other books in which boys play leading parts, notably *Jaap Holm en z’n vrinden* (1910) and *Niek van den bovenmeester* (1912).

These two books, that were not translated in English, are among Van de Hulst’s most popular, the former having received 29 editions – about a quarter million copies – and the latter 40. In each book, prayer is mentioned more than twenty times. Not all of these prayer passages are actual prayer scenes because they often describe how the protagonist’s mother or schoolmaster exhorts them to pray. What is more, seven times in *Niek* and ten times in *Jaap Holm* a description is given of the protagonist’s inability or unwillingness to (“really,” “sincerely”) pray. “He *couldn’t* pray,” is a recurrent sentence in both books, with “he” not being an adult man – like in the aforementioned three books – but a boy in his early teens.<sup>111</sup>

The events in *Jaap Holm* do resemble those in *Gerdientje*. Father, a farm hand, is fired by a ruthless farmer. Moreover, he is suspected of theft – and so is Jaap, who thereby loses his best friend. These and more hardships partly account for Jaap’s inability to sincerely pray; “[...] he sensed that he only meant half of what he was praying, and only half believed that the Lord would answer him.”<sup>112</sup> What is more, Jaap – like Hein in *Old Abe* – also feels unable to pray because he is aware of his own wrongdoings. “He did not pray; how could his heart, torn by anger and grief, *pray*? [...] he *couldn’t* pray, he *couldn’t* sleep, he *couldn’t* silence his conscience; his sin was burning in him like a consuming fire.”<sup>113</sup> In *Niek*, which is set in a middle-class milieu, the protagonist’s inability to pray entirely results from the bad things he has done to others.

110 “[...] zijn vrouw leefde veel dichter bij God dan hij. Zij was veel geduldiger, veel meer tevreden dan hij; veel zachter van aard,” *Gerdientje*, 39.

111 Niek is a forth-former alias tenth-grader. See *Niek*, 8.

112 “[...] hij voelde wel, dat hij ’t maar half meende, wat hij bad, en maar half geloofde, dat de Heer hem verhoren zou ...,” *Jaap Holm*, 77; see also 140 and *Om twee schitteroogjes*, 40–44.

113 “Bidden deed hij niet; hoe kon zijn hart, dat door woede en verdriet als verscheurd werd, bidden? [...] hij kon niet bidden, hij kon niet slapen, hij kon zijn geweten niet doen zwijgen; zijn zonde brandde in hem als een verterend vuur,” *Jaap Holm*, 85.

He hadn't said his bedtime prayer, a minute ago. [...] He forgot it more often. But then Mum would always come to tuck him up, and ask if he had prayed. This time she had *not* come. She was angry, and Niek was just lying there, alone in the dark. [...] In his anxiety, Niek folded his hands, closed his burning eyes and began to hastily say his bedtime prayer. Niek's *lips* were praying, but Niek's *heart* was not. And he didn't know that such a prayer can never rise to heaven high: it falls down like a bird with paralyzed wings. The Lord does not listen to such prayer. Because Niek's remorse was *false*.<sup>114</sup>

At this point, it is useful to take into account another, much less voluminous book, published one year earlier: *Om twee schitteroogjes* (1911; "For two glittering little eyes"). At the beginning of the story, the protagonist, Ries, has been dishonest to his parents, which keeps him from being honest to God.

He also prayed, on his knees in front of his bed, like he did every evening. But – suddenly this oppressing feeling got hold of him. He sensed it: God knew everything, saw him lying [down] now, heard his praying, which was false prayer. He sensed it and was scared: Being indifferent to the Lord? ... O, no, no! Pray he must; he could not skip his prayer, and he wanted to start again. But suddenly he jumped up, and ducked into his bed. No, if he would pray to God now, and prayed like this, *so* falsely, then ... then his prayer too would be a lie, the biggest lie.<sup>115</sup>

Ries overcomes his spiritual struggles by confessing to his grandmother, who urges him to pray, and promises to pray for him. Niek, in his turn, confesses to

114 "Straks had hij zijn avondgebed niet opgezegd. [...] Hij vergat het wel eens meer. Maar altijd kwam moe hem toedekken en vroeg dan of hij gebeden had. Nu was zij *niet* gekomen. Ze was boos, en Niek lag nu maar alleen in het donker. [...] Niek in zijn bangheid, vouwde zijn handen, sloot zijn brandende ogen en begon haastig zijn avondgebed op te zeggen. Niek's *lippen* baden wel, maar Niek's *hart* bad niet. En hij wist niet, dat zulk een gebed nooit naar de hoge hemel stijgt: het valt neer als een vogel met verlamde vleugeltjes. De Heer luistert naar zulk bidden niet. Want Niek's berouw was *vals*," *Niek*, 32–33.

115 "Hij bad ook; bad op zijn knieën voor zijn bed, zoals hij 't elke avond deed. Maar – toen opeens kneep dat beklemmende hem vast. Hij voelde 't: God wist alles, zag hem nu liggen, hoorde zijn bidden, dat vals bidden was. Hij voelde 't en schrok: Tegen de Heer onverschillig zijn? ... O neen, neen! Bidden moest hij; hij mocht zijn gebed niet overslaan, en weer wilde hij beginnen. Maar ineens sprong hij op, dook in zijn bed. Neen, als hij nou bad tot God, en *zó* bad, *zó* vals, dan ..., dan zou zijn bidden ook een leugen, de grootste leugen zijn," *Schitteroogjes*, 29–30.

his mother, who then prays with him – holding him close. After that he prays on his own: “Niek had wanted to call her back; wanted to hide his head at mother’s breast. *Then* everything was good and wonderful ... But mother had gone. And he pushed his head into the pillow, closed his eyes, folded his hands, and prayed the same thing mother had prayed. The *anxiety* was gone from his heart. There was only *grief* about his wrongdoing.”<sup>116</sup> In part 2 of the book, however, Niek relapses into dishonesty and unbelief, and stops praying: “There were more of those indifferent boys. They always had fun, they never were afraid. They didn’t pray either. Praying sometimes makes you scared. He wanted to be indifferent, too!”<sup>117</sup> But when his little sister becomes seriously ill, Niek repents, and again confesses to his mother and father. Both before and after this confession he prays – not with his mother, but all by himself. The book concludes by affirming this shift to independent prayer: “Niek did pray that night. He does so every night again, now. [...] Niek no longer prays that old prayer. [...] No, he tells the Lord everything he thinks in his heart.”<sup>118</sup> This conclusion has a close parallel in *Jaap Holm*: “That night, Jaap knelt before his bed again [...] He knelt like that every night again, now; but he no longer said the old prayer he used to say. Now he himself knew to find the words [...]”<sup>119</sup>

These two books – *Jaap Holm* and *Niek* – not only describe a similar process of spiritual growth, but also a similar role of the boys’ mothers in this development. At the beginning of Jaap’s story, his mother supervises him saying his bedtime prayer – just like Niek’s mother does. Later on, when serious troubles have begun, Mother – whose faith is stronger than both Jaap’s and his father’s<sup>120</sup> – prays for him, and urges him to pray, but as Jaap feels unable to do

116 “Niek had haar wel terug willen roepen; hij had zijn hoofd wel weer willen verbergen aan moeders borst. Dan was alles goed en heerlijk ... Maar moeder was heengegaan. En hij duwde zijn hoofd in ’t kussen, hij sloot zijn ogen, vouwde zijn handen, en bad hetzelfde, wat moeder gebeden had. De *bangheid* was weg uit zijn hart. Er was alleen *verdriet* om zijn kwaad,” *Niek*, 91.

117 “Er waren wel meer van die onverschillige jongens. Die hadden altijd pret, die waren nooit bang. Die baden ook niet. Van bidden word je soms bang. Hij wilde *ook* onverschillig zijn!,” *Niek*, 135; see also 158.

118 “Niek heeft die avond gebeden. Dat doet hij nu elke avond weer. [...] Niek bidt niet meer dat oude gebed [...] Nee, hij vertelt de Heer alles, wat hij denkt in zijn hart,” *Niek*, 213–214.

119 “Jaap knielde die avond weer voor zijn bed [...]. Zo knielde hij thans elke avond weer; maar het oude gebed van vroeger zei hij niet meer op. Hij wist nu zelf wel woorden te vinden [...],” *Jaap Holm*, 201.

120 “Mother was better, *much* better than he. She could pray, but he ... no, *he* could not. It was too bad, *too* bad ...” (“Moeder was beter, *veel* beter dan hij. Zij kon wel bidden, maar hij, ... neen, *hij* kon ’t niet. ’t Was te erg, *tè* erg ...”); *Jaap Holm*, 109–110.

so, she eventually prays with him. Like Niek's mother, she does so in a physically intimate manner: "And mother folded her hands around Jaap's head and in a softly whispering voice she prayed, bent over her own boy! [...] He hadn't been able to pray alone and *still* he was too sad to pray along with her, but mother did it ..."121 Towards the end of the story, Jaap's mother prays with him again, but by then he has regained the power to also pray on his own: "[...] now, all alone in the dark, *now* he could pray even better than a minute ago; then he had been thinking of mother, who was standing before his bed, feeling her hands on the blanket. Now he was with the Lord by himself."122

Apparently, a mother's loving presence could both be an aid for, and an obstacle to, negotiating "real," "sincere" prayer. This is also suggested in another, much later book by Van de Hulst – *Ergens in de wijde wereld* (1931), translated as *The window in the roof* – about a "nine, almost ten year old" boy called Henk. At the beginning of the story, she prays with him in a physically intimate manner: "[...] when he was lying with mother, she took both his hands into *her* hands. And mother prayed. Her soft, quiet words were near to him ..."123 This intimacy helps him to also pray by himself once he is lying in his own bed: "[...] he *again* folds his hands, just like a minute ago with mother. And he again closes his eyes. Like this, things are so wonderful. Like this, he is again very close to his mother. Like this, both of them are again very close to God."124 Henk's troubles begin after his mother has been hospitalised. He misses her dearly, especially when he has done wrong, and is even accused of stealing. In the depths of his despair he finds out that something surpasses motherly love.

Henk is sitting on his knees, in the middle of the attic, crying quietly [...] But when Henk looks up, oh, *light* suddenly shines into his heart, so dark and so full of sorrow [...] Oh, Henk *isn't* alone. [...] In his sorrow

121 "En moeder vouwde haar handen om Jaap's hoofd en met een zachte fluisterstem bad ze, over haar eigen jongen heengebogen! [...] Alleen had hij niet kunnen bidden en nòg was hij te verdrietig om mee te bidden, maar moeder deed het ...," *Jaap Holm*, 144.

122 "... nu, heel alleen in de [sic] donker: *nu* kon hij nog beter bidden dan straks; toen had hij nog telkens aan moeder gedacht, die voor zijn bed stond, en had hij haar handen voelen liggen op zijn dek. Nu was hij met de Heer alleen," *Jaap Holm*, 184.

123 "[...] toen hij bij moeder lag, heeft moeder zijn handen allebei in háár handen genomen. En moeder heeft gebeden. Haar zachte, stille woorden waren vlak bij hem ...," *Ergens*, 38–39.

124 "[...] hij legt zijn handen *weer* tgen elkaar, net zoo als straks bij moeder. En hij doet zijn oogen weer dicht. Zóó is 't zoo heerlijk. Zoo is hij weer heel dicht *bij* zijn moeder. Zoo zijn zij allebei weer heel dicht bij God," *Ergens*, 39.



and loneliness, Henk has only thought of his *mother*. [...] Henk has not thought of *God*. Oh, he feels ashamed: he senses that all that sorrow is caused by his own disobedience. [...] Henk prays. He folds his hands, he closes his eyes, tears are running over his cheeks, but he lifts his head towards the skylight, as if *like this* he can better say what burns in his heart, as if *like this* he is closer to heaven, closer to God. [...] Henk gets into bed, next to Jan. There's his little place. [...] He folds his hands, like once with mother. Now things are quiet inside.<sup>125</sup>

This narrative of a boy's acquisition of the power to pray on his own is not unlike the stories in the first and the final issues of the *Rozemarijntje*-series, but there are two crucial differences. First, whereas being close to Mother is initially equated with being close to God, it is eventually suggested that his attachment to the former is in competition with his respect for the Latter. Prayer is presented as the way to acknowledge both one and the Other. Second, the boy's sorrows are said to be partly resulting from his own wrongdoings – and the remedy for this, too, is prayer. In yet another, slightly earlier book about a teenage boy, Van de Hulst summarised this as follows: “Karel must learn to fight on his own the evil that time and again grew in his heart. Karel must learn to *pray* on his own.”<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, the author attributes these thoughts not to Karel's mother, grandmother, or schoolmaster, but to his father – one of the few male parents in Van de Hulst's stories – who happens to be a pastor (cf. VOK 18: *Annelies*). Yet, while Karel's mother is twice depicted praying, no such thing is told about his father.

125 “Henk zit op z'n knieën, midden op de zolder, stilletjes te schreien [...] Maar als Henk naar boven kijkt, o, dan valt in zijn hart, zoo donker en zoo vol verdriet, opeens *licht* [...] O, Henk *is* niet alleen. [...] Henk heeft in zijn verdriet en in zijn eenzaamheid alleen maar aan zijn *moeder* gedacht. [...] Aan *God* heeft Henk niet gedacht. O, hij schaamt zich: hij voelt wel, dat al dat verdriet gekomen is door zijn eigen ongehoorzaamheid [...] Henk bidt. Hij vouwt zijn handen, hij sluit zijn oogen, tranen loopen over zijn wangen, maar hij houdt zijn hoofd omhoog naar het raam, alsof hij *zóó* beter zeggen kan, wat er brandt in zijn hart, alsof hij *zóó* dichter bij de hemel, dichter bij God is [...] Henk kruipt in bed, bij Jan. Daar is zijn plekje. [...] Hij legt zijn handen tegen elkaar, als eens bij moeder. Nu is het stil geworden van binnen,” (*Ergens*, 63–65).

126 “Karel moet zelf leeren vechten tegen het kwaad, dat altijd en altijd weer opgroeide in zijn hart. Karel moest zelf leeren *bidden*,” *De roode vlek*, 66.

TABLE 13 *Social setting of prayer (number of scenes) in other popular (>10 editions) children's books by Van de Hulst*

Title (year of publication; number of editions)	Prayer passages	Prayer scenes	Social setting of prayer (who prays?)			
			Child/ren, w/o adult present	Child/ren, with adult present	Child/ren, together with adult	Adult, w/o child present
<i>Ouwe Bram</i> (1909; 26)	15	7*	4	–	–	3
<i>Jaap Holm</i> (1910; 29)	22	15	11	–	1	3
<i>Om twee schitteroogjes</i> (1911; 12)	9	4	4	–	–	–
<i>Niek van den bovenmeester</i> (1912; 39)	21	11	7	–	4**	–
<i>Zoo'n vreemde jongen</i> (1917; 12)	8	7	4	–	–	3
<i>Het gat in de heg</i> (1917; 16)	1	1	1?	–	–	–
<i>Thijs en Thor</i> (1918; 10)	3	3	–	–	–	3
Subtotal A	(77)	(48)	(31)		(5)	(12)
<i>Peerke en z'n kameraden</i> (1919; 22)	8	6	2		1***	3
<i>Gerdientje</i> (1922; 21)	7	6	1	1	1	3
<i>In 't kraaiennest</i> (1924; 15)	7	6	2	–	1	3
<i>De roode vlek</i> (1928; 13)	5	5	3	–	–	2
<i>Ergens in de wijde wereld</i> (1931; 11)	6	5	4	–	1***	–
<i>Hans in 't bosch</i> (1932; 11)	4	4	2	1	–	1
<i>Jantje van de Scholten-hoeve</i> (1934; 12)	3	2	–	–	–	2
Subtotal B	(44)	(34)	(14)	(2)	(4)	(14)
TOTAL	111	82	45	2	9	19+1

Legend: \* = I do not count the following passage as a prayer scene: "That night, in three of the village cottages, three boys had thanked God for being saved, and had prayed for their rescuer. And so had done their parents."<sup>127</sup> \*\* = 2 × prayer at school, 1 × saying grace; \*\*\* = praying hand-in-hand

<sup>127</sup> "En in die nacht hadden in drie huisjes van het dorp drie jongens God gedankt voor hun behoud en gebeden voor hun redder. Dat hadden hun ouders ook gedaan," *Bram*, 80.

## 7 Conclusion

It is not easy to say exactly what way of praying Van de Hulst advocated; not so much because he wrote fiction – from which we can only indirectly fathom his ideas or ideals – but because his writing career spans half a century, in the course of which he tried several genres, targeting different categories of children. Crucially important is the shift he made from writing primarily about – and for – teenage boys to writing about younger children, who were more and more often girls.<sup>128</sup>

In his earlier books, which tended to have male protagonists, including adult men, Van de Hulst emphasised that the power to “really” pray does not come naturally. Children do not drink it in with their mother’s milk nor do they get it as part of their religious education but they – teenage boys in particular – have to gain it, through moral, psychological, and spiritual struggle. The support of a pious, loving mother can be of help, but only up to a certain point – and fathers even tend to be conspicuous by their absence. This highly gendered story template has much in common with the pattern Callum Brown has discerned in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evangelical narrative: “... women’s spiritual battle was virtually never portrayed as a battle with temptation or real sin [...]. The problem is the man ...”<sup>129</sup> Particularly interesting about Van de Hulst’s depiction of the solitary, internal struggles of his male protagonists is the opposition of “honest,” “sincere,” “real” prayer to ways of praying that are deemed merely conventional or even outright “false.”

In the stories he later wrote for younger children – often with girls as protagonists – prayer is comforting rather than challenging, and equally important as sincerity and individual agency is the intimacy between mother and child, exemplified by praying “hands-in-hands.” Too little is known about prayer practices among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dutch Protestants to say whether this ideal reflected reality, but there seems to be some correspondence between Van de Hulst’s ideals and those of one his contemporaries: the

128 This may partly account for Van de Hulst’s enduring popularity. While boys’ books like *Ouwe Bram*, *Peerke* and *Niek* have been out of print since the 1990s, and *Om twee schitteroogjes* even since the 1960s – because of its reference to animal abuse – the VOK booklets are still being reprinted, be it in a revised edition.

129 Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization: 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2006), 77. See also: Nancy Chodorow, *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

influential Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologian, psychologist, and educationalist Jan Waterink (1890–1966). In 1936, he published a pedagogical advice book for mothers of toddlers that would gain a wide readership, going through about twenty editions: *Aan Moeders hand tot Jezus*, translated as *Leading Little Ones to Jesus*.<sup>130</sup> What makes this book relevant for the present inquiry is not only the chapter on “Mothers’s Prayer,” but also the preceding one, in which Waterink sings his praises of “Mother’s Hands.”

Mother’s hands are, for the child, the first things in this world that are real. [...] The impressions which a child receives of Mother’s hands, of Mother’s folded hands, are lasting. [...] Where Mother’s hands are the security amid all the turmoil of the child’s life, there comes into the family the right atmosphere [...] Above all, there may be found the stillness wherein Mother and child can pray together. Indeed, Mother’s hands are, much more than Mother herself realizes, expressions of Mother’s inner life.<sup>131</sup>

As we saw, Van de Hulst described praying hands-in-hands already in *VOK* #9, which was published in 1929 – years before Waterink’s bestseller. It is therefore possible that he influenced “Jan Wat” rather than the other way around. This raises a more general question: did Van de Hulst put forward new models for prayer or simply express ideas and ideals that were widely shared among his Protestant contemporaries? A definitive answer to this question is hard to give because so little historical research has been done on prayer in the modern era, but even a limited amount of other sources suffices to conclude that Van de Hulst was far from unique in emphasising sincere, individual, improvised prayers that expressed gratitude and begged forgiveness and spiritual guidance. In nineteenth and twentieth century Protestant children’s books this seems to have been fairly standard.<sup>132</sup>

Some aspects of Van de Hulst’s dealing with prayer were *not* held by other Protestant authors, though. This comes to light if we briefly compare his works with children’s books by Piet Prins: pseudonym of the orthodox-Reformed,

130 Jan Waterink, *Aan Moeder’s hand tot Jezus: De godsdienstige opvoeding van den kleuter* (Wageningen: Bosch & Keuning, 1936); translated as *Leading Little Ones to Jesus: A Book for Mothers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962).

131 Waterink, *Leading*, 37–40. After the chapters on “Mother’s Prayer” and “Mothers Faith” (chs. 7 and 8) comes one titled “Mother’s Hand Relaxes a Bit.”

132 See David Bos, “De verbeelding van de dominee: Stereotypering van predikanten en hun huisgenoten in vroeg twintigste-eeuwse, protestants-christelijke kinderboeken,” in

neo-Calvinist journalist and politician Piet Jongeling (1909–1985). Prins is best known for the series of books he wrote on the adventures of a teenage boy called Tom and his dog, Snuf (or “Scout,” in English translations). This first issue was published in 1950, the ninth and final one in 1985.<sup>133</sup> What these books have in common with Van de Hulst’s is that prayer occurs frequently. The first has no less than ten prayer scenes, and in nine of them Tom himself prays – alone. The sequels are less packed with prayer, but on average the last four issues have as many prayer scenes (4.0) as the first five, though more often with adults in leading roles. Unlike most adults’ prayers in Van de Hulst’s stories, those in Prins’s Snuf-books almost always make up part of domestic worship – usually before or after meals – which also includes Bible reading.<sup>134</sup> All but one of the grown-ups who pray are men – and only once a girl prays. Prayer is hardly ever rendered literally; the exception is a distress call Tom utters twice: “Lord, help me!”<sup>135</sup>

The most important difference with Van de Hulst’s books is that Prins seems to see the power to pray as completely unproblematic. Not once does he write a phrase like “He tried to pray,” or “He *couldn’t* pray.” Neither is there any development in the protagonist’s prayer life. The prayers of adults only differ from those of children because they typically make up part of collective domestic worship – which is also the only setting in which young and old pray together. Mothers, grandmothers, or other women do not pray with children; they even seem to completely lack religious agency.<sup>136</sup> Unlike Van de Hulst, Prins not only frequently refers to saying grace and Bible reading but also to

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*Bouwvel voor 't leven: De traditie van protestantse kinderliteratuur*, ed. Jacques Dane and George Harinck (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 76–106.

- 133 *Snuf de hond* (1950), *Snuf en het spookslot* (1953; original title: *Het geheim van de Valkenhorst*), *Snuf en de jacht op Vliegende Volckert* (1954), *Snuf en de IJsvogel* (1955), *Snuf en de verborgen schat* (1959), *Snuf en de geheime schuilplaats* (1976), *Snuf en de verre voetreis* (1980), *Snuf en de Zwarte Toren* (1982), *Snuf en de luchtpostbrief* (1985). Translations of these and other books by Piet Prins were published by Paideia Press and by Neerlandia.
- 134 When Tom and his friends visit an uncle, it strikes them that he and his wife say grace silently. Eventually, this uncle and aunt convert, and pray together.
- 135 See *Snuf de hond*, 12; *Vliegende Volckert*, 35; In an interview, “Prins” explained that he thought prayer was too holy for rendering literally. See: Herman Veenhof, *Zonder twijfel. Piet Jongeling (1909–1985), Journalist, politicus en Prins* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak 2009), 381. See also George Harinck and Ewout Klei, *Pieter Jongeling: Boegbeeld van de vrijgemaakte wereld* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2011).
- 136 The exception is the aforementioned girl, who is Jewish, but prays to Jesus. Cf. Ewoud Sanders, *Levi’s eerste kerstfeest: Jeugdverhalen over jodenbekering, 1792–2015* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2017).

public worship. In seven of the nine books, he describes how Tom and his relatives or friends go to church on Sunday, and usually he adds that they do so both in the morning and in the afternoon – which is something only orthodox (Neo)Calvinists did and do. Sometimes he even hints at which denomination exactly he has in mind.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, in two books he tells stories about the Reformation, and in no less than five books he denounces superstition. All of this is a far cry from Van de Hulst's focus on inward religion which almost exclusively comes to expression in his characters' life of prayer.

The aim of this article has been to gain insight into the "social production" of prayer – to see how works of fiction, alongside many other texts and practices, offer "models for prayer," tailored to readers and hearers of a specific age and gender that change over time.<sup>138</sup> Since it has hardly taken into account the reception of Van de Hulst's books, the article does not offer any evidence that they have had a real impact on the religious or spiritual practices and ideas of those who read or heard them. However, given the wide readership these stories received, and their typical ways of negotiating praying, it is likely that they have had some influence – not only on children but also on the adults who read them out to their young ones. Mothers in particular may have derived from these books – both from the text and some of the illustrations – ideas about how to pray with "their young ones" or coach their somewhat older children into a more mature, independent, internalised prayer life.

Van de Hulst larded many of his books with sin, guilt, shame, remorse, grace, forgiveness, and obedience – concepts that have been badly damaged by "the religious crisis of the 1960s."<sup>139</sup> His present-day popularity, also among Dutch literary writers, therefore tends to be slightly nostalgic and tongue-in-cheek. On the other hand, though, he emphasised, notably in his descriptions of prayer, the importance of sincerity, spontaneity, intimacy, and self-realisation – values that would prove quite in line with the 1960s "turn to subjective life."<sup>140</sup> Far

137 Piet Jongeling (alias Prins) belonged to the "Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated)," which in 1944 broke with the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

138 Cf. Matthew Wood, "The Sociology of Spirituality: Reflections on a Problematic Endeavour," in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 267–285.

139 Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); see also Peter van Rooden, "Oral history en het vreemde sterven van het Nederlands christendom," in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 119, no. 4 (2004), 524–551.

140 Linda Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004).

from being hostile to institutional religion, Van de Hulst may therefore have contributed to the development of forms of spirituality that could survive the demise of confessional Christianity in this part of Europe.

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