

4.2 Existential aspect of “fairy tales” by lilli promet (“The lockless casket”)

Existentialism is one of those philosophical trends that are inextricably linked with literature. Firstly, many philosophers, considered to be both the predecessors and direct representatives of existentialism, tend to reveal thoughts in a figurative, artistic form; they actively use conceptual comparisons, metaphors, allegories, and symbols to characterize significant ideas and concepts.

As Jeff Malpas states, “Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also present their ideas in ways that eschew the usual stylistic conventions of philosophical writing, adopting fictional and other devices to advance their thought” [150, p. 296].

Herein it is necessary to mention, for example, the allegorical images of Abraham and Isaac in “Fear and Trembling” by S. Kierkegaard or Zarathustra in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” by F. Nietzsche. The list of figurative representations of existentialist philosophical concepts can be extended by A. Camus’ works (the image of Sisyphus in the “Myth of Sisyphus”), A. Maceina (the image of Jobo in the “Jobo Drama”), etc. Secondly, many writers support *existentialism’s ideas*.

They include not only well-known masters of the word such as J-P. Sartre and A. Camus, but also representatives of various national cultures who create existential pictures of the world in their works of art: F. Kafka, J. D. Salinger, W. Golding, C. Wilson, Kōbō Abe, V. Pidmohylny, I. Bahrianyi, etc.

Considering these facts, as well as the huge number of works dedicated to the analysis of existential ideas in art, it is expedient to recognize the existence of a *separate area of interdisciplinary* (on the border of literary studies/cultural studies and philosophy) *scientific research focused on the study of this phenomenon*.

To be sure, the limited framework of our studies does not allow us to present a comprehensive review of all monographs and articles, contributing to the development of such a global topic as “Existentialism and Fiction”. However, it seems promising to define the main directions of research and current issues in this field.

1. First of all, it is necessary to outline the works of the authors who strive for theoretical generalizations, considering existentialism in a broad literary context, namely “The Literature of Existentialism” by Charles I. Glicksberg, “Existentialism as Literature” by Jeff Malpas, “The Art of Being: Poetics of the Novel and Existentialist Philosophy” by Yi-Ping Ong, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Works in the Context of 20th Century Literary Existentialism” S. Kryvoruchko, etc. Thus, for example, Jeff Malpas states that “While one approach to existentialism is through the philosophical works that make it up, another approach is surely through the literary works that represent a parallel, and sometimes the alternative, mode of articulation and expression” [150, p. 292].

Arguing against “existentialism without limits”, that is, the interpretation of many literary works as existential only because they discuss the questions of existence, the researcher suggests distinguishing between the concepts of “the existential” and “existentialist” [150, p. 292]. The former term is broader, and the second one is narrower, directly related to the phenomenon that is of interest in this article.

“Of course, much of the discussion of existentialism, past and present, has taken a much wider and more liberal view – nowhere more so than in the treatment of existentialism in literature.⁶ Where literary works are concerned, existentialism is sometimes so broadly construed as to allow even Shakespeare to be included, along with a host of other dramatists, novelists, and poets. Writers as diverse as W. H. Auden, Philip K. Dick, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, John Fowles, William Faulkner, André Gide, Graham Greene, Henrik Ibsen, Hermann Melville, Iris Murdoch, Vladimir Nabokov, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Miguel de Unamuno, to name but some, have all been characterised, at one time or another, and with more or less justification, as belonging to the existentialist tradition. Indeed, one might wonder whether there is any modern literary figure of note who has not at some point been characterised in this way” [150, p. 293].

S. Kryvoruchko pays special attention to issues of terminology. The researcher claims that “philosophical existentialism and literary existentialism are not identical” and they “intersect only in the concept of existence” [151, p. 92].

Literary existentialism “felt the powerful influence of philosophical existentialism, but formed its own artistic concept” and today is a “specific form of artistic consciousness” that cannot be simplified exclusively to artistic transcription of philosophical ideas [151, p. 92]. Literary existentialism is considered as a metahistorical phenomenon (that is, not limited by certain chronological frameworks) [151, p. 77].

S. Kryvoruchko makes an attempt at differentiation and systematic characterization of certain traits of literary existentialism: the depiction of a “limit situation”, the problem of a character’s choice of their path, explicit emotionality, deep psychologism, “publicistic style” (orientation onto the present time) and the allegorical layer (“mythological” character), depiction of ordinary realities of life, etc. [151, p. 80].

The researcher states: “The phenomenon of literary existentialism has a worldview paradigm, which consists of several elements of the internal form: 1) the specifics of the plot; 2) type of denouement; 3) type of a hero; 4) existence; 5) methods of resolving moral dilemmas” [151, p. 107].

2. The second group consists of research works aimed at identifying and analyzing *the ideas of existentialism in the works of specific writers*, such as John Killinger’s “Hemingway and the Dead Gods: A Study in Existentialism”, Charlotte Keys’ “Shakespeare’s Existentialism”, Ihor Karivets and Andrii Kadykalo’s “Existentialism through the Literary Images in the Short Stories of V. Pidmohylny and M. Yatskiv”, Aleksei Pleshkov’s “Paths of Existentialism: Leonid Andreyev as a Philosophical Writer”, Mykola Tkachuk’s “Existential and Stoic Dimensions of Lyric Poetry by Vasyl Stus”, Yu. Shanina’s “Existentialism in 20th Century Literature and the Works of W. Golding” etc.

These studies can be divided into two subgroups:

- those dedicated to authors who were directly influenced by the ideas of philosophical existentialism and consciously reproduced them in their creative works (such as, for example, V. Pidmohylny or L. Andreyev);

- those aimed at interpreting literary works by writers completely unfamiliar with this philosophical movement within the framework of existential ideas and categories (as, for example, pieces by W. Shakespeare). In this case, the very “existentialism without limits” is meant (see above).

3. The third group embraces the research focused on considering the specifics of existentialism in various *national cultures and national literatures*: “Existential America” by George Cotkin, “Latin America and Existentialism. A Pan-American Literary History (1864-1938)” by Edwin Murillo, “Existentialism in the Ukrainian-German literary Space (based on prose works about World War II)” by N. Malaniy, “Ukrainian Existentialism: Between Philosophy and Literature” by Tetyana Lysokolenko, Iryna Karpan, Olena Rohova, etc.

It should be noted that in most studies of the second and third groups, the main emphasis is placed predominantly on the content (ideas and moods), while the question of the *specificity of the corresponding artistic form* inherent in literary existentialism in general and its national variants in particular *often remains open and requires special attention*. Considering the inseparable unity of form and content, the artistic means by which the existentialist picture of the world is painted are determined by the philosophical concept of this trend; here the figurative “re-coding” of philosophical categories is meant.

Studying the author’s individual and cultural-national specificity of artistic representation of existentialist ideas in art opens up broad prospects for scientific research in this direction. This article is also a contribution to the study of the topic “Existentialism and Fiction”, it promotes the development of interdisciplinary links between philosophy and literary studies, research devoted to the national specifics of existentialism, it also presents an analysis of literary works in the existential aspect with an emphasis on the unity of form and content. The purpose of this article is to highlight and characterize the existential aspect of the “Fairy Tales” by the Estonian writer Lilli Promet from the collection “The Lockless Casket”.

Attitude to Lilli Promet (1922 – 2007) in the 21st century is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, today there is a loss of interest in her writings of the 1950s-80s, which

is largely due to the perception of L. Promet as an author “pleasing to the Soviet regime” (the favor of Soviet criticism, numerous publications, and translations into Russian of the pieces from this period, granting the title of Honored Writer of the Estonian SSR, etc.).

On the other hand, it is necessary to take into account the fact that L. Promet also addresses topics that are “inconvenient” for the Soviet government: this convincingly reveals the depth of the writer’s understanding of the tragic events of national history in the 1940s (the novel “Primavera”, which caused a negative response of official critics, is indicative in this regard).

Perhaps the most complete history of the writer’s work and life (from popularity to almost complete oblivion) is presented in the monograph “Kirjanik kübaraga. Lilli Prometi lugu” (“Writer in a Hat. The Story of Lilli Promet”) by Sirly Hiidemäe.

In our opinion, for a modern humanities researcher, the analysis of such “contradictory” phenomena is of particular interest, aimed at deconstructing traditional meanings and attitudes formed by historical and biographical methods. Not denying the value of these approaches, we also consider attempts to go beyond the boundaries of such interpretations and study works of art in a “timeless” philosophical aspect to be promising.

Although L. Promet's creative work is an important part of Estonian culture's history, the thoughts and moods expressed in her collection “The Lockless Casket” (1974) are not limited to the national-historical context. The philosophical depth of the “fairy tales” attracts everyone ready to reflect on the essence of existence, the place of man in the world, and the meaning of life and death.

To represent the existential picture of the world, the Estonian writer uses a special genre: in fact, her “fairy tales” are typical *parables, prose with a deep philosophical subtext*. L. Promet's intricate plots and images do not imply literal perception, they require thoughtful interpretation, unraveling hidden meanings.

For the intellectual reader such parable prose actualizes associations with *the best examples of literary existentialism, characterized by the active use of parable principle*. The figurative form to transmit ideas reflecting the existential concept of the

world and man was used by many writers, such as J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, F. Kafka, W. Golding, Kōbō Abe, etc.

The literary parable of the 20th century is one of the most adequate genre forms for expressing existential ideas, since it encourages individuals to think without limiting their freedom, often without giving them unambiguous answers, thereby pushing them to an independent search for solutions and understanding of their own Self. A fairy tale is logical, based on the laws of justice and the victory of good over evil, an existential parable, on the contrary, shows the world as absurd and tragic.

To represent the existentialist picture of the world, L. Promet uses *several specific artistic means, following the best literary existentialist traditions*. The narrator in her works is “objective”, in no way expresses personal attitude to the depicted events, and gives no evaluation of the characters’ actions, just in the spirit of existential parable prose tradition, providing the potential recipient with complete freedom of interpretation.

The plots of Promet’s works are often built on a *pointe* (an unexpected turn of events) and have an open ending. The narrative style is rather restrained; the contrast between the tragic nature of the depicted situations and the “detachment” of the narrator makes L. Promet’s prose comparable with the works of many famous writers who similarly express the ideas of existentialism: J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, F. Kafka, E. Hemingway, etc.

At the same time, like her predecessors, L. Promet makes active use of synonymic groups and repetitions, depicting “Everyday Being”, “not authentic Being” in the greatest possible detail. The chronotope of most of the Estonian writer’s parables is abstract: there is no indication of the time and place of action, which allows the author and the recipient to rise to the level of maximum generalization because the questions tackled by L. Promet are “eternal”, relevant for all times and national cultures. The characters are depersonalized, the majority of them are nameless and represent humanity in general.

The deep philosophical meaning of the parables of "The Lockless Casket" by L. Promet is determined by the figurative embodiment of significant categories of the

existential semantic paradigm. In particular, it is worthwhile mentioning the creative representation of ideas that are related to the ideas of famous existentialists; recognition of the absurdity of the everyday bustle of the majority, the faceless crowd (“das Man” according to M. Heidegger [152, p. 164]), in which a person loses themselves (“Everyday Being”, “not authentic Being”); acceptance of the fact of the loneliness of an individual in the face of death, the encounter with which is the most important stage in understanding the essence of existence, one’s presence in the world (“authentic Being-towards-death” according to M. Heidegger [152, p. 311]; the significance of K. Jaspers’ “Grenzsituation” (“limit situation” [153, p. 226]).

Perhaps the most productive way to examine the parables of “The Lockless Casket” is in the light of Heidegger's ideas, as set out in his work “Being and Time” [152]. The philosopher uses the concept of “das Man” (in English translation “the They”) to characterize the faceless masses.

“But this distanciality which belongs to Being-with, is such that Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in subjection [Botmdssigkeit] to Others. It itself is not ; 1 its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. These Others, moreover, are not definite Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. 'The Others' whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one's belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part 'are there' in everyday Being-withone-another. The "who" is not this one, not that one, not oneself [man selbst] , not some people [einige], and not the sum of them all. The 'who' is the neuter, the "they"” [152, p. 164].

The philosopher underscores: “The They”, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness” [152, p. 166] ... “The They” do not think about the meaning of existence, they are immersed in everyday routine and do not strive to express their individuality. By accepting their general norms and way of presence in the world, a person loses themselves. Here

“averageness, leveling down, publicness, the disburdening of one's Being, and accommodation-lies” is meant.

M. Heidegger claims that: “This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Others’, in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more” [152, p. 164]. “And because the “they” constantly accommodates the particular Dasein by disburdening it of its Being, “the they” retains and enhances its stubborn dominion.

The depiction of “the They”, the vanity of everyday existence, “not authentic Being”, the power of generally accepted norms over the individual, suppressing their personality, is typical for L. Promet, who tries to reveal to the reader the danger and tragic consequences of a person's losing their own Self. For this purpose, the writer uses an allegorical form, in her parables a philosophical meaning is hidden behind fanciful plots and images.

For example, in “Tivoli”, L. Promet depicts the narrator's journey with his Muse into a fantasy world inhabited by poets. They are all “the They”: average mediocrities, busy with everyday worries and concerns, consumed by the desire to please the crowd and gain its recognition. Their creative work and existence are devoid of any meaning. Pictures of senseless and absurd activities constitute the “stream” of the narrative.

The narrator sees one of the poets dragging someone's wounded body and the Muse explains that in fact, this is his “wounded ambition” [154, p. 150] as the poet suffers terribly having received no recognition or glory. Another poet leads a “herd of jumping limbs” [154, p. 150]: these strange, flawed creatures are an allegory for the wretched, unoriginal, primitive thoughts and images of his work. The third poet reads poems to hippos because it does not matter to him who will be the recipients of his works, it is more important that the audience becomes bigger and bigger (“he needs fans and admirers, even if they are hippos”) [154, p. 152].

It is this loss of their own existence by the poets of Tivoli that is emphasized by vivid detail; to the narrator they all look alike and are identical: “The Muse smiled when I noted that they all looked the same” [154, p. 149]. The fact that poets become

the representatives of “the They” is especially significant and tragic because as creators who should possess special wisdom and understanding of the true purpose of a human.

“The They” do not think about death: they fence themselves off from accepting demise, from understanding it, and imposing indifference to passing away as the norm. However, only the awareness of one's own mortality takes the individual out of the world of everyday rush, and death determines existence.

According to M. Heidegger [152, p. 311], “We may now summarize our characterization of authentic Being-towards-death as we have projected it existentially: anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the “they”, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious”.

The theme of a person's encounter with death is one of the main themes in the works of Lilli Promet. In the parables of “The Lockless Casket”, like in the philosophical concept of M. Heidegger’s “Being and Time”, it is only death that determines existence.

L. Promet’s characters are often shown in a “limit situation” (“Grenzsituation” by K. Jaspers [153, p. 226]). As the German philosopher notes, it is about “struggle, death, chance, guilt, which are based on antinomy. Struggle and mutual assistance, life and death, chance and meaning, guilt and the consciousness of a sin do not exist without each other” [153, p. 226].

The most exemplary in this regard are the fairytales entitled “Festive Day” and “Dewdrop”, which show moments of an individual's encounter with death, and examine the problem of choosing and accepting one’s destiny in a “limit situation”.

“Festive Day” is built on the antithesis of “crowd – personality”, “everyday Being”, “not authentic Being” – “authentic Being-towards-death”. “The Crowd” is related to Heidegger's “the They” category. Unlike “Tivoli”, there is not much fiction here: the everyday life of the crowd is depicted in the most detailed and naturalistic way, allowing the reader to fully immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the city’s

festive bustle. The crowd wants to eat, drink, have fun, and not think about the meaning of life, the essence of death. Promet marks [155, p. 134]: “The city was jam-packed with nobles, rittmeisters, clerks, the fortress guard riflemen, village coterells, women and maidens, whose buckles and gold hoops glittered so beautifully in the sun ... Despite warm weather, the most renowned townspeople wore robes lined with lynx or leopard fur ... A deer, fattened bull-calves, dozens of goats, hares and more than a hundred chickens were roasted”.

This is an “impersonal character”, immersed in everyday futile concerns. The “fitting end” to this celebration is the execution of an innocent person, the townspeople perceive it with detachment and indifference, as befits “the They”. The “being-towards-death” of the man sentenced to death is contrasted with the general mood of the celebration of life. The finale implicitly expresses the existentialist understanding of death as a necessary stage in grasping the essence of existence.

In “Festive Day”, an unnamed poor poet was sentenced to death, the only thing known about his fate and crimes is that he “just wrote ballads about troubles and poems about suffering, in which he spoke about assassinations” committed by the king and the royal secretariat.

“He was trembling all over; his knees were shaking noticeably, he was as pale as a dead man, and his teeth were clattering with fear. Nobody expected this of him, and his colleagues, who came to watch the execution, even laughed at this behavior ...

- He, who is bolder than me and not afraid, let him take my place! – he suggested.

But no one moved, everyone waited. They waited until the versemaker drew his last breath” [155, p. 134].

Whatever the form of death, its existential interpretation neutralizes the meaning of a person’s life regardless of deeds, social status, and life experience by way of recognising indisputable fact of the finality of any person’s existence. The condemned poet, the aged king, the impoverished mistress, all of them find themselves alone in the face of death, equal in their own lot and absurdity of their lives lived.

The parable “Dewdrop” raises the problem of choice, which is significant for existentialism (“man is doomed to freedom of choice”). The main character is a king

who is in love with an unusual girl, rejected by the majority. He has to make a typical existential choice: to preserve his own Self or to adapt to the norms and demands of “the They” and to become like everyone else.

At first, the king abandons his love and chooses to adjust to the crowd’s tastes (“everyday Being”). However, later, in the face of death, in a “limit situation”, he understands what was truly valuable and significant for him (“authentic Being-towards-death”); he apprehends the falsity of his passions, the desire to return his beloved and his true self. Death makes him himself again.

For existentialists *the meaning and way of existence in the world* is one of the most important questions: each person must decide it for themselves, fully accepting responsibility for their choice and its consequences.

For example, the existentialist writer A. Camus in “The Myth of Sisyphus” presents the image of an ancient character doomed to eternal, hard, and aimless work as a fighter against Absurdity, who gains freedom through its awareness and acceptance.

Camus writes [156]: “I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”.

In L. Promet’s works, one can single out ideas that are consistent with those of both M. Heidegger and A. Camus. The parable “From a Bird's Eye View” is the most vivid one in terms of its parallels with the “Myth of Sisyphus”.

Here the author shows a picture of earthly life, filled with endless troubles and sufferings, which makes a man helpless. Death comes with natural disasters, epidemics, wars. “But there was no end to troubles” [157, p. 154]. “The plague walked and walked around Maarjamaa, entered the village houses overlooking neither the hunting castles nor the town halls. People were mown down like grass, the lights went out in the windows, fire faded in the hearths” [157, p. 154]. “And this time in many

villages, not a single soul was left alive and there was no one to take care of the cattle, mad with hunger and thirst” [157, p. 155]. “The earth was given up to fire to be devoured, people’s dwellings turned into burial mounds, courtyards were overgrown with moss. Those who survived went to the highway and turned into a robber, a sorcerer, a fire-eater, a conjurer, or a beggar” [157, p. 156].

However, the most significant image in this work is that of the farmer, whose story concludes the plot. Promet states the following [157, p. 157]: “The swallow ... told that flying over the devastated, plundered Maarjamaa, she suddenly saw a plowing peasant... Then the peasant sowed golden grains of bread into the black furrows of the earth. And it was so pleasant to look at that the swallow did not want to fly away ... The peasant managed to reap the bread. But then the time came for the bird to fly away, and the swallow knows nothing at all about what happened to this man and his grain.

“Praise him,” said the old man”.

Every year the old man gives the swallow a task to bring him news about this person. The swallow fulfills his assignment, but can never tell what result the peasant gets from his work: whether he manages to save the crop, whether he benefits from selling it, whether he eats enough bread from the grains he grows, whether he can feed his family. Or someone else feeds on the fruit of his labors (which is more likely), because injustice and poverty reign everywhere in Maarjamaa. “The Danes ruined the land, then the Russians and Khan Chig-Alei, then they were robbed by *Reitershunde*, Polish szlachta and Litvins, then they were captured by the Swedes” [157, p. 156].

The main thing is that the peasant continues his business year after year: this is his conscious challenge to the world and at the same time the path to reconciliation with it, this is his choice aimed at preserving existence. And in this aspect, the character of this parable evokes associations with A. Camus’ Sisyphus.

Another Promet’s parable “The Poetaster” gives an answer to the question on the place and role of a writer in this world. Here the idea of the true purpose of art is expressed. The plot is formed by the motif of the journey, during which the old poet shows the young one what is worthy of a true creator’s attention: a man who pretends to be blind “so as not to see the essence of things” [158, p. 116], a traveler bent under

a burden of a load of worries, a boy who “got lost in a terrible forest and suddenly felt so alone” [158, p. 117], a siren who cries and “grieves over her loss” [158, p. 117], etc.

All these nameless characters are representatives of humanity, doomed to suffering. The writer's task is to show this to the reader, to convey to them the awareness of the tragic nature of existence, and to stimulate them to think about the meaning of existence and death.

Thus, summing up, it is necessary to note that the works of the collection “The Lockless Casket” by Lilli Promet have a deep philosophical subtext: their images express the ideas of existentialism.

Particularly significant in this regard are “The Poetaster”, “Dewdrop”, “Festive Day”, “Tivoli”, and “From a Bird's Eye View”. Significant categories of the existential concept of the world and man are presented figuratively, characteristic of an existential parable: the tragedy of being, the absurdity of the everyday bustle of the majority - a faceless crowd (“das Man” / “the They” according to M. Heidegger), in which a person loses themselves (“Everyday Being”, “not authentic Being”); the loneliness of the individual in the face of death, the encounter with which is the most important stage in understanding the essence of being, one's existence in the world (“authentic Being-towards-death” according to M. Heidegger); “Grenzsituation” (“limit situation”) by K. Jaspers; the problem of freedom of choice and acceptance of the world (“The Myth of Sisyphus” by A. Camus), etc.

To represent the corresponding ideas and categories, Lilli Promet uses the genre of parable and specific artistic techniques typical for the traditions of literary existentialism: plots with a *pointe* and an open ending that creates a sense of understatement, an “objective” narrator, a “detached” style of narration, synonymic groups, and repetitions, a detailed image of “Everyday Being”, an abstract chronotope, depersonalized characters shown at the moment of meeting with death, in a “limit situation”.

The Estonian writer strives for the maximum degree of generalization: each scene in her fiction demonstrates one of the facets of tragic existence, and each nameless participant in the scene represents all of humanity.

On the one hand, the author reveals the meaninglessness of existence limited by everyday concerns, and the desire to please the crowd (“the They”) in terms of existential axiology.

On the other hand, the writer shows the significance of meeting death and choice in a “limit situation”. The writer gives a worthy example of an “authentic Being”. The image of the peasant from the parable “From a Bird’s Eye View” represents a humanistic ideal of stoicism. This character evokes strong associations with A. Camus’ Sisyphus.

The study confirms “popularity” of existentialist ideas in 20th-century fiction and opens up prospects for further research in this field.