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**THE THEME OF DEATH IN UKRAINIAN
LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN:
ARTISTIC PECULIARITIES
(BASED ON HALYNA KYRPA'S STORY
MY DAD HAS BECOME A STAR)**

INTRODUCTION

One of the tendencies of modern Ukrainian literature for children and young people is actualization of complex, „adult”, inconvenient themes and problems which writers have long avoided to not psychologically hurt young readers. The experience of foreign artists, social and cultural changes, open information space, a different attitude to a child and childhood are those factors which make the authors keep up with times and meet their readers' needs. Among new topics the Ukrainian authors touch in the literature for children we can see the following: war in Eastern Ukraine, social and political changes (the Revolution of Dignity, Maidan), people's struggle against the tyranny of the authorities and Russian aggression, upholding national dignity and state independence. The loss of the dearest people and realization of the tragedy of those people's fates who perished in Maidan and ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) zone are becoming psychologically traumatic for children. Thus the problem of death is one of the most complicated topics in the literature for children and youth.

In the article presented the artistic features of interpretation of the issue of death by *Halyna Kyrpa* in her story *My Das*

Has Become a Star are analyzed. One of the central aspects of the analysis is focus of the work on the readers of a certain age group – primary school children (7 – 11 years old).

In the scientific discourse, the story by Halyna Kyrpa became the object of study by Mateusz Swetlitsky («Śmierć, trauma i dorastanie w ukraińskiej literaturze dla dzieci»). Some aspects of the coverage of the topic of death in Ukrainian contemporary literature for children were sporadically touched by Ukrainian critics and commentators Iryna Slavinska (Ірина Славінська)¹, Khrysta Venhryniuk (Христя Венгринюк)², writers Natalia Shcherba (Наталія Щерба), Volodymyr Arenev (Володимир Арєнєв), and librarian Tanya Pylypets (Таня Пилипець)³. However, the topic of death in the literature for children has long been discussed in foreign circles of literary researches, critics, children's writers. There are more widespread studies in the field of tanatology, which explain the problems of children's reaction to death, tauntophobia in transitional periods and the overcoming fear of death. Books are also a kind of conversation with children about death. The urgency of the interpretation of contemporary works through the prism of their functioning in theatrical paradigms is evident at the present time.

The literature for children and youth is an artistic, aesthetic and socio-cultural phenomenon which specificity first and foremost has been defined by the addressee (psychological and physiological peculiarities of young recipients). The most characteristic features of this segment of literature are the correspondence of texts to the level of knowledge, life experience,

¹ І. Славінська, *Не солодка дитяча література*, Українська правда, <http://life.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/07/11/133251/> [11. 07.2017]

² Х. Венгринюк, *Обережно про втрати*, Varabooka: Простір української дитячої книги, <http://www.barabooka.com.ua/oberezhno-pro-vtrati/> [24.08.2017].

³ *Про табу без табу*, Varabooka: Простір української дитячої книги, <http://www.barabooka.com.ua/pro-tabu-bez-tabu/> [24.08.2017].

psychological development of the child; appropriate orientation of their subjects, genre characteristics and polygraphic design⁴. The younger the recipient, the more is distinctive the difference between the literary works for children and the ones meant for adult readers. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein in her study *Defining Children's Literature and Childhood* (1996), reviewing characteristic features of the literature for children, highlighted that a writer's appeal to a child, a reader, counts significantly; and speaking about the notion of 'children's literature', she wrote the following:

The definition of 'children's literature' lies at the heart of its endeavor: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: children. The definition of 'children's literature' therefore is underpinned by purpose: it wants to be something in particular, because this is supposed to connect it with that reading audience – „children” – with which it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned⁵.

The prospect of a reader's reception defines the ways and methods of dealing with any topics, even the most complicated ones for child's perception. The author's system of these ways and methods constitutes the poetics of literary works meant for young readers. The main principle of communicating with the child is the assertion that it is necessary to talk with children about everything through the prism of the artistic text, but for this purpose it is urgent to choose the right forms, tone, style of conversation.

Thematic and problematic accents, pathos, genre, the system of characters, psychological nature, chronotope,

⁴ Т. Качак Т. *Українська література для дітей та юнацтва*, Київ 2016, с. 10.

⁵ K. Lesnik-Oberstein. *Defining Children's Literature and Childhood*, [w]: *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, Edited by Peter Hunt, London 1996, p. 15.

narration and language are among the fundamental system-creating components of poetics in which one can trace the specificity of exploration of complicated, „adult” topics in the literature for children.

Proper conversation with children about death in literary works is becoming appropriate and vital. For contemporary kids, the artistic deployment of tanatic motifs in works cannot be new, traumatic or strange experiences, since children often encounter such tragedies personally. Foreign educators state that in the real world children get traumatic occasionally, and sometimes their friends get into trouble. Avoiding stories about such experiences tells more about how adults understand childhood, rather than how children perceive the world. Parents and teachers of the children who are lucky to live a comfortable life, face the contradiction between the desire to provide their children with carefree childhood and the need to help them raise their empathy. Australian teachers Anna Kamaralli and Georgina Ledvinka also believe that the idea of happy ending in texts for children is an illusion and gives examples of books that end in different ways.

Stories for very young children hold to the principle of happy endings almost without deviance, but the exceptions are noteworthy. *Old Pig* (1999), which is aimed squarely at primary school-age children, introduces the idea of coping with the death of a loved one and Eleanor Coerr's *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (1977), in which the young heroine never gets her wish to be cured of leukaemia, provides about the earliest introduction to a genuinely sad ending in a children's novel. A few children's books deliberately subvert the expectation of happy endings. Lemony Snicket (1988) repeatedly disavows any prospect of happy endings and implores those looking for them to go elsewhere: „I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant”⁶ .

⁶ A. Kamaralli, G. Ledvinka, *One day my end will come – kids don't need happily ever afters* <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/social-affairs/one-day->

Besides, tanatic motifs have been a part of children's games for a long time (boys play war-games „killing” each other; children imitate burying rituals of their pets), and nowadays such elements gain special visualization while the market offers some specific toys – dolls with coffins, toy ghosts and corpses, crosses and other things with death symbols. The books are able to provide them with correct answers to the questions, demonstrate the behavior patterns and reactions of their peers-characters to difficult life moments. Their function is to help the child understand death and cope with own emotions associated with psychological trauma, loss of loved ones. The author has to tell the small readers not to shock them, not to deepen this trauma, but on the contrary – help perceive social reality as it is. Such are the books of contemporary Ukrainian writers: *My Dad Has Become a Star* (*Мій тато став зіркою*) by Halyna Kurpa (Галина Кирпа), *Marta from St. Nicholas Street* (*Марта з вулиці Святого Миколая*) by Dzvinika Matijash (Дзвінка Матіяш), *A Fairytale About Maidan* (*Казка про Майдан*) by Khrystyna Lukashchuk (Христина Лукашук), *The War That Has Changed Rondo* (*Війна, що змінила Рондо*) by Romanna Romaniv (Романна Романів) and Andrii Lesiv (Андрій Лесів); *Who will take snow?* (*Хто зробить сніг?*) Mariana and Taras Prohasko (Мар'яна і Тарас Прохасько), *Pluto* (*Плутон*) by Valentyna Vzdulska (Валентина Вздутьська) and others. These texts combine the features that attest to the artistic specificity of literature for children: the coverage of the topic from the point of view of the child, dynamic plot of the narration, high level of visualization of the text, the use of metaphors and symbols, the image of the inner world of the young hero and his reflections; life-affirmation, an optimistic guideline for goodness and vitality pathos, understandable language, stylistic expressiveness.

my-end-will-come-%E2%80%93-kids-don%E2%80%99t-need-happily-ever-afters [24.06.2015].

MAIN PART

In the story *My Dad Has Become a Star* by Halyna Kyrpa tanatic symbols can be traced in the description of the girl's psychological experiences concerning her father's death. The child is reflecting on such issues as: death, barricades, rocket systems („grad”), war in Eastern Ukraine. **Tanatic elements are growing into the theme of the story.** The author avoids using the word death, but it is tanatos – the central concept of the work, which at the level of pathos is partially offset by the vitality sentiment.

Every day the girl waits for her dad who keeps going to Maidan and more often stays there over the whole night. And when he has been away from home for several days, and her mother persists in looking for him at the barricades and calling everyone she can, the girl has managed to get the answer to her question: When will dad come back? Halyna Kyrpa depicts the typical behavior of the adults who try to avoid the direct replies to difficult children's questions. Adults normally hide the truth from the children. The girl persuaded her mom not to treat her as a little child, and her mother decided not to conceal anything but talk to her daughter as to an adult person.

„He won't come back to us, dear...,” the mother seems to be lacking words. ‘Our dad...Your daddy... has become... a star.’

„What do you mean – a star? ” I'm asking and examining my mom if she can be joking? Mom has kept silent for a long time – it can't be longer! – she kept silent and then said, ‘He has been killed. On the barricade’⁷.

Talking to children, one never treats the notion of death as an absolute end of a human life, but only as a certain step of a human's path. According to the Christian belief a human soul goes to the heaven after death, a person who has died is

⁷ Г. Кирпа, *Мій тато став зіркою*, Львів 2015, с. 13 – 14

called a star, an angel. These people carry on with their missions: they protect and take care of their relatives, children, „shining from heaven”.

One of the peculiarities inherent in the Ukrainian spiritual culture is that its content is not in theoretical considerations or metaphysical reflections, but in the form of metaphors, symbolic figures, and images. In Ukrainian culture, death is a mystery, an undiscovered enigma of life, and the inevitable final of all living things, and the doom that hangs over a man⁸.

In the story father's death has been eclipsed by his baby's Yordanka birth. The author doesn't deepen the child's tragedy, but urges the girl to see the future optimistically.

It is very difficult for a young child to comprehend such realities of life, to understand their meaning, to explain to themselves why this happened. The writer subtly conveys this confusion, the girl, her emotional experience, indignation, and then – tears, terrible pity and despair.

I'm so distressed that I can hardly move my lips. How can he have been killed? In Maidan? Why? Mom says the murderer is being looked for. And they will find him or her by all means. If not today, then tomorrow. But I'm more than sure that dad was killed by a person who didn't know that there was no reason for killing him. It was the person who didn't see his smile and didn't hear his voice. It must have been such a person! Can dad have been killed on purpose?!⁹.

Both the mother and her daughter try not to give up but gain a foothold. The mother embraces her child tightly as if

⁸ О. Малик. *Соціально-медично-правові аспекти дослідження ненасильної смерті: філософські уявлення, історичні традиції та культурологічні особливості сприйняття смерті (частина I)*, “Актуальні проблеми медицини, фармації та біології: наук.-практ. журн.”, № 6, 2012, с. 39.

⁹ Г. Кирпа, *Мій тато став зіркою*, Львів 2015, с.14

she were protecting her. They have united against death giving the promise of remembrance:

„Whatever may happen, dear, you should never forget one thing: our daddy has become a star and will shine to us forever’. A star as a symbol of eternal light is called for easing the pain of loss. The child’s emotions are expressed by the heart-rending phrases in which all the tragedy of the situation has been condensed: ‘I’d like to cry out for the whole world to hear:

„No, I don’t want it this way!!! Let the star, not my dad, shine!!! And let my dad draw the high sky and tall poplars for me!!! Let him be just my dad, that’s all!’”¹⁰.

The specificity of the literary works for children finds expression in the following: „one can speak about that special intonation that comes from the selected vocabulary, rhythmic structure of phrases and a range of emotions inherent in a child”¹¹.

The little girl tries to understand one more time: what it means to become a star?, she wonders if Ivanka’s father has gone that way as well and if Ivanka has learnt from her mother that there are a lot of them there, „like tiny black poppy seeds’. The micro-image of a coffin, which comes up in the girl’s imagination, makes tanatic motifs more vivid:

The dad’s coffin is covered with a banner and seems like a nice blue and yellow boat. Perhaps, dad wanted to have the boat just like that. Then everything is like in a dream. As if I slept with my eyes open. The boat goes up and sails slowly over the human heads until it is sailing into the sky. Can he be so light? Or totally weightless?¹².

The image of a boat is a symbolic one. The vision, which the girl described, was engraved in the memory of lots of

¹⁰ Ibidem, с. 14

¹¹ Л. Кіліченко, *Українська дитяча література*, Київ 1988, с. 12

¹² Г. Кирпа, *Мій тато став зіркою*, Львів 2015, с.16

Ukrainians: in Maidan the people gathered to bid farewell to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred, scanning „Heroes Won't Die”, people got away from despair, pain, they inspired hope. „The heroes sailed into the sky in the blue and yellow boats. They sailed to the place where stars twinkled”¹³. In such a way the main heroine compares the things she had seen to her own imagination and the metaphorical image of her dad-star. Meanwhile, Maidan emerges in her memories as one of the time and space images of the story. The stylistic device of artistic materialization, visualization is very important in literature in general, and in the literary works for children and youth, it is a compulsory component which functions in the same way as an illustration does in a children's book. „We believe that one of the most essential characteristic features of the artistic world is the level and peculiarities of its visualization, its eidetic nature which is regarded as longevity and vividness of the inner view of everything that happens in literary works”¹⁴. Vivid descriptions, saturated with artistic details, symbols, distinctive images of things and phenomena, are „the functional means of the generation of aesthetic energy” (H. Klochek) which helps readers realize the content and imagine everything depicted. Mariia Zubrytska observes that „the literary and theoretical issue of *homo legens* first and foremost is the issue of vision and visualization”¹⁵. The highest level of visualization is one of the characteristic features which highlight the specificity of the prose and poetry for young readers.

Halyna Kyrpa has proved again with her book that the literature for children does not need simplification and there's no need to write for children in a primitive way about the things which they sometimes feel psychologically deeper than adults do.

¹³ Ibidem, с.18

¹⁴ Г. Клочек, *Енергія художнього слова*, Кіровоград 2007, с.85

¹⁵ М. Зубрицька, *Ното legens: читання як соціокультурний феномен*, Львів 2004, с. 15

Day by day, the main heroine learns how to put up with the fact that her father is not by her side anymore, but she feels his presence and is able to imagine how her dad puts her on his right shoulder „and takes her somewhere far away across whole Maidan, through the fluttering of blue and yellow banners and the endless chatting of the barricades. And just right above the heads the star is shining. So high that it can't be even higher... And only her eyes can say: „You are always with me, daddy!”¹⁶. And the girl keeps talking to him in her mind telling him about her newborn baby sister, Yordana, and recalling the last holiday of Vodokhreshcha when her dad was by her side. The religious holiday after which her sister was named is one of the time references, the element of the story's **chronotope** which embraces the depicted events. Maidan, the river and her home are the three space notions that come to her imagination while thinking about the father. Her memory cherishes the image of her father, he lives in her heart. In her consciousness this connection is fixed with the help of her imagination, memories, things (pastels), her and her father's traditions (which are now continued by her mother). **The deep psychological insight** into the image of the little narrator is evident. The writer admits:

I have been writing this book for a very long time, for more than a year. I started in summer 2014 after those appalling atrocities in Maidan. While we buried our heroes, there one could also see mothers with their kids in the square. Among them there was a little girl whose eyes I will never forget... And the heroine of my book is that kind of a girl. I tried to imagine what was going on in the soul of a child whose father hadn't come back home but was lying in a coffin. Maybe, feeling like a child myself, I could understand that girl's tears¹⁷.

¹⁶ Г. Кирпа, *Мій тато став зіркою*, Львів 2015, с. 35

¹⁷ *Мій тато став зіркою* – книжка про світло й надію від Галини Курну, <https://starylev.com.ua/news/miy-tato-stav-zirkoyu-knyzhka-pro-svitlo-y-nadiyu-vid-galyny-kyrpy>, [16.02. 2016]

The artistic narration is skillfully evolved by Halyna Kyrpa. Everything is combined in a harmonious and natural way. The topical and painful issue has been explored on the basis of simple life circumstances; ordinary characters of a little girl, her younger sister, mom, cousin. The author used the typical way of narration of children's literature – **the narration provided by a child**. But how good the issue is explored! All the sentences in the story are supported with deep and striking images: the tall poplars, the high sky, the wind which is combing the leaves of the poplars; the star that never becomes dim; the blue and yellow boats sailing into the sky. **By its genre**, Halyna Kyrpa's *My Dad Has Become a Star* is a traditional story with characteristic realistic and psychological dimensions of the unfolding of „the plot which has one line and is clear-cut by its structure”, the plot of the story „is limited to one (sometimes several) episode from a life of a character or some characters”¹⁸.

The prose by Halyna Kyrpa is distinguished by a high artistic level, figurative and metaphorical language. This is evidenced by the title itself *My dad has become a star*; it conveys the sense of the word „perished” in a metaphorical way. The metaphorical style of the language is a typical feature which highlights the specificity of the literature for children. In *Encyclopedia of Literature Studies*, Yurii Kovaliv thinks over the notions of

the language of children's literature and language of the literature for children' and admits that 'the peculiarity of such works is frequent usage of metaphors, which is connected with the animated world view of the little ones. For children of school age the metaphor acquires aesthetic-expressive meaning, the language of literary texts gradually approaches the language of works for adults'¹⁹.

¹⁸ Ю. Ковалів, *Літературознавча енциклопедія: У двох томах*, Київ 2007, Т. 2, с. 156

¹⁹ Ibidem, с. 59

Halyna Kyrpa writes her literary work for children about tanatos. Her little characters live in the reality where death and loss of the dearest people are much spoken about. („Suddenly I feel scared. I’ve recalled the morning radio report about the twelve dead near Luhansk. They’ve been blown up on a land mine. And is Pavlus’ father there among them? And even though it wasn’t Pavlus’ father, it was someone else’s father! All the same – FATHER!”²⁰). And despite such a difficult and adult topic, this book gives light, spreads the good and teaches us how to love. Halyna Kyrpa knows how to communicate with children and to write in such a way that everyone (both young and adult people) will not only read, but will live through the story emotionally, feel the power of love and good. In an interview, the author speaks very well about how to write about complex themes for children:

Someone from the writers said that this is a book about light and hope, and this light, perhaps, holds us now. And somehow it is necessary to preserve the child’s soul from despair, and, hopelessness. I would very much like this book to be read. To make people feel more sympathetic, kind and generous. Maybe I idealize, but I would like to live in the world where everything is be good, cozy, where everybody loves each other²¹.

Taking into account the fact that the book is meant for young readers and the story is told by a child, the author tries not to exacerbate the tragic pathos, although she does not avoid the drama of the depicted. Pathos as a comprehensive category, „is depicted in the whole work, but not concentrated in any one of its plot compositional moments, even in one of the characters”²²,

²⁰ Г. Кирпа, *Мій тато став зіркою*, Львів 2015, с.33

²¹ „Мій тато став зіркою” – книжка про світло й надію від Галини Кирпи, <https://starylev.com.ua/news/miy-tato-stav-zirkoju-i-knyzhka-pro-svitlo-y-nadiyu-vid-galyny-kyrpy>, [16.02. 2016]

²² М. Кодак, *Поетика як система: літературно-критичний нарис*, Київ 1988, с.23

pathos as a component of the poetics of the story, its „mood”, has a significant importance in literary works for children. Focusing on complicated issues, taking into account the child’s reception, authors have to choose such a mode of emotional awareness of the world that would be comfortable, captivating; making a reader sympathetic to the characters; at the same time a child should not be traumatized psychologically, and contributed to the optimal functional implementation of the text.

My Dad Has Become a Star is the story that makes both young and adult readers cry and at the same time it provides them with strength of mind and hope. The story, which is told by the little girl whose father was killed in Maidan, amazes us not with its great and heroic pathos since there is not any there, but with the light of the child’s soul, her thoughts, wishes, truth which is difficult to put up with, and one needs to live on somehow with such truth. In this story **the pathos of vitality** outweighs the tragic and tense moods created by tanatos motifs.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, for the work of Halyna Kyrpa, despite the deployment of the theme of death, the specifics of literature for children are inherent: „in the realm of worldview – it is optimism, life-affirmation, a sincere guidance for good, in the realm of aesthetics – it is universalism that subjugates itself to subjective component, in the realm of artistic form – is the simplicity of statement, game character, stylistic expressiveness”²³.

The analyzed work showed that in prose texts for young readers, the death of a person (character) is often interpreted as a transition from earthly life (image) into another space (image). An American psychologist Irvine Yalom observes that there

²³ М. Моклиця, *Інтенційно “дитячі” елементи літератури для дорослих*, “Волинь філологічна: текст і контекст”, Вип. 3, 2007, с. 18

is convincing evidence that children at an early age discover death; they are aware of the inevitability of a cessation of life; they attribute this awareness to themselves, and this discovery causes them tremendous anxiety. The child denies the inevitability and finality of death creating myths about immortality or gratefully grabs the myths offered by others. Such variants are offered in fabulous plots or artistic texts for children. The children's book thus helps the child understand the world and everything that is going on around without hurting her psyche with naturalistic descriptions and categorical, irreversible losses.

My Dad Has Become a Star, a story for primary children, has become an aesthetic phenomenon, and not just instructive reading, due to its figurative language, its artistic and metaphorical merits, perfect linguistic and narrative level. Halyna Kyrpa is good at talking to children about difficult and adult issues, touching little hearts, stirring up a range of emotions, making the world a better place filled with love. This enters the functional aspects of the work. The experience of reading such a text at the age of 7 – 11 will not be traumatic, since the behavior of a girl of the same age is a delight, and the artfully written story makes us believe that even after death, dear people remain close, and their aspirations inspire us to be strong. This is an example of how promoting optimism can be encouraged by developing tanatos themes. In the story of Halyna Kyrpa death loses before faith in victory, with the birth of a sister, love of the family, bright memory of the father.