

The Concept of Happiness in Max Frei's Novel *The Key of Yellow Metal*: Hamlet and Siddhartha

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Abstract. This article explores the motif of an '(un)happy prince' as it is manifested through the evocation of Hamlet's and Siddhartha's imagery within Max Frei's novel *The Key of Yellow Metal* (2009). The research offers an in-depth analysis of the functioning of these references within the broader intertextual landscape of the novel, placed within the Vilnius narrative. The theme of the happy prince's perception of human suffering is entwined with the topoi of hell and paradise, as well as home or lost paradise. Traditional imagery plays a pivotal role in shaping the concept of inspiration and madness as dynamic forces that exert a profound influence on the surrounding world, counterbalancing the notion of eternal suffering. The shift of focalization allows us to reconsider Sartre's idea of 'Hell is other people'. The paper emphasizes the role of the author as a narrator/reteller of well-known stories and tales, both for the author as an actual person and as a literary mystification. The article demonstrates the transformation of the fairy-tale notion of 'happiness' into the concept of acquiring meaning as a prerequisite of the main character's individuation.

Keywords: Max Frei, Vilnius text, intertextuality, traditional images, hell and heaven topoi.

Laimės samprata Makso Frajaus romane *Geltonojo metalo raktas*: Hamletas ir Sidhartha

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas „(ne)laimingo princo“ motyvas, atpažįstamas Makso Frajaus romano „Geltonojo metalo raktas“ (2009) Hamleto ir Sidharthos personažuose, lygia greta detalai analizuojamas šių tapatumų funkcionavimas plačioje ir intertekstualioje Vilniaus naratyvo erdvėje. Pasakojimas apie tai, kaip laimingas princas suvokia žmogaus kančią, susipina su pragaro ir rojaus, taip pat namų ar prarasto rojaus toposais. Svarbiausių tradicinių įvaizdžių dėka romane kuriama įkvėpimo ir beprotybės tema. Pastarieji atsiskleidžia kaip dinamiškos jėgos, darančios didžiulę įtaką visam supančiam pasauliui taip subalansuojant amžinosios kančios sampratą. Fokalizacijos pokytis leidžia iš naujo apmąstyti Sartre'o idėją, kad „Pragaras – tai kiti“. Straipsnyje pabrėžiamas autoriaus, gerai žinomų istorijų ir pasakų naratoriaus/pasakotojo vaidmuo, kai autorius suprantamas ir kaip realus asmuo, ir kaip literatūrinė mistifikacija. Straipsnyje parodoma, kaip pasakiškos „laimės“ sąvoka virsta prasmės įgijimo konceptu ir tampa būtina sąlyga herojaus individualizacijos kelyje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Maksas Frajus, Vilniaus tekstas, intertekstualumas, tradiciniai įvaizdžiai, pragaro ir dangaus toposai.

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Introduction. Max Frei's Vilnius text¹

The Vilnius narrative by Max Frei, presented by seven volumes of *The Tales of the Old Vilnius* (2012–2018), a massive trilogy of *The Heavy Light of Curtain* (2018–2021), and the current collections of short stories, originally dates back to 2009. The novel *The Key of Yellow Metal* (*Ключ из желтого металла*, 2009) can be regarded as the author's first Vilnius text. This intertextual and intercity novel includes the protagonist's quest compatible with classic fantasy traditions: "there and back again" from Vilnius to Vilnius. Here, Max Frei, for the first time, introduces the image of Vilnius as a topos of Paradise (lost and regained) and as a core city of Central Europe, where opening the magic portal changes the reality in other places. In this paper, I will regard *The Key of Yellow Metal* as one of Max Frei's Vilnius novels. My study focuses on the intertextual base of the novel, in particular, the references to happy/unhappy princes Hamlet and Siddhartha. The concept of Happiness, uniting these images, is rooted in both the author's (the resident of Vilnius, Lithuania) and the protagonist's perception of Vilnius as a place where happiness is a normal state for a human being.

The creative output of Max Fry attracts the attention of researchers in the context of the study of literary mystifications (Uliura, 2015; Kukushkina, 2002 etc.), the development of mythological motifs or the oneiric paradigm (Boyko, 2021; Safron, 2018). Most of the research of Max Frei's works is focused on the series about the world of Echo and *the Tales of the Old Vilnius*. The Vilnius short story collections have been the subject of study by Lithuanian scholars. In particular, Pavel Lavrinec mentions them in the context of the perception of Vilnius as Another space (Lavrinec, 2015, p. 279–281) and Nadzeya Charapan & Hanna Mikulich discuss the conceptualisation of a literary tourist gaze (Charapan & Mikulich, 2019).

The novel *The Key of Yellow Metal* has been considered in the context of Kraków city mythopoetics (Vorontsova, 2017) and as a source of intertextual inclusions or intertextemes² (Boyko, 2021). My attempts to study this text were aimed at analysing the principles of constructing the fantasy world grounded in the real geography of Europe by means of allusion and ekphrasis (Kanchura, 2018, Kanchura, 2018a). The intermedial and intertextual studies of the novel led to conclusions about the conceptual dominants of the work and the possibility of fitting it into the general outlook of Max Frei's oeuvres.

The extensive network of the writer's intertextual techniques has been thoroughly analysed by a linguist, Olga Boyko (Boyko, 2021). The scholar, while examining quotations and allusions in Max Frei's works, convincingly proves the connection of the author's mythopoetics with the context of world culture (from ancient mythology to Nietzsche's and Borges' works). Boyko also emphasises the syncretic and intertextual nature of fantasy discourse (Boyko, 2021, p. 59). The researcher highlights the development of additional meanings

¹ Some ideas of this research were presented at the XII Chycheryn Readings (Lviv, 2021), (See: Kanchura, Y., 2021. Hra z motivom (ne)shhaslivogo princa: Hamlet i Siddhartha v *Kljuchi zhovtogo metalu* Maksra Fraja. [A play on the motif of the (un)happy prince: Hamlet and Siddhartha in Max Frei's *The Key of Yellow Metal*]. In: *Svitova literatura v literaturoznavchomu diskursi HHI st. Materiali HII Chicherins'kih chitan'.* L'viv, 28-29 zhovtnja 2021 roku. [World literature in the literary discourse of the 21st century. Materials of the 12th Chicherin readings. Lviv, October 28-29, 2021]. L'viv: Vidavnychij dim "Gel'vetika", pp.69–73.) and as a lecture in Shakespeare's Days in Ukraine (Zaporizhzhia, 2022). The paper suggests the development of the research.

² The term "intertexteme" as an intertextual unit, is mostly used in linguistics.

as a result of a dialogue between the author and the reader, due to the use of intertextual techniques. This conclusion allows a further study of the functions of allusions and references in the novel, mainly to understand the role of references of Hamlet and Siddhartha.

In this paper, I aim to delineate the Hamlet and Siddhartha intertextemes in the novel's framework. I study their role in the plot structure to find the meaning of the (un)happy princes' images for Max Frei's idea of 'Happiness'. My research relates the named concept to the topoi of 'Paradise' (correlating with the idea of the fantasy world's genuine reality) and the 'Hell'. The functioning of a (un)happy prince motive is studied via intertextual tools categorisation and the principles of their incorporation into the novel structure.

I conclude that a reference to Hamlet in the novel functions as a sort of shibboleth, which identifies the people of creative mindset tending to "air the stuffy world" (Frei, 2015, p. 397). The references to the images of Hamlet and Siddhartha serve to reveal the author's ideas of happiness and its sources: freedom and inspiration. The senseless dullness of 'Hell' is set in opposition to 'Paradise' which is full of meaning. A happy prince, as an active agent, 'airs' the world, unlocking the flow of creative power inherent in meaningful happiness.

The novel's plot: a short comment

As it is clear from the title, paraphrasing *The Golden Key, or the Adventures of Buratino* by Alexei N. Tolstoy (Tolstoy, 1936; further: *Buratino*), the novel mirrors the plot of this famous literary fairy tale. Just like Buratino, Philip, the protagonist of the novel, has a long nose and lives with his foster father Carlo, a virtuoso organ player and devoted collector of barrel organs and keys. A door, discovered in their Vilnius house basement, which was concealed behind an old and ugly picture of a blast furnace, refers to the door, hidden behind an old picture of a fireplace in Daddy Karlo's chamber in *Buratino*. Following that discovery, the whole story unfolds as Phillip's quest to acquire the key that unlocks this mysterious door. The turning point occurs when Phillip's trip, seemingly ordinary and uneventful, transforms into a profound quest, full of inspiration and meaning. This transformative moment is marked by the reference to Hamlet's name. Searching for the key of yellow metal, Phillip travels to Prague, Hagen, and Kraków before returning to Vilnius to unlock the door. By opening the door, he gains the real sense of being which, in the novel, correlates with the concept of happiness.

This concept echoes not only the true significance of the original Buratino's golden key (Kanchura, 2018) but also corresponds with the happy ending of a fairy tale as a genre of folklore and/or children's literature. According to J. R. R. Tolkien, the consolation of a happy ending is "the mark of a good fairy-story" (Tolkien, p. 276). The novel's narrative structure follows the main points of Vladimir Propp's fairy tale plot: the protagonist leaves home with a specific task, meets the villain (or a trickster), a wise and/or fairy guide etc. (Propp, 1971). The novel as a whole contains plethora of narrative and lexical markers of fairy tales, that create a specific ambience and make it easy to accept the presence of the otherworld in Europe in the first decade of the Millennium. In some instances, the protagonist encounters a mermaid, knight, king and queen who are simultaneously real and unreal. Likewise, the landscape contributes to the fairy-tale ambience: for example,

the protagonist travels through the land of mediaeval castles and thick forests. One of the characters, pani Grażyna, lives in a hidden /secret garden, etc. As the word frequency analysis of the text demonstrates, the word ‘prince’ appears 34 times, solidifying the reference to the fairy tale princes. Interestingly, the word ‘happiness (счастье)’ is equally frequent, appearing 37 times, but it eventually gives way to another central keyword in the book: ‘sense/meaning (смысл),’ which appears 126 times and refers mainly to the lost and gained sense of being. The fairy tale atmosphere, which creates the readers’ expectations of a happy ending, gains a deeper sense, revealing the meaning of ‘happiness’ as a concept.

The novel’s intertextual base

Readers’ expectations regarding the novel, arising from its fairy tale structure, are amplified by the rich intertextual base. A defining feature of the book’s postmodern poetics, it serves as an efficient tool for incorporating the novel into the real world: the references, allusions, and quotations are rooted in the Western canon, they belong to the common white knowledge³ of the characters, connecting them to each other and the readers. The network of recognizable allusions, quotations, parodies, pastiches, and stylizations⁴ from the Western canon forms a strong connection between the characters and the readers. Below, I provide several examples to illustrate my concept: the allusions (“It would be silly to live in Prague and not to have a Golem of your own”), the references (Prince of Denmark / *принц датский*), quotations (Gertrude, do not drink. / *Не пей вина, Гертруда!*), parody (A couple of frauds from *Buratino*, Alisa, the Fox, and Basilio, the Cat are present here as a grotesque couple of Gallery owners), pastiche (“Que sera sera, Whatever Will Be, Will Be”⁵), stylizations (Mirra’s “awful” verses, which in a specific manner echo obscene folk poetry) etc. The sources of the intertextems range from mythology (the Hecate’s portal, Kjalarr / Odin’s and one of the character’s names), the Bible (St. Peter, the Gatekeeper) or Brothers Grimm’s and *1001 Night*’s tales (short stories by Boris Tsaplin, a writer, invented by the author) to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* (*Huis clos*, 1944), Oscar Wild’s *The Happy Prince* (1888), and Gustav Meyrink’s *The Golem* (1915). References to music, cinema, and painting are also rich (Paganini’s *Capriccio* #24 (c. 1817) – music, John Sturges’s *The Magnificent Seven* – film (1960), *Der Blaue Reiter* (*A Blue Rider*, a group of avant-garde artists, organized in 1909, etc.) The strong intertextual fabric of the novel links it with the real world, while the extended notional ekphrases, both musical and pictorial, open the portals to the Otherworld, creating a strong secondary belief⁶ (Kanchura, 2018, 2018a). Moreover, the intertextual frame helps the author to address a certain audience and find their “ideal reader”.

³ ‘White knowledge’ a term, coined by Terry Pratchett, means the information acquired without conscious effort (See: Christensen, T. 2023. What is White Knowledge? *WiseGeek*. Available at: <https://www.wise-geek.com/what-is-white-knowledge.htm>)

⁴ For the basis of intertextems classification, I use Piegay-Gros, N. (2002). *Introduction à l'intertextualité*. Nathan Université.

⁵ Jay Livingston and Ray Evans’s song first published in 1955, introduced by Doris Day in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956).

⁶ ‘Secondary belief’ a term, suggested by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay *On Fairy Stories: the intense form of readerly acceptance required for proper belief in an autonomous subcreation* (See: Clute, J., Grant, J., 1999. *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* UK, Orbit, p. 952)

Hamlet and Siddhartha references in the plot structure

The sources of the allusions and references to Hamlet and Siddhartha would form a part of background knowledge of a post-Soviet intellectual of the 1990s. Thus, the story about Siddhartha's three meetings refers to Jorge Luis Borges's essay *Buddhism* (in the post-Soviet space its Russian translation was included in the collection *The Writing of the God* (Borges, 1992). The cliché "Prince of Denmark" (*принц датский*) is ubiquitous in the shared post-Soviet culture. The quote, "Gertrude, do not drink. (*Не пей вина, Гертруда!*)" refers not only to the Russian translation of *Hamlet* by Boris Pasternak; it was also popular among young people due to Boris Grebeshchikov's song of the same title (the album *Кострома mon amour*, 1994⁷). Another allusion, accompanied by a paraphrase "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are alive", refers not only to its classic source but also to Tom Stoppard's famous play (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1966), as well as its film adaptation directed by Stoppard himself (1990). The quotes above demonstrate the elements of cultural background, inherent to a circle of people with shared values: young creative intellectuals, rejecting the boredom and restrictions of the late Soviet epoch. Thus even in defining the source of references, the shibboleth function of Hamlet's name can be detected.

Overall, the name 'Hamlet' appears in the novel 17 times. 'Siddhartha' – only once, at the beginning of the story. Additionally, there is a mirroring pre-climax episode, with Borislev's (the presumed antagonist) reversed retelling of the story of Siddhartha.

Consider the Freytag's Pyramid's points⁸ of the novel plot structure with their correlation to Hamlet and Siddhartha references (Table 1):

Table 1. Hamlet and Siddhartha references in the plot structure.

Point of the plot	Reference to the (un)happy prince image
<i>Opening</i>	
Phillip travels from his friend's country cottage to Moscow and then – to Vilnius; Piotr, the gatekeeper, opens the gate for him with a "Goodbye".	Entering the social world after voluntary isolation. Lack of desires and needs. False Nirvana. Parting with the personal space.
<i>Exposition</i>	
Phillip arrives in Vilnius. A talk with Karl and Renata about happiness and ennui.	A visit to 'Paradise'. Nature of happiness (staying in the Palace vs. entering the social world). Hamlet's first mention (synonym of senseless existence). Siddhartha's mention (three meetings: entering the social world and facing the suffering people).
Phillip receives a task from Karl to visit Prague and collect the Key.	Common people enjoy suffering and promote it as the "right" way of life. 'Hell' is the Others (common people)

⁷ Available at: <https://bg-aquarium.com/ru/album/kostroma-mon-amour>.

⁸ Chandler, D., & Munday, R., 2020. *Freytag's pyramid. A Dictionary of Media and Communication*.

Point of the plot	Reference to the (un)happy prince image
<i>Inciting Incident</i>	
Phillip arrives in Prague and encounters living statues with The Knight as one of the key figures.	A quote from <i>Hamlet</i> as a shibboleth; <i>Hamlet</i> as a symbol of Divine madness – inspiration; <i>Hamlet</i> as a subject of retelling a story from a new perspective;
Meeting with Borislev. The Key / the ABC-book exchange. A presumably false key.	<i>Hamlet</i> as a field for literary mystification.
<i>Rising Action</i>	
<i>The Key</i> quest starts (Hagen, Kraków). Meeting pani Grażyna (time skipping theme). Karoddunum / Otherworld. Meeting Max: a talk about the power of genuine desire.	Gaining the taste of life, desires, and meaning.
<i>Climax</i>	
Prague Second meeting with Borislev. Alisa's portrait. The key temptation – Paradise lost.	Siddhartha is not mentioned but is referred to. Teaching the joy: a truly happy prince represents active good. Refusing the personal destiny in a dream demonstrates the possibility of losing and destroying Paradise.
<i>Resolution</i>	
The revelation of the genuine Key. Return to Vilnius Unlocking the door. Opening the Portal.	Accepting the destination. The locked room is open (the hell is open, new fresh air) Airing the world.
<i>Dénouement</i>	
A conversation with the Knight	<i>Hamlet</i> as a source of inspiration. Re-writing the classic plot from all possible perspectives (new approaches).
<i>Closing</i>	
Phillip travels from his friend's country cottage to Moscow and then – to Vilnius; Piotr, the gatekeeper, opens the gate for him. Greetings from the gatekeeper.	Entering the social world from voluntary isolation. Full of desires and inspiration. Anticipation of joy. Greeting.

As Table 1 demonstrates, certain references to both princes appear symmetrically: in the exposition and in the dénouement. Moreover, the dénouement mirrors the exposition, whereby the author repeats some phrases, amplifying the change that happened in the world. The inciting incident, where the most references to *Hamlet* are concentrated, presents the nexus of all the novel's main themes: 'Hell' as the Others, the happiness of the divine inspiration, old plots' rethinking, changing of the perspective, and giving voices to the muted characters. The pre-climax episode exposes the topic of the *Happy Prince*, who in Oscar Wilde's tale actively tries to help people in need but fails, eventually spending all of himself (Wilde, 1988). On the contrary, the pre-climax episode of *The Key* introduces the happy prince's mission of teaching people to experience joy.

People themselves already know how to suffer, fear and behave properly, in order to avoid the punishment. But to rejoice and to fear nothing in Hell is the most complicated thing. So, this is exactly what a person should learn on Earth⁹.

(Frei, 2015, p. 341)

Borislev's words are supported by Mirra, the protagonist's magic guide and the painter creating Alisa's portrait. The topic of happiness as a natural state for humans is revealed in the novel's exposition, thus, correlating with the topoi of Vilnius and 'Paradise'.

Vilnius as Paradise

In the exposition, the only place where Phillip can be happy is his family home, his father's house located in Vilnius. Offering an explanation as to why he doesn't visit it frequently or stay there for long, Phillip says: "It's too easy to be happy in your house. Too good. And it ends, the moment I leave. And starts again, no matter under what condition I've returned" (Frei, 2015, p. 47). One of the elements of happiness that Phillip implies here is the notion of finding his own joy of being through conscious development rather than receiving it as a gift. The author uses the novel's key metaphor to build the protagonist's own "happy palace".

The family home correlates with the concept of happiness not only due to its inhabitants' specific worldview but also due to its location in Vilnius. For the novel's characters, it is a place of birth and childhood (pani Grazina), with a special nostalgic vibe and old names of Vilna's streets. It's a place to return and recreate life after it has been totally renewed (Renata), the homeland, which is genuinely gained only after leaving it in desperation, where you return with the restored joy of being. It is a place where you start feeling happy every time you enter the Gate of Dawn, yet you never fully settle, avoiding the feeling of routine and boredom to ensure you cherish its genuine inner sense (Phillip). Pavel Lavrinec in his study "The Interpretation of Tomas Venclova's Vilnius Text" highlights that for most writers, Vilnius is "a place to return to" (Lavrinec, 2019, p.42). The same motive is presented in *The Key*, with a specific connotation of returning as a renewal. Passing through the Gate of Dawn includes the motive of the edge, one of the novel's dominant characteristics (Kanchura, 2018).

The renewal connotation, inherited by the motive of the edge, is amplified by the time and place of entering the Old Town: through the Gate of Dawn, early in the morning, the dawn time, the spring. "I make a step, then the other, and one more, and I am stepping under the arch, and the cries of the birds are turning into the bells' chiming, the exhaust fumes – into frankincense and myrrh" (Frei, 2015, p. 13). In the closing scene, mirroring the opening, the narrator adds the new Moon, which signifies the total renewal of the world and the thick fog, coming down to the city. The fog marks the touch of the Otherworld, the connection with the genuine reality, where happiness and joy of being are the norm (Kanchura, 2018).

⁹ *The Key of Yellow Metal* was not translated into English. All the quotes are suggested in my translation. – Y.K.

In the whole gallery of the cities that comprise the novel's setting, Vilnius is the core, where the 'Paradise' topos is located and where the magic portal is unlocked. That is why, when Phillip, in the nightmare, experiences the temptation and plans to give up his destiny and the key, he sees his home and the beloved city devastated and lost. Simultaneously, the devastation is projected to the wider space: a totalitarian police regime rules back in Moscow (where Phillip used to have property), restricting free people's communication and movement. "Now all the citizens live only where they are registered [...] I've heard, they are forced to wear electronic chips like farm animals" (Frei, 2015, p. 361). The image of the possible devastation as a result of giving up his quest motivates the protagonist to make his final decision and ensure the physical manifestation of the genuine magic key, which unlocks the door to happiness (Frei, 2015, p. 388).

The concept of happiness in the novel (the function of Siddhartha references)

The initial conversation between Karl and Phillip about happiness as a natural condition of people occurs in the 'Paradise' space of the family home. Here Phillip refers to himself before Renata as a dull Prince of Denmark, spreading the "disgusting smell" of disappointment and depression throughout the house. Here Phillip exposes the chasm between the Palace, where a happy prince dwells, and the outer world, full of suffering and misery. Here the main points of contrast between 'Hell' and 'Paradise' arise and mark the ways they are developed in the novel:

1. Existence

- a). In 'Hell', people's primary concern is the struggle for survival "eighteen hours a day". When a person frees his/herself from this violent routine, he/she faces the opposite point of the dichotomy: the absence of desires. In the novel's opening, the protagonist wants nothing: neither eating nor drinking nor sleeping, absolutely nothing interests him. He also doesn't sense or enjoy the taste of food.
- b). In 'Paradise', people simply live and experience the pure joy of existence. As Renata states: "I like the process once again [...]. Good weather is enough to feel happy and when the weather is bad you may bake an apple pie" (Frei, 2015, p.22). Life is full of sensory experiences: the taste and smell of coffee and pies, music and art are spread all over the novel marking the episodes, where happy people act.

2. Perceptions of the Norm

- a). In 'Hell', the norm is suffering and misery. For Phillip, the worst Happy Prince's encounter outside the palace is with the so-called common people who believe that illness, poverty and death are completely "normal and even right. That this is how it should be because it is supposed to be, and no one will escape, a step aside – and you'll get shot". (Frei, 2015, p. 47).
- b). In 'Paradise', the norm is the joy of being. As Karl declares, "happiness is always right" (Frei, 2015, p. 47) This point is further illustrated by the mirroring ekphrases: in the exposition, Karl draws Phillip's attention to a guitar performance by Filomena

Moretti (musical ekphrasis) whose face radiates the joy of being. In the pre-climax episode, synchronically with the discussion of the unnamed Siddhartha, the ekphrasis of Alisa's portrait radiates the same joy. Phillip's perception of the portrait demonstrates the specificity of his personal development: "People are not like that", I thought, but for some reason, I said aloud: "This is how people should be." And Mirra, the painter, responds: "Certainly. This is how we were conceived to be" (Frei, 2015, p.341).

3. Demand vs. Teaching

- a). People belonging to 'Hell' represent the idea of "Hell is the Others", which later will be highlighted by the *Hamlet* reference. In the exposition, Phillip states, that those people impose their world view on their surroundings, demanding everyone around to follow the norm of suffering:

They are all so simple and dull but strong and persistent. And for the sacred right to ruin the life of oneself and one's neighbours, suffer to the fullest, wallow in self-pity, grow old and kick the bucket, they will fight to the last, and you will not confuse them.

(Frei, 2015, p. 48)

When suffering is the norm of life, its "sacred right", it is demanded by everyone around and those who share this view insist that others must follow their rules. The consequence is killing the joy everywhere they can reach:

When there are so many of them – very similar, not aware of themselves, joyless, almost blind, almost speechless, but firmly confident in their own rightness – their well-coordinated chorus, their picture of the world covers you with your head like a wet blanket and suddenly turns out to be your only reality.

(Frei, 2015, p. 49)

That is why the original Siddhartha suffers from encountering the people's suffering, and that is why Hamlet is dull and depressing: they all are captured by the depressive society.

- b). People, belonging to 'Paradise', are used to the fact that all their desires are granted. In the pre-climax conversation, Borislev describes a Happy Prince as a person who was coddled in the Palace and who knows that all his wishes should be fulfilled. According to this kind of mindset, Borislev suggests a different course of actions for Siddhartha's, whereby the Prince would call a royal doctor to cure the sick man and befriend the old man to engage him in many thought-provoking conversations. And, eventually, the wise man teaches the Prince that death is not the complete end of a person's story but its new stage (Frei, 2015, p. 343). So, according to Borislev, being happy is an opportunity to teach other people to be happy and to experience the joy of life. People of 'Paradise' teach others to act consciously to fulfil their desires, after defining their genuine desire first.

4. Punishment vs. Acceptance

- a) In 'Hell', punishment (as a legitimized infliction of suffering) is a demanded norm. The eternal punishment and unlimited suffering are welcomed by the people of Hell, who rejoice in threatening them with the eternal flame to burn their neighbours. The

dispute of Hell's temporality, derived from Christian theologians (Kyryliuk, 2022, pp. 111–115), is echoed by Borislev who claims that Hell is impossible in the coordinates of eternity as suffering is limited in time by its nature.

- b) People of 'Paradise' do not demand anything from their neighbours, but merely teach them the joy of life and the love and acceptance of the world. The ekphrasis of Alisa's portrait provides the essence of their set of values by capturing in one powerful image the ideas explored in conversations with Karl and Borislev (the exposition and pre-climax):

In this face, there was a discreet, almost inexpressible joy of being and a serene readiness to accept life, no matter what it turns out to be, without setting conditions or bargaining. And, at the same time, there was a calm awareness of her own strength and power.

(Frei, 2015, p. 341)

5. Temporality

- a) Time, along with temporality, is one of 'Hell's' intrinsic features. While the eternity of Hell is disputable, it is regarded here as one of the aspects of temporality, the extreme level of it. The limited human life consists of time. Any common action among the people of 'Hell' is time-consuming. Phillip hates Moscow as "the eater of his time". He "bleeds with time" taking a train escaping from Moscow to Vilnius. He constantly fears that the lives of his loved ones are limited by death. In his nightmare, he sees his family home devastated after Karl's death, then the whole timeline is precisely marked (20 years since the totalitarian system was established in Moscow). The inescapable time loop in the Kraków train is one of the novel's most terrifying episodes.
- b) In 'Paradise', time as a set of limits does not exist. A person's age is hard to define (Borislev, Jiří Šnips or pani Grazina etc.). For instance, Pani Grażyna can skip any unpleasant periods of her life. The future is flexible (Phillip's nightmare in the Kraków train can be regarded as an admonition but also as a gap in time). Max (another magic advisor) does not depend on time at all and therefore can guide the protagonist to the outskirts of the ancient Karoddunum. The idea of a person as the only master of his/her destiny defies time.

6. Impact on the surrounding world/reality

- a) In 'Hell', where Phillip appears in the novel's opening and exposition, he feels like an entirely powerless person. He desires nothing, is interested in nothing, and influences nothing. As a gifted storyteller, he writes his books but deletes their files immediately after completion. By deleting a book, he tests whether reality actually needs it. The world is already full of stories, and any new one is just senseless. In 'Hell', the result of any action is evaluated only in accordance with its materialistic output.
- b) People of 'Paradise' do whatever they really want: play music, draw pictures, write books, without thinking about the material result of their creative process. They value creative work on its own terms. As Karl (a gifted musician) claims, the result is not a masterpiece or virtuoso performance, but the changes happening in a person when he/she gets up and does something.

The reference to Siddhartha in the two mirroring episodes develops the motive of leaving the Palace ('Paradise') with full awareness of this step, with an understanding what the Palace is and how to keep it in a person's life. Phillip travels from Siddhartha (depressed) to Siddhartha (happy) and the trigger which launches this quest is the reference to Hamlet.

Inspiration as happiness (the functions of the references to *Hamlet*)

Phillip initially compares himself with Hamlet while describing his dull state of mind to his nanny Renata. Later, his vivid response to a random *Hamlet* quote heard in a Prague café is also based on its context (shared language and cultural background). Moreover, his interest is stimulated by the setting corresponding with the phrase: the street actor, the 'Queen', was choosing drinks. Table 2 demonstrates how different characters perceive the quote and provides its meaning for the plot development:

Table 2. "Gertrude, do not drink" quote (Frei, 2015, p. 78)

	Function	Meaning	Conclusion
For the group of street actors	A 'meme' marking the inner space for the circle of friends.	To prevent the 'Queen' from being drunk.	"The only thing left is to cite Shakespeare. The only consolation".
For Phillip	Trigger causing the interest. Encounter with the likeminded people.	Awakening of the interest in life: "Life is amazing. [...] Such a beautiful episode, [...] Life turns into a carefully directed film".	"At such moments, I am closer than ever to faith—if not in the Director, then at least in the Screenwriter. "Add the Producer [...] the perfect Holy Trinity,"

According to Table 2, life becomes "amazing and inspired" when it starts to resemble a work of art, and the images of the creators appear somewhere in the background, adding sense and meaning to the chaotic incidents. The artistic approach to life presupposes the Creators who imbue everything with meaning by fulfilling their desires. The conversation from this episode (Frei, 2015, pp. 78–87) does not move the plot directly but fuels it with the idea of inspiration and creative actions. As the inciting incident, it not only launches the regaining of his sense of life for Phillip but focuses on inspiration and creative work as the components of the 'happiness' concept.

Inspiration correlates with madness as the object of reflection and a source of creativity. The new creation arises through retelling as the refreshing of the classical stories from new perspectives and giving a voice to all their characters. The opposing topos of 'Hell' is also presented in the episode as an infinite quarrel between the dead people who cannot forget or forgive each other's actions during their lifetime. The allusion to *No Exit* links the episode with Phillip's dull perception of society and amplifies the contrast between a locked room and the unlimited space of open-minded, inspired people. The topic of inspiration is supported by finding people of the same worldview, which is presented in Table 3:

Table 3. *Hamlet* rewriting: reasons and authors (Frei, 2015, pp. 78–87).

Author	Action	Reason for “rewriting”	Main concept	Result
Ljudmila, the novel’s character	Is “crazy about <i>Hamlet</i> ”, knows how to stage the play.	Strong desire to make it right	Visual stage demonstration of the inner madness. Madness as the source of inspiration.	Life vehicle: she relocated to Prague and is studying to become a film director.
Phillip, the novel’s protagonist	Has had life-long a desire to rewrite <i>Hamlet</i> .	A mystification to establish friendly terms	An alternative plot twist: ‘Happy end’, everybody is alive.	“A good life, but a bad play”. Artificial happy end.
Borys Tsaplin, mystification, “a real person” in the novel.	Rewrote <i>Hamlet</i>	Giving a voice to muted characters adds new perspectives.	All the characters discuss the plot events in a sequel, meeting in Hell, quarrelling and arguing.	The book accompanies Phillip on his journey, refreshing the perspectives.
Hanni Johansen, mystification, (“unreal”)	Is rewriting <i>Hamlet</i> , like a big literature project	A mystification to establish friendly terms	All the characters tell their own story. Change of the narrator and perspective.	The beginning of a genuine friendship.
Phillip and Kjalarr, “real”	Are planning to rewrite <i>Hamlet</i> in Hanni Johansen’s way	Strong desire to make it right	All the characters tell their own story. Change of the narrator and perspective.	Inspiration. Life gains its sense. The joy of being.

Table 3 demonstrates common reasons for rewriting *Hamlet*: the desire to renew the perspective interlaced with establishing new interpersonal connections. A variety of perspectives transforms the perception of Others from alienation into acceptance, empathy, and interest. The episode functions like a nexus of ideas, collecting the characters’ intentions. All this aligns with literature mystifications, starting from Max Frei project itself, to Borys Tsaplin, who is considered to be real in the novel continuum, and to fictional Hanni Johansen, who mirrors the original Max Frei literary mystification project¹⁰. They represent the creative imagination itself when not the physical author matters, but an inspired personality, able to renew the world, and one of the ways to do it, according to the *Hamlet* discussion episode, is the focalisation shift, finding new perspectives and changing the perception.

¹⁰ Although the first Max Frei’s books were published in 1996, the real names of the project’s authors, Svitlana Martynchyk and Igor Steopin, were disclosed only in 2001. The secret of the popular project’s authors was the subject of numerous speculations.

Conclusion

The analysis of the (un)happy princes' references demonstrate that their names appear at the pivotal plot stages. Thus, a reference to Siddhartha launches the discussion of what 'Happiness' is and why the social world is perceived as the "Hell". All the topics raised in the expository talk are focused on what is normal and right for a human being: permanent suffering and struggle for a living, imposed on other people, or the pure and genuine joy of life, without conditions or demands. The themes of 'Siddhartha discussion' are developed throughout the novel, being echoed by the other conversations or insights, reflected in the protagonist's quest. The mirroring pre-climax episode provides the programme of actions for a happy prince, whose main target is to teach people the joy of being.

The 'Hamlet reference' serves as the inciting incident, bringing together the themes of creative inspiration and shift of perspective that launch the protagonist's quest for 'the key, which brings happiness'. Due to the 'Hamlet discussion' episode, Phillip regains interest in life and eventually comes to the embodiment of the genuine magic key, able to unlock the Portal.

While 'Siddhartha discussion' presents the concentration of all the key elements of the concept of happiness (sense, meaning, the joy of being), 'Hamlet discussion' serves as the catalyst for the inspired journey, revealing the ways and marking the direction.

The whole quest takes place in the Vilnius frame, which marks the topos of 'Paradise', the magic Palace, where the Prince feels happy, at home, and where he is able to open the magic door, airing the world and giving the flow to the fresh air and perception. The rich intertextual base of the first Max Frei's Vilnius novel, being concentrated in the references to (un)happy princes, defines Vilnius as the topos of 'Paradise' and declares the will for a meaningful inspired being. While the unhappy, constantly hesitating Hamlet speculates over the eternal question "To be or not to be", the characters of *The Key of Yellow Metal* are certain to come to the answer: they "love to be" (Frei, 2015, p. 217).

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