

**Thanatological Motifs in Doris Lessing's Lyrico-Epic Works
(«A Seam of White Crystals» and «As If They Had Always Known It»)**

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The lyrico-epic cycle «*The Wolf People*» (2002) by the contemporary English writer D. Lessing chronologically divides the writing of her prose trilogy «*Mara and Dann*» (1999-2005). The collection serves as a thematic continuation of its first part and a prologue to the second; that is, it acts as a kind of bridge uniting the two parts of the trilogy. Through a contextual analysis of D. Lessing's ballads «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» from the collection «*The Wolf People*», motifs resonant with the writer's prose works have been identified: the trilogy «*Mara and Dann*» and the novel «*Alfred and Emily*» (2008). A common thematic focus, underlying issues, and motifs (motifs of catastrophic death, lost origins and memory, the search for a safe space, and the motif of the dream) are determined across these works by the author.

D. Lessing artistically explores the origins and consequences of the catastrophe experienced by humanity in a post-apocalyptic future world. The author crafts an image of a primeval world wherein humans strive to find their place and attempt, by any means, to withstand the lethal forces of nature. In the ballads «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*», the thanatological motif emerges as a constant component of the eschatological myth. The motif of catastrophic death is initially connoted by the characters' premonition of disaster in the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*» (the semantics of the title reveal a sacred incantation-warning to descendants). The protagonist of the trilogy «*Mara and Dann*» is also the keeper of sacred knowledge regarding the tragic past of the continent of Ifrik. In the autofictional novel «*Alfred and Emily*», the destruction of the «family» tree with the authentic name Mawonga, which embodied the family's life cycle, symbolizes the dismantling of ontological origins.

The raised motif varies: in the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*», it resonates as a premonition of disaster; in the lyrico-epic text «*A Seam of White Crystals*», the motif of catastrophic death gradually intensifies (the terror of death grips all community members); and subsequently, this motif scales up in the ballad «*The Ice Comes*» to a universal eschatology (a natural disaster emerges as a threat to all of humanity). The eschatological myth regarding a catastrophic end is nuanced and scaled across D. Lessing's works: whereas in the trilogy and the ballads «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*», the insurmountable force is an impersonal force of nature, in the novel «*Alfred and Emily*» it is the world wars, which are the consequences of civilization's destructive impact. This novel by D. Lessing serves as a postmodern reception of the myth surrounding the First World War.

The motif of catastrophic death in the ballads and the aforementioned prose works is linked to the motif of lost origins. The destruction of the «center» of the family space («*Alfred and Emily*») occurs not only physically but also mentally; thus, the problem of the loss of personal memory manifests, which subsequently scales up into the motif of the loss of the community's collective memory. The thanatological motifs presented in these ballads and prose works are embodied through mythological oppositions: «life — death», «ice — sun», «day — night», «light — darkness», «omniscience — blindness», which also affects the characterization of the artistic space: «native — alien», «closed — open».

The individual and collective memories of the lyrical subjects in the ballads «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» emerge as the sole source of historical memory, which parallels the process of their self-identification. In the novel «*Alfred and Emily*», D. Lessing reveals the traumatic nature of war for humanity. The space of childhood in the protagonist's memories is not safe; it is permeated with the parental experience marked by war.

Keywords: English literature, D. Lessing, eschatological myth, memory, motif of catastrophic death, poetry, ballad.

The literary legacy of the contemporary English author Doris Lessing (1919–2013) is well known in

foreign literary studies (the 2007 Nobel laureate in Literature); however, in Ukrainian academic discourse,

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interest in her oeuvre is only beginning to grow. D. Lessing's name and her work are generally associated with feminist and postcolonial issues, as well as the discourse of speculative fiction.

Research on D. Lessing's literary heritage in foreign literary criticism is represented by the works of such scholars as H. Bloom [13], G. Greene [17], R. Rubenstein [25], S. Watkins [27], S. Wilson [28]. Recent academic inquiry into her texts published between 2023 and 2026 focuses primarily on the analysis of prose texts rather than poetry, alongside postcolonial and historical studies (C. Sen [26]). Academic studies frequently center on the interpretation of past trauma, particularly the «psychological scars» of colonialism that devastate the destinies of the characters (D. G. Patni [22]). It is worth noting the debatable nature of those interdisciplinary studies, that combine the subject areas of literature, ethics, ecology, and philosophy (R. Baranwal [11], X. He [18], S. Arikan [10]).

In contemporary Ukrainian scholarship, Lessing's oeuvre has been explored by O. Derykoz [2], M. Horlach [1], V. Lutsyk [4], L. Miroschnychenko [6], M. Mykolaichyk [5], O. Tykhovska [9], I. Zymomria [4]. The critical reception of her literary legacy primarily revolves around the poetics of her short fiction, specifically the collection «*A Man and Two Women*» (1963). Ukrainian researchers delineate the scope of pressing contemporary issues raised in her writings, such as identity, individual alienation, and female socialization (N. Polishchuk [7; 8]).

To date, the study of Lessing's poetic output remains quite fragmented. Academic discourse on this subject is limited to isolated studies (N. Bentley [12], R. Graham [16], C. Murray [21]), with critical attention predominantly centered on the author's early poetry, particularly the collection «*The Fourteen Poems*» (1959). Key aspects of D. Lessing's later poetry (the lyrico-epic cycle «*The Wolf People*», 2002) were examined in our previous publications [23; 24]. This research enabled us to outline the overarching features of her verse and establish its thematic resonance with her autobiographical prose. The present **article aims** to expand upon these observations through an analysis of the lyrico-epic poems «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» from «*The Wolf People*» collection. Furthermore, it strives to uncover the neomythological features of their poetics and highlight their intertextual connections with Lessing's prose fiction.

The scientific novelty of this study lies in its contextual analysis of the lyrico-epic texts «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» from «*The Wolf People*» collection by Doris Lessing, a writer predominantly recognized for her prose fiction. Chronologically, the cycle «*The Wolf People*» (2002) bridges the creation of

Lessing's prose dilogy «*Mara and Dann*», situated between the publication of its first volume («*Mara and Dann: an Adventure*») in 1999 [20] and the second («*The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog*») in 2005. Consequently, given their thematic focus, underlying issues, and motifs, these poetic works serve as a thematic continuation of the dilogy's first part and a prologue to the second. Specifically, the dilogy and the lyrico-epic works share resonant motifs: catastrophic death (glaciation), lost origins and memory, the search for a secure personal space, and the characters' initiation rites, which ultimately lead to the «rebirth» of the protagonists.

Lessing's lyrico-epic cycle «*The Wolf People*», comprising eight poems, opens with an epigraph that concisely encapsulates the thematic core of the verses and prepares the reader for the text: «*Verses suggested by recent scientific speculation on the possible behaviour of our very distant ancestors*»¹ [15, p. 577]. It is noteworthy that «*The Wolf People*» collection exhibits the formal characteristics of a speculative ballad: it is written in verse, is relatively brief in length, features poems interconnected by a shared plot, and includes a limited cast of characters. Furthermore, it demonstrates a consistent use of specific poetic devices (repetitions, parallelisms, etc.), incorporates the motif of metamorphosis, and culminates in an unexpectedly tragic finale (notably, the motif of death in the ballads «*The Misfit*» and «*Something speaks*») [3, pp. 75–76].

The motif of catastrophic death, which is central to the prose dilogy «*Mara and Dann*», also proves to be a pervasive theme in the lyrico-epic works «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*». D. Lessing artistically explores the origins of tragedy and the nature of the disaster that humanity confronts in a post-apocalyptic future. Within these texts, the catastrophe motif emerges as an integral component of the eschatological myth. The author crafts an image of a primeval world where individuals endeavor to establish their place while attempting to withstand an insurmountable force of nature.

In the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*», the thanatological motif initially surfaces as the characters' premonition of an impending disaster. This is symbolically reflected in the title itself («*As If They Had Always Known It*»), which is verbalized as an incantation-warning for humanity. The community's collective memory preserves this spell as a cautionary message to future generations regarding a potential cataclysm capable of obliterating all of humanity's civilizational achievements. Consequently, this incantation-warning acquires the status of sacred knowledge that must be safeguarded to avert an eschatological end and ensure the survival of

Тут і далі текст наводиться за [Partisan Review (2001) Doris Lessing's poetry "The Wolf People". Boston University. Vol. 68 No. 4, P. 577–590], (підрядник наш – Н. Проскура)

descendants: «*The beasts have never come together, / Hunter and hunted, never run together down the valley / Yet someone-who?-at some time-when?-/said, You must go too*».

A comparable motif of anticipating death is also evident in the dilogy «*Mara and Dann*». The protagonist, Mara, urges the residents of Chelops to abandon their drought-ravaged, dying city. She imparts sacred knowledge regarding the historical catastrophe that befell the continent of Ifrik; however, she is met with incomprehension, disbelief, and her people's refusal to pursue salvation: «*These things can happen quickly, Just imagine: all of this, all...—and she made the globe spin slowly—all of it here, the top half, beautiful and good to live in, and then the ice came down over it*» [19, p. 200].

The motif of catastrophic death in the ballads («*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*») correlates with the motif of lost origins. Confined to restricted spaces, the characters experience a profound sense of rootlessness and a compelling urge to discover their «own topos». The lyrical subjects of these ballads are trapped within the enclosed locus of a cave, just as the main characters of the prose dilogy, Mara and Dann, are restricted to the confines of the Ifrik continent due to glaciation. The protagonists across both the ballads and the dilogy strive to resist the devastating forces of nature that annihilate all living things. The individual and collective memories of the lyrical subjects in «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» emerge as the exclusive wellspring of historical memory, running parallel to the process of their self-identification.

D. Lessing's engagement with eschatological themes is driven by her «personal history» and the «geography» of her life's journey. The writer was born in Persia (modern-day Iran), spent her childhood in Southern Rhodesia (present-day Africa), and lived her adult life in England. Residing in various countries profoundly shaped her tolerant attitude toward all cultures. D. Lessing reflects upon the crucial stages and significant events of her own life and that of her family in the autofictional novel «*Alfred and Emily*» (2008). This work, serving as a distinct culmination of the author's entire life, also foregrounds the motifs of catastrophic death and the characters' return to their ontological origins. Toward the end of her life, the author undertook several journeys to Africa, notably visiting the maize farm in Southern Rhodesia where she spent her childhood. However, her perception of childhood as a carefree existence in a safe haven remained solely within her memory: «*It was hard for me to come back to the farm, to the kopje where the house was – to my memories*» [19, p. 228].

One of the chapters in the second part of the novel «*Alfred and Emily*» bears the symbolic title «*The Old Mawonga Tree*». For D. Lessing, the

image of an old bean tree became the primary marker of the farm's topos and the locus of existence. The writer employs the authentic local name – Mawonga. The image of this tree emerges as the symbolic center of the family, reinforced by the imagery of birds that constantly flocked to it. This image embodies the life cycle (birds as family members who always return to the parental home) and reflects the mythological motif of the eternal return to origins: «*Our tree was a sort of a landmark. It was always full of birds*» [19, p. 231].

The memories of D. Lessing's parents were also associated with the image of the family tree: «*Of that tree my parents said: We'll never get off the farm, and they'll bury us under the mawonga tree*» [18, p. 232]. Thus, the destruction of the Mawonga tree symbolizes the loss of family space and the dismantling of ontological foundations. In the second, memoir-based part of the novel «*Alfred and Emily*», the space of «childhood» transforms into something hostile and dangerous: «*Once I lived here. I was a child here,» I said, bright and breezy, as if this was not bound to be a pretty awful occasion*» [19, p. 228]. Thus, the physical destruction of the sacred center of the family space subsequently manifests on a mental plane – local residents do not even remember it: «*There was no tree there, said the man, swaying and leaning. There was never any tree*» [19, p. 229]. Consequently, a motif of the loss of personal memory arises: «*Interesting, watching history being unmade, the past forsworn*» [19, p. 229], which further expands into the motif of the loss of collective human memory.

In the lyrico-epic texts of the cycle «*The Wolf People*», thanatological motifs depict an eschatology on a cosmic scale. The motif of death, which initially emerges merely as a harbinger of disaster (as the anticipation of the death of a community member) in the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*», gradually deepens in the text «*A Seam of White Crystals*» (the fear of dying is now experienced by all members of the community) and scales up to the eschatological finale of the universe in the ballad «*The Ice Comes*» (glaciation appears as an insurmountable natural force that destroys humanity).

The thanatological motifs shared by the ballads and the dilogy are manifested through mythological binary oppositions: «life – death», «ice – sun», «day – night», «light – darkness», «omniscience – blindness», which is reflected in the semantics of the artistic space: «native – alien», «closed – open».

In the lyrico-epic texts «*As If They Had Always Known It*» and «*A Seam of White Crystals*», it is demonstrated how a community of primeval humans is forced to overcome its fears to withstand a powerful natural force and survive in conditions of an eternal night. The existence of the characters is confined to the space of a cave dominated by darkness. A similar confrontation between humans and the forces of nature can be observed in the dilogy «*Mara and Dann*». The symbolism of Plato's myth of the cave, according to which humanity is depicted as a «*prisoner of the cave*», is manifested in both the ballads and the dilogy by

D. Lessing [23; 24]. The image of a prophet, who alone possesses the ability to perceive the truth and foresee the future, emerges in the ballad «*A Seam of White Crystals*»; consequently, the opposition of «darkness – light» correlates with the juxtaposition of «omniscience – blindness».

The problem of personal identification is common to both the poetry and the prose of D. Lessing, and it is resolved through a return to primal sources, which brings about a specific restoration of time. The self-awareness of the community members, who exist on the «life-death» precipice in the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*», is achieved through comprehending the uniqueness of every creature (birds, wolves). The perceptions of the primeval community members regarding the world and humanity's place within it gradually evolve; a process of individuation occurs, and instead of being designated by a number, each member of the community receives a personal name.

In the lyric-epic work «*A Seam of White Crystals*», the motif of catastrophic death also correlates with the motif of the dream, which emerges as a plane of universal truth. The image of the Old Man correlates with the mythologem of the prophet: in a liminal mystical state, a mystery was revealed to him that in the future, the «time of darkness» would be replaced by the «time of light». The Old Man envisions the shimmering of sunlight on the white expanse of snow, which he perceives as a harbinger of the anticipated «long light». However, this future, much like the flickering of sunlight, is precarious and uncertain, as evidenced by the varying intonational coloring of his prophecy. The affirmative intonation of the line «*There will be light again*» shifts to a doubtful one («*There will be the long light?*»), and the interrogative sentences in the final lines of the ballad «*As If They Had Always Known It*» intensify the sense of uncertainty regarding the dreams about humanity's future, creating an open ending for the reader: «*Or if it was a dream, / Why did that dream stay in our heads?*»

However, the community members do not believe the old prophet's divination, as the truth is revealed only to the «initiated»; thus, the opposition of «omniscience – blindness» emerges once again, as evidenced by the lyric-epic lines: «*Know there is more than they have ever seen*». The visionary, who believes in the rebirth of life and the future of his community (long light), passes the secret prophecies to a young member of the community. In the dilogy «*Mara and Dann*», the protagonist, Mara, also preserves sacred knowledge for her daughter, Tamar, to ensure the survival of the entire community and to hasten the «time of light».

Therefore, the contextual analysis of D. Lessing's ballads «*A Seam of White Crystals*» and «*As If They Had Always Known It*» from the collection «*The Wolf People*» has revealed motifs resonant with the writer's prose works: the dilogy «*Mara and Dann*» and the novel «*Alfred and Emily*». Chronologically, the lyric-epic cycle «*The Wolf People*» emerges as a kind of bridge that unites the two parts of the dilogy and shares resonant motifs: catastrophic death, lost origins and memory, the search for a safe space, and the motif of the dream.

D. Lessing artistically explores the origins and consequences of the catastrophe experienced by humanity in a post-apocalyptic world of the future. The author crafts an image of a primeval world wherein humans seek their place and attempt, by any means, to withstand an insurmountable force of nature. The leitmotif of catastrophic death is nuanced: in the lyric-epic text «*As If They Had Always Known It*», it aligns with the anticipation of a disaster (the symbolic nature of the title; the foresight of a community member's death); in the ballad «*A Seam of White Crystals*», its resonance intensifies (all members of the tribe experience the fear of death); and subsequently, in the ballad «*The Ice Comes*», as well as in the prose dilogy «*Mara and Dann*», it scales up to a universal eschatology (an insurmountable natural force threatens the survival of all humanity). In the novel «*Alfred and Emily*», this insurmountable force is no longer an impersonal force of nature, but rather the civilization that led to world wars.

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Танатологічні мотиви в ліро-епосі Доріс Лессінг («A Seam of White Crystals» і «As If They Had Always Known It»)

Ліро-епічний цикл сучасної англійської письменниці Д. Лессінг «*The Wolf People*» (2002) хронологічно розділяє написання її прозової дилогії «Mara and Dann» (1999 - 2005). Збірка є змістовим продовженням її першої частини і прологом до другої, тобто є своєрідним «містком», що об'єднує дві частини дилогії. За допомогою контекстного аналізу балад мисткині «A Seam of White Crystals» і «As If They Had Always Known It» зі збірки «*The Wolf People*» виявлено мотиви, суголосні прозовим творам письменниці: дилогії «Mara and Dann» і роману «*Alfred and Emily*» (2008). В зазначених творах письменниці визначено спільну тематику, проблематику і мотивівку (мотиви смерті-катастрофи, утрачених первнів і пам'яті, пошуку безпечного простору, мотив сну).

Письмениця художньо досліджує витoki і наслідки катастрофи, які переживає людство в постапокаліптичному світі майбутнього. Мисткиня створює образ первісного світу, в якому шукає своє місце людина і намагається в будь-який спосіб протистояти вбивчій стихії. В баладах «A Seam of White Crystals» і «As If They Had Always Known It» танатологічний мотив постає константним складником есхатологічного міфу. Мотив смерті-катастрофи спочатку конотується передчуттям героями катастрофи в баладі «*As If They Had Always Known It*» (в семантиці заголовка оприявлено сакральне заклинання-попередження нащадкам). Головна героїня дилогії «*Mara and Dann*» є також хранителькою священних знань про трагічне минуле історії континенту Іфрик. В автофікціоному романі «*Alfred and Emily*» знищення «родинного» дерева з автентичною назвою, «Mawonga», що уособлювало життєвий цикл родини, символізує руйнацію онтологічних первнів.

Порушений мотив варіюється: у баладі «*As If They Had Always Known It*» він лунає як передчуття катастрофи, в ліро-епосі «*A Seam of White Crystals*» мотив смерті-катастрофи поступово посилюється (жах смерті охоплює усіх членів громади) та надалі цей мотив масштабується у баладі «*The Ice Comes*» до есхатології всесвіту (природне лихо постає загрозою для всього людства). Есхатологічний міф про кінець-катастрофу нюансується і масштабується у творах мисткині: якщо у дилогії і баладах «A Seam of White Crystals» і «As If They Had Always Known It» нездоланною силою постає безособова природна стихія, то у романі «Альфред і Емілі» — це світові війни, що є наслідками руйнівного впливу цивілізації. Цей роман письменниці є постмодерністською рецепцією міфу про Першу світову війну.

Мотив смерті-катастрофи у баладах і зазначених прозових творах пов'язаний з мотивом утрачених первнів. Руйнація «центру» родинного простору («*Alfred and Emily*») відбувається не тільки фізично, а і ментально, тож оприявнюється проблема втрати особистої пам'яті, що надалі масштабується до мотиву втрати колективної пам'яті громади. Танатологічні мотиви, представлені в цих баладах і прозових творах, втілюються за допомогою міфологічних опозицій: «життя — смерть», «лід — сонце», «день — ніч», «світло — темрява», «всебачення — сліпота», що позначається і на характеристичі художнього простору: «свій — чужий», «закритий» — «відкритий».

Спогади ліричних героїв, індивідуальні й колективні, у баладах «*A Seam of White Crystals*» і «*As If They Had Always Known It*», постають єдиним джерелом історичної пам'яті, що суголосно процесу їхньої самоідентифікації. У романі «Альфред і Емілі» Д. Лессінг розкриває травмувальну природу війни для людства. Простір дитинства у спогадах головної героїні не є безпечним, в ньому присутній батьківський досвід, маркований війною.

Ключові слова: англійська література, Д. Лессінг, есхатологічний міф, мотив смерті-катастрофи, пам'ять, поезія, балада.

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