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THE EXISTENTIALIST MOTIF OF DESPAIR IN MCCARTHY'S "NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN": NEW DARKNESS AND OLD HOPES

The article considers McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* from the perspective of the existentialist motif of despair in the characters' network. Being philosophical in nature, the book raises existential questions of the value of human life and the purpose of human existence. The subject of the study is the existentialist motif of despair. The problem is the peculiarities of representation of this existentialist motif in modern literature. The aim of the study is to explore the literary representation of the existentialist motif of despair in *No Country for Old Men*. The applied methods include close reading, which serves for the identification of the motif of despair in the novel, and character analysis, which helps examine the main characters' experiences of despair and reveal their psychological and emotional responses to the existential challenges they face. The novelty of the study lies in offering a fresh perspective on the analysis of the novel in the context of existentialist motifs, especially the motif of despair.

The results of the study show that in *No Country for Old Men* the existentialist motif of despair arises from the awareness of the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of existence. The main characters constantly experience despair because the society they live in is devoid of meaning and is ruled by cruelty, which reveals profound changes of modern civilization. The protagonists belong to diverse generations and differ in their positions and ways of thinking, but they share a common experience of descending into the depths of despair at some point of their lives. The despair that they feel is caused by the changes that society undergoes. These transformations, also on the global scale, provoke alteration in the ethical norms engendering a pervasive sense of dissonance and moral ambiguity. The characters seem to assume that violence becomes necessary for survival, since justice proves its insufficiency, money and drugs take a leading place and substitute religion, and the value of human life deteriorates. The world seems absurd and devoid of meaning; however, the protagonists desperately try to find their path through the darkness and struggle to uncover meaning and authenticity in a seemingly indifferent and chaotic world.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; American literature; existentialism; existentialist motifs; despair.

Introduction. Progress is closely connected with regress. One step forward in one field may lead to two steps back in another. The recurrence of events is quite frequent in the universe, but, unfortunately, few lessons are learnt from history, and the same mistakes are made repeatedly. Thus, periods of enlightenment take turns with periods of complete darkness. The Middle Ages known for its total church control over secular life turn to the Age of Discovery and give place to the epoch of Renaissance, marked by outburst of new creations and appearance of fictional texts of W. Shakespeare, T. Wyatt, M. Cervantes, D. Erasmus etc. in the Old World. Meanwhile, in the New World newly colonized Northern America instead of promised peace and liberty faces a witch-hunt and gradual extermination of the indigenous population. Hence, the history of humanity is the story of endless wars and revolutions with short periods of truce, and the time of great struggle of various nations for their rights and liberties. The brutality witnessed during the World Wars compels people to revise the eternal questions of human existence ultimately giving rise to existentialism.

Although this literary movement emerged in the late 19th century, its ideas remain relevant in the modern world, marked by natural disasters and human-made catastrophes (e.g., the global pandemic), and a number of terrible wars (including the one in Ukraine). These circumstances force people to confront the delicate balance between life and death, as well as intrinsic value and purpose of human life. Consequently, the exploration of these fundamental existential questions continues to resonate in contemporary literature.

Alongside with universal themes, modern writers more often tackle darker ones, such as: violence, race or sex discrimination, drug addiction, abuse of the environment and others. They question the cornerstones of existing society, searching for the answers to the essential questions of value and purpose of human life. One such author is Cormac McCarthy, a Pulitzer Prize winner and a prominent figure in American literature. The author is deeply concerned about the fate of his own country. That is why, in his novels, the writer aims to attract society's attention to its pressing issues and to find answers to the key

questions of human existence. The novelist undermines the complacent roles of an individual, society and the world as a whole, exploring in his works the existentialist motifs of despair, death, alienation, absurdity of life, etc. One such novel is *No Country for Old Men* (2005), in which McCarthy explores the flaws of the modern world and the USA in particular and dwells on the meaning of human existence.

No Country for Old Men has raised wide interest among readers due to its minimalism and simplicity caused by the fact that it was originally written as a screenplay, which distinguishes the novel from McCarthy's other works. The book covers such a scope of topics as life and death, good and evil, ageing, the value of money and the role of god in the society. The novel has already been the subject of academic interest of such scholars as J. Cant, J. Ellis, B. Burr, K. Lincoln, N. Monk, S. Frye, G. Phipps, N. Zhluktenko, A. Stembkovska, etc. However, it has not been analysed in the light of the existentialist motif of despair. Thus, the aim of the study is to explore the literary representation of the existentialist motif of despair in *No Country for Old Men*. The following tasks have to be accomplished to achieve the aim:

- to clarify the notion 'existentialist motif' and the concept of despair in existentialism;
- to identify the existential motif of despair in literature;
- to analyze the genre and special features of *No Country for Old Men*;
- to examine the representation of the existentialist motif of despair in the novel.

Theoretical background. Existential and existentialist are two related terms that both concern human existence, yet they differ in their meaning. 'Existential' is a broader term that encompasses questions of existence in a general sense, while 'existentialist' is tied to the philosophical movement of existentialism and its specific concepts and ideas (Webber, 2018, p. 17). For this reason, in our study, we will focus on the existentialist motif, which pertains to themes and concepts developed within existentialism.

In existentialism, despair is defined as a state in which a person becomes aware that their life brings no satisfaction and there is no hope in it. However, as Kierkegaard states this knowledge does not come from inevitability of death (Kierkegaard, 1941), as in some occasions one may desperately hope for death as salvation from the absurdity of the world. Absurdity becomes evident when human aspirations confront harsh reality (Camus, 2015, p. 24), leading individuals to experience despair in the face of an indifferent universe. According to Sartre, despair indicates that people should do only those things which they are capable of to experience freedom of choice (Sartre, 2007, p. 34). Thus, despair is a profound state of hopelessness and disillusionment in which individuals perceive their lives as devoid of meaning, satisfaction, or prospects for improvement. It is also characterized by a sense of existential emptiness and a loss

of hope for a better future. In literature, the existentialist motif of despair serves as a powerful tool to explore the depth of human nature. Protagonists, experiencing despair, confront the darkest aspects of their inner worlds and question the very essence of their existence, uncovering the potential for profound self-discovery, and forging a unique path towards a more meaningful and authentic life. The literary embodiment of this existentialist motif can be traced in *No Country for Old Men*. In the novel, the main characters grapple with despair as they strive to give their lives true and proper meaning.

Genre analysis and key features of *No Country for Old Men*. In the novel, the story takes place on the American border with Mexico in 1980 and tells about a senseless confrontation between the police and drug dealers. As a result of a skirmish between two mafia clans, all the members of both gangs are murdered, and a large sum of money is stolen by a casual witness, Llewelyn Moss, who is now being followed by a professional killer and psychopath, Anton Chigurh. The police, led by Sheriff Bell, try to solve the crime and punish the perpetrators, but all their efforts are in vain because the true evil is not where they are looking for. Therefore, in the book, the country that once was the land of big opportunities has turned into the place where money is god and cruelty is a common thing: "*What do we think is goin to come of that money? Money that can buy whole countries*" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 303). Being involved in the war between drug dealers, Llewelyn Moss understands how deeply society is rotten. The efforts of the police to stop drug trafficking are fruitless because it is a profitable business, in which some powerful people are involved. Constant wars between mafia clans make people fear for their lives, and the happy end is not in the near future. The absurdity of the existing authoritative system, which does not control the spread of weapons and drugs, takes the country back in time to a period when strength defines a person's status in the community. The illusions of becoming rich in the blink of an eye disappear facing a harsh reality in which everything has its price: "*We're bein bought with our own money. And it aint just the drugs. There is fortunes bein accumulated out there that they dont nobody even know about*" (McCarthy, 2007, p. 303).

No Country for Old Men belongs to a hybrid genre, combining elements of both a western and a crime thriller. The characters — the sheriff, the hunter Moss, the horseback riders — along with the desert landscape represent classic elements of the western genre. On the other hand, cars, motels, automatic weapons are typical elements of a crime thriller (Cant, 2008, p. 240). However, the story deviates from the classic genre conventions by taking place somewhere in the province rather than a city, as is often expected. That is sheriff Bell's county and adjacent territories of towns and road motels and, of course, the road, which embodies danger in detective stories (Zhluktenko, 2014, p. 266–267). As in McCarthy's

other novels, the style of *No Country for Old Men* is quite minimalistic and characterized by scarcity of punctuation marks, which helps the crime thriller keep readers in constant suspense. The craft in the novel serves for intensification of conventional terrors of plot (Dorson, 2017, p. 6). The landscape is plain and unimportant, as the events do not venture far from the road, and nearby hotels, and the border between the USA and Mexico. Texas appears to be the place of injustice, cruelty and smuggling. It is an uncontrollable territory where drug-traffickers are free to do their dirty business in spite of the law. Neither Mexico nor the USA can stop it, mainly because big money is involved. The narrative methodically accumulates everyday details, regional speech patterns, minor thoughts, and brief actions against the backdrop of profound violence fueled by the drug trade, institutional corruption, irrationality, and malicious acts (Lincoln, 2009, p. 142). Nevertheless, false values are in the core of the world and the reality seems absurd, but still life continues and the main characters struggle to adapt to the existing way of living and to overcome the feeling of despair and helplessness.

The title of the novel is quite telling that at glance it seems to be simple, because it literally appeals to the plot, namely to the last unsuccessful investigation of an old sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, before his resignation. However, the metaphorical meaning can be seen as an allusion to W. B. Yeats poem *Sailing to Byzantium* first published in the 1928 collection *The Tower* as the novel takes its title from the first line of the poem (Zhuktenko, 2014, p. 266). According to the poem, the young generation cares only about sensuality and seeks for ephemeral pleasures, while the speaker, who represents the older generation, strives for “*the holy city of Byzantium*” (Yeats, line 16), where nothing is the subject to change, decay, and death (Marandi, 2018, p. 51). Similarly to the aged man in the poem who is concerned that young people prefer trivial and temporary things to permanent ones: “*Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect*” (Yeats, lines 7–8), Ed Bell is worried about the future of a new generation which is nurtured in violence and permissiveness. His fears are proved by the survey he has read in a newspaper, where it is said that the biggest problems of teaching nowadays are “*Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide*” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 196). Moreover, the sheriff feels alien and desperate in the rough environment where he ought to live because his ideas and beliefs as a lawman are at odds with the existing world (Marandi, 2018, p. 51). Therefore, starting as a story about a young man Llewelyn Moss it gradually becomes a book about a middle-aged man, Ed Bell, fulfilling the depth and darkness of the reference to the poem (Ellis, 2009, p. 134). Thus, *No Country for Old Men* represents the idea that old values are of little importance for the new generation that is raised on the principle of social selection, according to which the most adaptable and unprincipled survives. And

what is left for the old, those people who still have hopes that they may find their own place in this country, is to leave the stage as it is no longer in their power to change anything. Hence, the older generation makes way for a new one — even much darker, and the dawn of human rebirth is still yet to come.

Existentialist motif of despair. In the novel, Llewelyn Moss and Sheriff Bell represent different generations, but they both feel despair and powerlessness in the face of the modern world. Ironically, Moss is killed and Bell keeps living with the remorse of the past he cannot return to and the future he cannot change: “*All the time you spend tryin to get back what’s been took from you there’s more goin out the door*” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 267). The sheriff complains about the present, about the work that he can no longer do. He is trapped in time, haunted by memories from the past and is unwilling to face the fearful present, in which there is only despair: “*I’ve lost a lot of friends over these last few years. Not all of em older than me neither. One of the things you realize about gettin older is that not everbody is goin to get older with you*” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 216). For Bell the role of a sheriff is contradictory: from one side there is unrestrained authority given by the state but from the other there is an uncontrollable exhibition of force to preserve order (Mangrum, 2011, p. 114). Thus, the law punishes not only the guilty but also the innocent. And this moral dilemma of inconsistency of what should be right and what is really right makes Bell resign as he no longer sees a point in performing the duties of a sheriff: “*<...> when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I’m getting old*” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 196). Therefore, Sheriff Bell notices that there is no place for him in this world, as he is old enough to alter his principles to suit new ethics. Hence, the inability to accustom to new norms of society is a key factor which determines his deep despair.

Bell’s thoughts are expressed in the form of italicized monologues which frame the novel and follow every apparent story that is hardly resolved, closer the end of the book they start to appear more often and finally turn into one of his dreams (Ellis, 2009, p. 134): “*And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make afire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up*” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 309). The monologues do not actually refer to the events in the main narrative but express the sheriff’s inquiries into the nature of violence and moving comments about his wife and their marriage (Frye, 2009, p. 157). They refer to former times’ values, which has nothing to do with the present day America of injustice and violence. Sheriff Bell is worried about the new morals: with great concern he reads about killing sprees, children murdered by their mothers, green-haired teenagers (Hacht, 2015, p. 4). For him not the war but drugs are the great evil that has caused the shift in American

moral values: *"It was already in bad shape. Vietnam was just the icing on the cake"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 294–295). Bell also agrees with Moss's father who holds the view that: *"You cant go to war like that. You cant go to war without God"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 295). But god no longer exists for the majority as his role has been undertaken by heroin, LSD and the like (Ellis, 2009, p. 146). In such a world, it is no wonder that control over borders and the eradication of smuggling still remains just a dream. Thus, as a representative of a democratic society, Bell becomes disillusioned and forlorn especially when he witnesses the work of Chigurh, which shows a change in the social and cultural composition of society (Mangrum, 2011, p. 112). The sheriff has already observed the signs of decay in the world, when he sentenced a boy, who heartlessly murdered another human being, to death. It was a new kind of people nurtured in sin. People who feel no remorse, who are devoid of morals: *"He was nineteen. And he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 3). And Chigurh is one of them, he is *"a true and living prophet of destruction"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 4), who proves his existence by killing others. Thus, Bell believes that the increase in violence is the result of a generational change (Stembkovska, 2014, p. 272) and the shift in moral values. Despite the fact that society has transformed and adopted new social norms, which are not always ethical, there is still hope that the world will find its path through the darkness.

Llewelyn Moss also belongs to a new generation, but he is not devoid of morals. He is kind and sympathetic, that is why he brings water to a dying gunman despite the risk of being killed. Being followed by gangsters, he tries to help a homeless girl: *"I'm goin to drop you at the bus station. You got money. You dont need to be out here hitchhikin"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 235). However, he refuses to live a life of an everyman when he encounters a bag with a lot of money. Knowing its origin and the outcomes of this decision, he still takes, since not even his love to his wife and her supplication could overcome his greed: *"It's a false god. Yeah. But it's real money"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 182). Moss believes that wealth can make him happy but actually, he is driven to despair since he cannot save neither his wife's life, nor his own: *"You bring me the money and I'll let her walk. Otherwise she's accountable. The same as you. <...> I wont tell you you can save yourself because you cant"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 184). Thus, money is a distinguishing factor of the world, which can radically change and even destroy human lives. It is an irreplaceable part of a capitalistic society, the role of which is quite noble to put the world in order and save humanity from anarchy, but in fact, it ruins the human soul. At the same time, it is a motive power of movement which stimulates people to work and develop, but it is also the most common motive to kill. As shown in the book, money is almost the only thing that can reveal

the darkness inside and precipitate an individual into the depths of despair: *"Well, I guess in all honesty I would have to say that I never knew nor did I ever hear of anybody that money didnt change"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 128).

The antagonist, the heartless psychopath Anton Chigurh, decides the fate of his victims with the help of a coin: *"He <...> reached into his pocket and drew out a few coins and took one and held it up. He turned it. For her to see the justice of it"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 258), and kills them with a cattle gun, thus showing his superiority and disdain. In his numerous murders, Chigurh follows his own principles, which he places above all else: *"Even if you gave him the money he'd still kill you. <...> He has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 153). Therefore, his primary motive to kill is not money itself but the desire to decide the fate of another human being. Undertaking the role of god, Chigurh dispenses his justice and remains above the law because he has the most valued things in modern society: power and good connections. He believes in his impunity and, as Frye states: *"Chigurh becomes an omnipresent force of evil that is metaphysical by implication"* (Frye, 2009, p. 158–159). The killer is elusive for the police and only his acts are visible *"I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 4). Anton takes lives feeling desolation and solitude because he cannot find his own place in the world. It is his way to prove his existence and to demonstrate his uniqueness. For Chigurh violence is an ordinary thing, which sometimes may happen accidentally, but it is always a solution to a problem (Monk, 2016, p. 83). That is why he kills a clerk in the hotel or a man when he needs a car, for him it is as simple and natural as to breathe: *"He placed his hand on the man's head. <...> The man slid soundlessly to the ground, a round hole in his forehead from which the blood bubbled. <...> Chigurh wiped his hand with his handkerchief"* (McCarthy, 2007, p. 7). Thus, this ruthless killer, who tries to reshape society, embodies the drug world, which, akin to a ghastly disease is quickly spreading across the country bringing up a heartless and godless nation (Proulx, 2005). The nation indulged in illusions of becoming rich without any effort is ought to face the terrible reality in which violence and hypocrisy are the necessary qualities for survival.

Conclusion. McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is a powerful novel dedicated to representing modern America and detecting the blemishes of the country. The genre of the novel is a hybrid with the characteristics of both a western and a crime thriller, with the latter undergoing minor modifications as the main events take place in a province and the sheriff plays an insufficient role in the investigation. The very title of the book bears the symbolic meaning of inevitable generational change that happens not only because of ageing but also as a result of social influence. In the novel, the existentialist motif of despair, which is

characterized by a state of distress, anguish, and hopelessness, and which the main characters experience, is caused by the shift in moral values, an increase in violence and ambiguity of justice. The protagonists feel desperate witnessing the changes in the ethics of society and reassurance in imminence of moral degradation, especially Sheriff Bell, in whose monologues the concern about the fate of the country is expressed. Bell embodies old values and that is why he cannot adapt to the present day world, where justice is just an illusion, since money and drugs are the new moral. In this absurd world, the puppet police have not enough power to stop drug trafficking and to punish real perpetrators, who still remain above the law. Llewelyn Moss and Anton Chigurh both belong to a new generation, but they differ in their approach to life. After a fruitless pursuit of the meaning of their existence, both young characters end up with desolation and despondency. The despair experienced by the characters serves as a catalyst that can either propel them towards personal growth, freedom, and the pursuit of an authentic existence, or lead them down a path of degradation and further anguish. Thus, giving a detailed description of different atrocities and human weaknesses, such as a passion for money and power, which may send people into the depths of despair, the author makes his readers think of the real aim and value of life.

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ЕКЗИСТЕНЦІАЛІСТСЬКИЙ МОТИВ ВІДЧАЮ

У РОМАНІ К. МАККАРТІ «СТАРИМ ТУТ НЕ МІСЦЕ»: НОВА ТЕМРЯВА, СТАРІ СПОДІВАННЯ

У статті досліджується художня репрезентація екзистенціалістського мотиву відчаю в романі Кормака Маккарті «Старим тут не місце». Твір є глибоко філософським і спонукає до роздумів, адже в ньому порушуються екзистенційні питання цінності людського життя та мети людського існування. Предметом дослідження є екзистенціалістський мотив відчаю. Проблема полягає в особливостях репрезентації цього мотиву в сучасній літературі. Мета дослідження — розглянути літературне втілення екзистенціалістського мотиву відчаю в романі «Старим тут не місце». Методи, застосовані в ході дослідження, охоплюють уважне прочитання, яке служить для ідентифікації мотиву відчаю в романі, та аналіз персонажів, який допомагає дослідити, як головні герої переживають відчай, і виявити їхні психологічні й емоційні реакції на екзистенційні виклики, з якими вони стикаються. Новизна дослідження полягає в тому, що пропонується новий погляд на аналіз роману в контексті екзистенціалістських мотивів, особливо мотиву відчаю.

Результати дослідження показують, що у творі екзистенціалістський мотив відчаю виникає як наслідок усвідомлення внутрішньої безглуздості й абсурдності людського існування. Головні герої постійно переживають відчай, оскільки суспільство, у якому вони живуть, позбавлене сенсу і керується жорстокістю, що вказує на глибокі зміни моральних та етичних стандартів у сучасній цивілізації. Протагоністи належать до різних поколінь і відрізняються за своїм соціальним статусом та способом мислення, але вони поділяють спільний досвід переживання відчаю в певні моменти свого життя.

Відчай, який вони відчувають, спричинений змінами, що зазнає суспільство. Ці трансформації в глобальному масштабі провокують зміни етичних норм і моралі, породжуючи повсюдне відчуття дисонансу та моральної двозначності. Герої помічають, що насильство стає необхідною умовою для виживання, оскільки правосуддя доводить свою неспроможність боротися зі злом, гроші та наркотики займають провідне місце, замінюють релігію, а вартість людського життя знецінюється. Світ здається абсурдним і позбавленим сенсу, однак головні герої відчайдушно намагаються знайти свій шлях крізь темряву та віднайти сенс і справжність у, здавалося б, байдужому й хаотичному світі.

Ключові слова: Кормак Маккарті; американська література; екзистенціалізм; екзистенціалістський мотив; відчай.

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