

# Existentialism through the Literary Images in the Short Stories of V. Pidmohyl'ny and M. Yatskiv

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**Abstract.** This article analyses little-known short stories of modern Ukrainian writers Valerian Pidmohyl'ny and Mykhailo Yatskiv in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism. It can be considered as a cultural phenomenon which combines philosophy with literature. Pidmohyl'ny's short stories were significantly influenced primarily by the ideas of the European philosophers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, we can search for similar motives in the works of Pidmohyl'ny and the existentialists, which developed under the influence of the ideas of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Also, the authors consider Yatskiv's short stories through the prism of the core concepts of existentialism, namely, fate and death. Pidmohyl'ny and Yatskiv can be assigned to existential writers on the basis of retrospective analysis of the themes of their short stories and the thematic areas of 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism.

**Keywords:** Pidmohyl'ny, Yatskiv, existentialism, Ukrainian literature, fate, death.

## Egzistencializmas literatūriniuose vaizdiniuose V. Pidmohyl'ny'o ir M. Yatskivo novelėse

**Santrauka.** Šiame straipsnyje XX amžiaus egzistencializmo kontekste nagrinėjamos mažai žinomų šiuolaikinių Ukrainos rašytojų Valeriano Pidmohyl'ny'o ir Mykhailo Yatskivo novelės. Jos gali būti laikomos kultūriniu reiškiniu, sujungiančiu filosofiją ir literatūrą. Pidmohyl'ny'o novelės visų pirma buvo ryškiai paveiktos XIX a. pabaigos ir XX a. pradžios Europos filosofų minčių. Todėl panašių motyvų galime ieškoti tiek Pidmohyl'ny'o, tiek ir egzistencialistų, kuriuos paveikė Schopenhauerio, Kierkegaard'o ir Nietzsche's idėjos, kūryboje. Be to, autoriai, pasitelkdami kertinių egzistencializmo sąvokų – likimo ir mirties – perspektyvą, nagrinėja Yatskivo noveles. Remiantis retrospektyvia novelių bei XX amžiaus egzistencializmo tematikos analize, Pidmohyl'ny'ą ir Yatskivą galima priskirti egzistencializmo literatūrinei srovei.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Pidmohyl'ny, Yatskiv, egzistencializmas, Ukrainos literatūra, lemtis, mirtis

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## Introduction

One of the peculiarities of Ukrainian philosophy is that it is strongly intertwined with Ukrainian literature. Ukrainian baroque culture researcher Leonid Ushkalov (1956–2019) argues that Ukrainian culture has formed the phenomenon of “special literary and philosophical convergence”<sup>1</sup> (Ushkalov 2019: 172). This feature is highly noticeable in Ukrainian culture.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, postmodern intellectuals, for instance, Jacques Derrida, blurred the boundaries between philosophy and literature, by introducing the concept of ‘textuality’. Richard Rorty believed that “philosophy is one of the kinds of writing” (Rorty 1978).

In the contemporary studies of the relationship between literature and philosophy, it is claimed that now is “a timely moment to stage a full-scale face-to-face encounter between literary and philosophical studies [...]” (Rudrum 2006: 5). Andriy Dakhniy emphasizes that the existentialist tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century best represents the interaction of philosophy and literature (Dakhniy 2021: 39). Martha C. Nussbaum stressed that we cannot understand human life only through its intellectual analysis, and thus literature is prominently noticeable in this matter because it forms certain narratives which are based on images and metaphors of existence that deepen our understanding of it; understanding not only the scientific concept of existence, but also images and metaphors of existence (Nussbaum 1992: 7).

Therefore, we turned to two Ukrainian modern writers who describe the existential problems of a human being in order to show how it is possible to understand human existence philosophically with the help of artistic images.

Analysis of the short stories of Valerian Pidmohyl'ny (1901–1937) and Mykhailo Yatskiv (1873–1961) was carried out to identify existential motives manifested in them. These short stories belong to their early works which have been scarcely analyzed from an existentialist point of view. Ukrainian scholars tend to focus on the novels of Pidmohyl'ny and Yatskiv. For instance, Iryna Kurylenko studies Pidmohyl'ny's novels *City* and *A Little Drama* (Kurylenko 2004; Kurylenko 2005; Kurylenko 2006); meanwhile, Svitlana Khopta has researched Yatskiv's novel *The Lights Are Burning* and Pidmohyl'ny's novel *Ostap Shaptala* (Khopta 2007).

The vivid expression of signs of existentialism in the short stories of the two Ukrainian writers brings them closer ideologically. The two writers described human existence in everyday peasant and urban living conditions.

In this article, we will show that fiction of an existential nature can be analyzed *retrospectively*. This means that ‘the epoch of existentialism’ has already passed, but the study of short stories of Pidmohyl'ny and Yatskiv shows that, even in Ukraine which was stateless and colonized at the time, there were writers who wrote in an existential spirit before the existentialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, existentialism was one of the most influential and prevailing directions in continental philosophy, and it went

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Ukrainian sources were translated by Ihor Karivets.

far beyond philosophy. The language of existentialists is more literary and figurative than conceptual and logical. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some philosophers, who did not consider themselves existentialists, were influenced by Søren Kierkegaard<sup>2</sup> and Friedrich Nietzsche (Aho 2014).

The issues raised by existentialists were philosophical, but the tool of their presentation was often literature. This connection between literature and philosophy became a marker of existentialism. According to Crowell (2012), it was Sartre who was the first to draw attention to this point.

It is not correct to ignore the fact that the French philosopher himself sought to see in existentialism something more rigorous than the motley phenomenon that it is sometimes considered to be. Sartre explained it the following way (Sartre 1956: 289):

A columnist in *Clartés* signs himself ‘The Existentialist’, and, indeed, the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all. It would appear that, for the lack of any novel doctrine such as that of surrealism, all those who are eager to join in the latest scandal or movement now seize upon this philosophy in which, however, they can find nothing to their purpose.

Crowell (2012) suggests considering existentialism as a cultural and intellectual movement, and not only as a philosophy. Existentialism was most popular in the 1940s and 1950s. This cultural and, in a narrower sense, philosophical movement manifested itself in various European countries (*ibid.*). Some researchers are convinced that existentialism combines philosophy and literature due to the fact that Camus and Sartre are philosophers and novelists at the same time (Rudrum 2006: 9).

The structure of the article and the presentation of the analyzed material is determined not by the timeframes of the lives of the two modern Ukrainian writers, but rather by the context of the ideas presented in their short stories.

### **Valerian Pidmohylny: the beginning of Ukrainian existentialism?**

Taking into consideration Crowell’s position, we can assume that there is a possibility of discovering little-known writers whose works correspond to the framework of such a cultural and philosophical phenomenon as existentialism.

Pidmohylny can be considered to be a little-known writer conforming to this framework. In order to find out the possibility of assigning his works to existentialism, it is necessary to analyze the ideas presented in his short stories. Beside this, if we are talking about the retrospective inclusion of Pidmohylny among the representatives of existentialism, then this means that his main productive period took place before the emergence of existentialism as a cultural phenomenon. This approach is justified because, in this context, Crowell argues that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are viewed as existentialists (Crowell 2012: 3).

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<sup>2</sup> Olena Stadnichenko expresses a similar opinion regarding Kierkegaard’s influence on Pidmohylny’s works, namely: Kierkegaard’s concept of three stages of the development of existence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious (Stadnichenko 2001: 2).

The significance of the analysis of Pidmohyl'ny's short stories depends on whether he can be considered as a founder and one of the representatives of existentialism in Ukraine. Some Ukrainian intellectuals suggest the positive answer, but their conclusions are usually very general.

Tarnawskyi emphasizes that the research of Pidmohyl'ny's works is complicated by the fact that part of his literary heritage may be unknown (Tarnawsky 1994: 8). The reason for that is the Bolshevik censorship. Nevertheless, it is worth researching Pidmohyl'ny's short stories with regard to the manifestation of the ideas containing signs of existentialism.

Some Ukrainian writers and researchers emphasize that Pidmohyl'ny is a typical representative of existentialism. Zabuzhko is convinced that the ideas presented in Pidmohyl'ny's works preceded French existentialism by twenty years. She states that her own writing was significantly influenced by the French existentialism and suggests that Pidmohyl'ny wrote in a similar style: "It is no coincidence that this is also a post-war experience, the first trauma, the first deep disappointment, the first catastrophe, the first national disgrace" (Zabuzhko 2016). A similar opinion is held by Stadnichenko who claims that existentialism in Ukrainian literature was already noticeable in the 1920s (Stadnichenko 2001: 1).

Cherevatenko, an art connoisseur and a researcher of Pidmohyl'ny's works, assures that the Ukrainian writer "was one of the founders of this stream, both aesthetic and philosophical, which later came to be called existentialism" (Cherevatenko 2021). Cherevatenko, in much the same light as Zabuzhko, emphasizes that Pidmohyl'ny's reaction to the liberation struggle in Ukraine was similar to the way how French intellectuals reacted to World War II in the 1940s. Tarnawskyi compares Pidmohyl'ny to Maupassant since, in the same theme, namely, the experience of disappointment as a result of historical events, "both writers reacted to social and personal upheavals in the same way, i.e., by fleeing into pessimism and philosophy" (Tarnawsky 1994: 8). Personal experiences of historical events are marked by their impact on a person's sense of loss of definiteness and certainty in the future, even the near one. Stadnichenko takes note of the indication of existentialism in Pidmohyl'ny's early short stories. These stories have the main idea of a human being as "a tool, means, or function" (Stadnichenko 2001: 4).

World War I had a consequence: the destruction of empires in Europe and the formation of democratic political regimes in Western Europe. The destruction of empires and the formation of democratic political regimes contributed to the growth of respect for the dignity and value of an individual. Meantime, a new type of regime emerged in Eastern Europe. The Bolshevik dictatorship differed little from the absolutism of the Russian autocracy in the devaluation of the human personality. In the former Tsarist Russian Empire, there was a crusade against any sign of individuality. Pidmohyl'ny wrote about this from a perspective that the Bolshevik authorities called 'bourgeois ideology'. He described the events that had no analogs in human history by undertaking the perspective of an individual and not from the point of view of historical objectivity. The reality was turning terrifying, and the depersonalization of a human being was transformed into radically ugly forms of destruction by hunger. Cherevatenko highlights that "Pidmohyl'nyi has some short stories

about this, with all the terrible consequences of hunger, i.e., man-eating or, as written in official documents, cannibalism” (Cherevatenko 2021). This is a situation when human beings are placed not just at the ultimate situation, but when they transgress it and lose their human nature. This means the coercion of human beings, the deprivation of their freedom. Pidmohylny’s attention to this distortion of the ‘human situation’ by the Soviet Communism is similar to Albert Camus’ recognition of the essence of this ideology. It is well-known that Camus was mercilessly criticized by Sartre because the latter was sympathetic to Stalinism. As Pidmohylny was executed by Stalin’s terror, which so distorted the human beyond recognition, then Camus could not help but recognize this terrible feature of Stalinism and turn a blind eye to it, as Sartre did. To agree with what Stalinism does and at the same time consider it humanism means to become part of the absurd, to try to give it a false meaning. Camus would never justify, as Michel Onfray points out, the bloody methods of achieving humanist ideals (Onfray 2013: 377–378).

One can notice the motives inspired by the image of Schopenhauer’s<sup>3</sup> ‘will’ in his short stories, for example, when Pidmohylny describes the human mass (Pidmohylnyi 1991c: 74):

It was as if a huge reptile crawled along the earth, crawled somewhere far away, wrapped itself around the world with an iron ring, turned back, swallowed into its full, greedy belly new people and crawled again – immeasurable, endless and inexorable, like the will.

As a model for his creativity, he saw French literature, which presented the style that Pidmohylny used in most cases, namely, philosophical and psychological prose. By using it, he demonstrated not only a single individual but also various individuals and their complex relationships with each other.

One of the principles of existentialism is to avoid the author’s speculations, fantasies, and the author’s subjective experiences. It is deemed normal for human nature to explain the actions of others and to look for their motives through the prism of one’s actions and motives, but this is unacceptable if we want to understand another person. In such a way, the author created a picture of psychological realism. It correlates with the spirit of existentialism which Kierkegaard laid down. Existentialism reveals the phenomena of real life; that is, it focuses on what a person always deals with and what distinguishes one person from another.

Pidmohylny shows that, in real life, all experiences have at least two people as their source, i.e., the one who experiences, and the one through whom they experience. Therefore, for a person, the question of their value is whether another person recognizes their significance. Pidmohylny reveals this idea in the short stories *Gracious God* and *Haidamaka*. In the latter, the main character asks: “Huh, what kind of a person one is, who does not know their own place in the world?” (Pidmohylnyi 1991a: 51). He feels noticeable and significant for the first time after being captured by the ‘reds’. Here, he

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Wicks argues that Schopenhauer’s philosophy “contains at its very foundation, features that later characterize existential thought” (Wicks 2020: 150).

is being paid attention to, despite the direct threat to his life. The feeling of significance prevails over the fear of death.

Viktor, the main character of the short story *Gracious God*, finds himself in a difficult situation of choosing between love and betrayal. He seeks justification for himself and his beloved, by alternately blaming himself and her. Acknowledging ourselves may require self-restraint since we are worth something when we give up what we need.

A person accomplishes this self-restraint voluntarily. Kierkegaard interprets the situation of Agamemnon being forced to sacrifice his daughter similarly. The necessity to make an ethical choice between the personal and the public good has a rational explanation since a personal sacrifice is self-limitation. Viktor finds himself in a similar situation. However, Viktor, unlike Agamemnon, has to make a choice that has no fateful significance for society; it is a choice between himself and the other. Self-restraint is rationality, and experiencing is natural irrationality. The description of Viktor's experiences is a spectrum of the most diverse emotions, mood swings, and fluctuations between self-restraint and freedom, between the rational and the irrational. The choices, the doubts, the fear of consequences – these all make the essence of a person. Tarnawskyi states that “Pidmohylny presents the psyche in an existential battle between reason and irrationality seen in a Nietzschean dichotomy. The conflict here turns out to be an ontological dilemma, not a moral one” (Tarnawsky 1994: 6).

In various short stories, Pidmohylny turns to the theme of decision-making, that is, the choice of a person, which he describes entirely in the spirit of Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.

The short story *Haidamaka* presents the main character Oles' who, in search of self-realization, moves from innate physical weakness to social significance. Life itself made him that weak, and it did not depend on him; he could not influence it and make a choice. Life has made Oles' insignificant, and he is the embodiment of being not viable and not visible to others. In general, the emergence of a human about whom Pidmohylny repeatedly writes is, in his opinion, something accidental, a consequence of the constant and necessary cycle of 'birth through love' and natural death. No person chooses to be 'here and now', as “[...] the sinewy, bony hand of existence was twisting them,” writes the Ukrainian writer (Pidmohylnyi 1991c: 71). The hand of the being is 'bony'; that is, the being itself is not synonymous with the life of the biological individual, namely a human. The doctor's words confirm this opinion that he “does not like painting a rosy picture of life” (Pidmohylnyi 1991d: 98). Pidmohylny calls this doctor a realist who sees human suffering and death. As Stadnichenko concludes, these comprise the authentic fate of all living things. It is the inclusion of the themes of life and death in his works is what makes the style of Pidmohylny's early works similar to the literature of existentialists (Stadnichenko 2001: 4). After all, life and death are as if two sides of human existence which reveal the essence of both a man and being.

It is natural that the issue of suicide often appears in Pidmohylny's short stories and is typical of his characters. This topic arises because a person has a complex of such feelings as resentment, abandonment, uselessness, and choicelessness. Pidmohylny describes these feelings in a variety of ways.

In the short story *Haidamaka* it is clearly shown that suicide is justified. It comprises the fact that it is a conscious decision to end one's existence as such, which is the very negation of life, for example, "such a weak and repulsive body has no right to life" (Pidmohylnyi 1991a: 51). The themes of existentialism are visible here, i.e., the choice, the suffering, the life, and the death. At the same time, the historical background and revolutionary events surrounding the character are less important for the author. The reason why this happens is explained by the fact that everything outside a person and his experiences are secondary. The change in these experiences can be conditioned by the events happening around them, but a person is always the core. The disclosure of this issue fully corresponds to the question raised by Camus about life and suicide, namely, whether life is worth living. The French thinker noted that an individual's world is complete in his or her subjective perception. History, knowledge, and the truth have meaning for a person only in their projection or attempt to make it anthropomorphic. Camus writes (Camus 2010: 6):

Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal. The cat's universe is not the universe of the anthill. The truism 'All thought is anthropomorphic' has no other meaning. Likewise, the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought. If man realized that the universe like him could love and suffer, he would be reconciled.

The issue of suicide arises because of the loss of understanding of the integrity of the world if its apparent orderliness is destroyed; this happens under extraordinary circumstances when those "walls that hid the absurd" are collapsing. The character of the short story *Haidamaka* finds himself in such a situation. He searched for 'walls of absurdity' in political ideas but could not find them; therefore, life was worthless. In the short story *Gracious God*, Viktor hesitates whether to commit suicide (Pidmohylnyi 1991b: 38–40). To refuse this act means to find an excuse, to cling to the meaning of the need to live and rationalize life, and to escape from the absurd into real everyday life. Although life itself, as can be seen from the works of Pidmohylny, is essentially irrational. Tarnawskyi states (Tarnawsky 1994: 30):

Indeed, the human condition can be described as futile servitude. Its key ingredients are human instincts, especially sexuality; the human desire, to complete something, be it stone walls with metal roofs, or knowledge and beauty; and the merciless fate, the meaninglessness of individual existence.

Absurdity manifests itself when a person's inability to change external circumstances is clearly revealed. A human finds him or herself in a trap, which Pidmohylny calls useless service, and Camus names it absurd.

Tarnawskyi emphasizes that the contrast between the village and the city in Pidmohylny's literary works is a social one. Presumably, one can agree with him since a comparison between the village and the city is a comparison of the irrational and the rational. Tarnawskyi's argument is rather well-founded (Tarnawsky 1994: 31–33). The city in the modern context, with its urbanization, looks like order and harmony. However, for Pid-

mohylny, it expresses the essence of human existence – the uncontrolled flow of human bodies, the direction of which has no goal or destination. The city is the civilization and the rationality that should create boundaries. However, these hopes of a person are not justified. Pidmohylny demonstrates this in the short story *In the Village*, which Tarnawskyi comments on and explains that the situation in the city is similar because “what is worse, these problems are the same in their nature as in the village” (Tarnawsky 1994: 32). Pidmohylny considers the city to be a concentration of people with all their flaws since “the city is the most successful symbol and metaphor of such an existence” (Tarnawsky 1994: 30). A person in the city becomes part of the mass.

### ***The short stories of fate and death by Mykhailo Yatskiiv***

In pre-Christian Ukrainian mythology, fate is something that the God or the gods bestow on a person; thus, it is part of the unity, representing God or the gods. If a person does not have a fate, it means that the God or the gods have turned away from him or her, and, consequently, misfortune, misery, and troubles await them. Another meaning of fate in the mythological and romantic context is that the meaning of fate is something that must be overcome in life (Etymological Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language 1985: 107).

Various life events and encounters are determined by fate and must be accepted and overcome (experienced). As for romanticism, “human life is often depicted in their dependence on human fate, which corresponds to the inner human being” (Chyzhevsky 1956: 380). A specific human fate reflects the inner essence of a person. In the Nietzschean philosophy of life, there is the concept of ‘amor fati’ (love of fate) which means that everything that happens in life, both good and bad, both gains and losses, must be loved and overcome because it is impossible to change what is necessary and what cannot be avoided; you have to say ‘yes’ to everything that happens. Nietzsche states (Nietzsche 1989: 258):

My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, and not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendacity in the face of what is necessary – but love it.

Considering the fate of *Dasein* (a human), Heidegger stresses that it can be accepted only by someone aware of his own ‘being-towards-death’; for *Dasein* is an existence between birth and death, it goes from birth to death by its fate. In this lies the authenticity of the existence of *Dasein*, i.e., heading one’s fate to death. Heidegger states (Heidegger 1962: 435):

The more authentically *Dasein* resolves – and this means that in anticipating death it understands itself unambiguously in terms of its own most distinctive possibility – the more unequivocally does it choose and find the possibility of its existence, and the less does it do so by accident. Every accidental and ‘provisional’ possibility is driven out only by the anticipation of death. Only being-free for death, gives *Dasein* its goal outright and pushes existence into its finitude.

Yatskiv mostly writes about fate and death in his early short stories (1900–1920). In them, the phenomenon of fate has a “mythological and symbolic meaning” (Yevhen Nakhlik), and death has a “realistic and symbolic meaning” (Lesia Demaska-Budzulyak). Svitlana Khopta argues that Yatskiv places the existential triad ‘fear-despair-death’ in the center of his works (Khopta 2007: 7). But it is not so because, in his short stories, he is mainly focused on describing the fate as well.

Fate is either personified or not. Fate can appear in the images of a baby or a woman. In the sketch *Diva*, the famous opera singer Lavra N. reckons on her childhood. One day, while playing with children, she enters the room and sees the following: in the cradle “lies a child with bright curls, like an angel, and plays with a golden apple,” and next to her stands “an old lady with milk-white hair, in a black dress, and whose face shines with gentleness.” She asks the child: “Whom, the child, are you giving the apple? Whom?” The child noticed Lavra and “immediately handed her the golden apple.” Years passed, and when Lavra became an outstanding opera singer, she “in the secret depths of the theater” saw a “small light” that “shone on the stage like a golden apple” (Yatskiv 1989: 55–56).

The golden apple symbol signifies that Lavra was bound to become an outstanding opera singer. The gift of fate is the golden apple she receives from Lady Fate’s hands, and the baby in the cradle is the new path of fate, the beginning of fate-life, and that gift of fate is to be an opera singer.

Another short story *The Tale on the Ring* tells us about a newlywed couple. Yatskiv writes (Yatskiv 2016a: 29):

Once, they heard at night a knock on the window, and then a voice saying “What do you prefer, to suffer from poverty in your youth or your old age?” It frightened them, and they replied that they would think about it and say “on the second night what they choose. On the second night, they heard the same question again and said that they would prefer to endure youth and live in happiness in old age.

And so the misfortunes began. They lost all their property and their house in a fire. The poverty came. They went “into the world for begged bread.” And they met a gentleman who advised the man to sell his wife for a hatful of money. They agreed to this Mister’s offer. Before parting, the woman “broke her wedding ring into two halves and gave one half to her husband, and hid the other for herself” (*ibid.*: 30). After many years, when the man grew old and went gray, he came to a yard where the master had already died and asked to be hired. The lady found out about it and asked her servant to bring him. When the man came to the lady, she asked him to tell about himself. When he finished his story, she took out half of her ring and asked if he had his half. He had it, and he gave it to her. So they met again, got married, and lived happily ever after.

In this story, the choice of common life plays a decisive role in the life of a young couple, and the ring, which first splits into two halves and then unites again, symbolizes the unity of the fates (parts) of two people – they did not get married by chance, the fate connected them.

The theme of the young couple’s fate emerges one more time in the short story *The Fate of the Young Muse*. It tells about the fate of a boy and a girl who decided to go to the

mountains. On the top of the mountain, the girl was fascinated by the view of the valleys, but the sky above her head captivated her even more (Yatskiv 2016b: 46):

She looked at the sky and drowned in its blue depths. It is chilling *there*, because there is no sin, it is clear and quiet, because God stays there and loves it that way. It is not visible with the eye, but can be seen with the soul in that terrible clear eternity.

What will the girl choose: the earthly path with her boyfriend, or the heaven, the life in the valley or the life above, closer to God? She decides not to go down into the valley, but rather to stay on top of the mountain between heaven and earth. It is human fate to be between heaven and earth. A human is a being-between, and he or she must adhere to his or her fate of being-between and not renounce it. If a person renounces his or her fate of being-between the heaven and the earth, then “the further down, the worse the hell. Human hearts are like flowers – the lower they bloom, the more they are trampled” (*ibid.*: 46). A man can preserve humanity only by being-between heaven and earth. Not to climb to God because this is pride (one may recall the myth of Icarus), and not to fall low because there is absolute hell at the very bottom of earthly life. God scares away the imperfect human with his “terrible crystal clear eternity.”

The earthly life down here is simply vanity. People waste their lives: “Some were getting drunk, others traded and counted money, still others quarreled over who was the best among them, and dragged each other by the forelocks, and some went on the pilgrimage” (Yatskiv 2016c: 137). One of the characters, a military chaplain, climbed a high mountain and, looking at the villages, said the following: “How futile human life passes over there, in the valley! Ants, ephemera! Millions have been disappearing like this since times immemorial, as if there was no such thing in the world!..” (Yatskiv 2016d: 21). Bank employees from the short story *Dance of Shadows* lose their vitality, health, and ability to develop; therefore, as Yatskiv writes, “not a single face was shining with satisfaction with their fate” (Yatskiv n/d: 18). Heidegger calls this ‘existence below’ ‘falling’ (Verfallen); it is meaningless, empty, and unreal. Such an existence is characteristic of people who do not know their fate. However, to rise from the undermost and bottom of existence, one must start looking for one’s fate. The search for fate is the beginning of rising above this empty and meaningless existence.<sup>4</sup>

Human fate can be uncertain; in this case, a person, not knowing his or her fate, can wander in search of it. Therefore, fate becomes incomprehensible, unknowable, and mysterious. Mykhailo Yatskiv writes about this in the short story *Masterpiece*: “On the third

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that we find the same motives of absurdity of everyday life in Albert Camus’ works, especially in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Notebooks*. Since the *Myth of Sisyphus* is better-known and more famous than the *Notebooks*, we will turn to the latter. Camus considered life meaningless if it consists of a forty-hour week in an office or a factory. After each working day, someone comes home, has dinner and goes to bed. And so throughout the years. Such a person is just waiting [...] to die. Such a life is ‘completely absurd’. We have lost ourselves in such meaningless work, and “we haven’t time to be ourselves. All we have time for is happiness” (Camus 1963: 79). What kind of work is a human being worthy of? Camus answers: “There is a ‘dignity of labor’ in the little barrels which men make for themselves on Sundays. Here, work and play come together again, and play linked with technique attains the dignity of work of art and of the whole creation” (*ibid.*: 92).

day, early in the morning, the sun greeted the majestic altar, and thousands of eyes were lost in it, as in the secret passages through which human fate wanders” (Yatskiv 2010a: 130).

The appearance of a person in the world and his or her arrival is a mystery of fate, i.e., why precisely in this country and exactly in this family was I born? Who or what determines the place of my birth, and what kind of people will be my parents? We can find the motive of the incident nature of birth in the short story *Novitnia osnova*. The main character speaks about her own and her mother’s birth as follows: “the feeling trembles in my soul that I appeared in the world by mere chance. [...] My late mother also went on a journey of life incidentally” (Yatskiv 2010b: 131).

The birth into this earthly world is the beginning of one’s life journey. The journey is exciting because we are unaware of what will happen to us, what people we will meet, and what events await us. An essential point in this ignorance of fate is that a person can change the course of events. A person’s future is not determined; such a conclusion can be drawn from the sketch *White Grasshopper*. The main character of the sketch, carried by his spirit (a white horse) onto the top of the mountain, looks through the telescope of the astronomical observatory “at that new city in which I will have to live. The weak human spirit advised me from ages ago to look intently at the walls, peer year after year into the future and look for my posthumous map” (Yatskiv 2016c: 137). He wants to see ‘the signs of fate’, the signs of the future life, and its events, but he does not even see the last event of his own life, i.e., the event of death. Nothing is written on the tablets of fate, not even fate itself.

In the short story *Where is the Truth?*, the motif of life as a journey is depicted. The postman Martyn Grobman, having lived for sixty years, “felt that his life’s journey was coming to an end, and doubts began to bother him more and more. Indeed, what is happening there beyond the borders of the earthly world?” (Yatskiv 2016e: 166). The approaching of death awakens the question for Martyn Grobman whether life ends with death. This existential question arises when a person is on the brink of life and death when their life’s journey is coming to an end.

The life journey of a person ends with death. In Yatskiv’s short stories, we can find the whole discourse of death: his characters think and talk about death, experience the death of others and acquire the experience of death. Death, as an ‘ultimate situation’ (Karl Jaspers), requires an answer to ‘unpleasant questions’: how did I live? Why did I live? What have I done with my life? Why do the closest people we love leave before us? Father Fed’, the main character of the short story *U naimakh*, experiences the death of his daughter: “He felt sorry for himself. He could feel the ragged shirt and the patched gray coat on him, and it seemed to him that they were also unhappy. Wrung his hands and beat his head against the wall” (Yatskiv 1900: 50).

On the one hand, death is a misfortune, whereas, on the other hand, it arouses curiosity with its mysterious inevitability and necessity (everything born must die). When a person lives, he or she is not interested in death, by thinking that death is a distant future, and that he or she will not die now. Though sooner or later, “everyone can face the situation when they experience death at least once in their life, and that is when one will encoun-

ter the indifference of people and the world towards the person, who used to treat others indifferently” (Yatskiv 1916: 69). Death is a unique experience for an individual. It is, paradoxically as it sounds, closely connected with life since there is no life without death and death without life: “Death is not an attack. A man is like an ear of grain. It grows out of the soil, and, as it ripens, it bends down to the soil. Both man and the ear of corn wait for the scythe. Furthermore, the white flower broken in the spring by the wind and the yellow leaf in the fall cling to mother earth” (Yatskiv 1995: 89).

So, the phenomena of fate and death are among the central ones in Yatskiv’s short stories. They are woven into human existence; one cannot simply reject them. They attract the artistic imagination of Yatskiv, who depicts them respectively mythologically and symbolically as well as realistically. His discourse of fate and death can be *retrospectively* inscribed in the corresponding discourse of existentialism in Ukrainian literature.

## Conclusion

The short stories of Yatskiv and Pidmohyl'ny bear signs of existentialism. Literary images of fate and death are present in Yatskiv’s short stories, and they are (for him) the main phenomena of human life. In Pidmohyl'ny’s and Yatskiv’s short stories, one can see obvious signs of the style of Sartre and Camus.

If we compare the existential images of a human being in the short stories of Yatskiv and Pidmohyl'ny, it turns out that Yatskiv created mysterious and enigmatic images, while Pidmohyl'ny created realistic ones, which were shaped on the basis of the socio-political processes of his time. However, what they do have in common is that they create existential images of a human being standing between rationality and irrationality, necessity and freedom, love and hate, between pleasure and restraint.

In the case of Pidmohyl'ny and Yatskiv, existential motifs are presented in their short stories. They explored the human being in the ‘ultimate situations’ and focused on such existentials as choice, fate, death, etc. However, one can disagree that this is existentialism in the sense of a philosophical trend which was developed in the 1940s. Pidmohyl'ny and Yatskiv are treated as existential writers only retrospectively. This means that, during their lifetime, they were neither called nor did they call themselves ‘existential writers’. Actual analysis of their short stories helps to attribute them to ‘existential writers’.

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