

# Facing Mortality: Exploring Existentialist Motif of Death in the Selected Novels by McCarthy, Zhadan, and Müller

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**Abstract.** This study represents the first scholarly endeavour to investigate the existentialist motif of death within the works of renowned authors from the United States and Europe: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Herta Müller's *Atemschaukel* (2009), and Serhii Zhadan's *Internat* (2017). Employing a multifaceted methodological approach, this research utilises close reading to identify representations of the death experience, an interpretative lens to uncover and categorise imagery, allusions, and symbols related to death, and a comparative analysis based on the point-by-point method to juxtapose the literary representations of death across the selected novels. Through this study, three distinct forms of death emerge: the cessation of life, the moral decay of humanity, and the demise of nature. This study delves into these forms, which are most prominently depicted in each novel, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of death at the dawn of the 21st century. The selection of these novels is predicated on their shared thematic concerns, including survival in hostile environments and extreme experiences such as isolation, alienation, and ultimately, death.

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy; Serhii Zhadan; Herta Müller; existentialist motifs; death.

## Introduction

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, arose in the 20th century, catalysed by the escalating disillusionment with traditional modes of thought and the unspeakable horrors revealed and inflicted by the World Wars. Its central tenet, formulated by J.-P. Sartre (2007, p. 20), asserts that human existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals must create their own purpose and significance in a world devoid of inherent meaning or external guidance. The atrocities witnessed during the World Wars in the 20th century, coupled with the revelation of humanity's capacity for destruction and chaos, shattered traditional

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beliefs and ideologies. Confronted with the cruelty and absurdity of the universe during the wars and experiencing their aftermaths, people start searching for the real purpose of human existence and reassess the value of human life. In response to these harrowing experiences, philosophers and writers reflect the turmoil of society by delving into the depths of existential themes about life, death, and freedom.

The awareness of human mortality and the recognition that life is finite and transitory have been enduring themes in literature. Existential themes regarding the purpose of human existence, life and death retain their profound relevance. It is in human nature to question reality, particularly when it looks absurd and unreasonable. While people have long sought to unravel the enigma of death, they can only witness the deaths of others, as noted by Bauman (1992, p. 3). Through the power of fiction, however, individuals can imagine the experience of death. All the information about the finitude of human life is accumulated in a culture that, according to E. Bronfen and S. Goodwin (1993, p. 3), is “the collective response to death”. Literature is a powerful tool that enables society to arrange knowledge about death and prepare future generations for its inevitability. Thus, the existentialist motif of death, with its stark confrontation with the imminent, is vividly represented by such European and American authors as Serhii Zhadan (Ukraine), Herta Müller (Federal Republic of Germany), and Cormac McCarthy (USA). In their novels, they investigate the depth of human society, bringing to light its most repugnant flaws and dwelling on the notion of death.

This study focuses on three novels: *The Road* (2006) by American Pulitzer Prize winner Cormac McCarthy, *Atemschaukel* (2009) by German Nobel laureate Herta Müller, and *Internat* (2017) by Ukrainian novelist Serhii Zhadan. These works have garnered significant scholarly attention, with researchers exploring various aspects of each narrative.

*The Road* has been scrutinised regarding its recurring themes and symbolism by G. Hellyer (2012) and M. Wierschem (2024), while its realistic nature has been examined by K. Bartczak (2014). The concept of death and human impact on nature are reviewed by S. Joyce (2016), with ecological apocalypse and cannibalism further analysed by D. Huebert (2017). *Atemschaukel* has been examined by C. Vogel (2023) in the light of traumatic experiences, while the metaphoric nature of the novel has been interpreted by P. Shopin (2014) and G. Vogler (2024). *Internat* has been studied through the lenses of trauma and symbolism by T. Zaharchenko (2019) and A. Kratochvil (2019), while N. Herasymenko (2023) analyses archetypes in the novel, and N. Krasilnik (2020) sheds light on the main existentialist motifs. While these studies provide valuable insights into the thematic richness of these thematically and motif-linked novels, a comprehensive comparative analysis from an existentialist perspective is lacking. This study addresses this gap by comparing the literary representation of the existentialist motif of death within these works. Thus, the study aims to compare the literary representation of the existentialist motif of death in the novels. The following tasks will be undertaken: 1) clarify the concept of death in existentialism; 2) identify the existentialist motif of death in the novels; 3) distinguish the forms of death in *The Road*, *Atemschaukel*, and *Internat*; 4) compare the literary representation of the motif of death in the books.

The methodological framework employed in this study combines close reading, which is applied to single out the representations of death experience most salient in the novels, and the interpretative approach, which helps explore the imagery in detail in the narratives. Following this approach, allusions and symbols related to death are uncovered, interpreted, and grouped according to the defined forms of death. After that, the comparative analysis is applied to draw parallels between the literary representations of the existentialist motif of death in *The Road*, *Atemschaukel*, and *Internat*. The comparison is based on the point-by-point method, which means that the similarities and dissimilarities of the novels are analysed according to each form of death. The novelty of the study lies in offering a thorough comparative analysis of the novels in the context of the existentialist motif of death.

## **Theoretical background**

In existentialist philosophy, omnipresent death is the ultimate boundary of existence that serves as proof of human mortality. It is a reality that no one can circumvent or avoid, which is made tangible by the presence of a dead body (Sapir, 2024, p. 140). According to K. Jaspers (1969, p. 4), death proves our existence, as only due to the presence of death, which marks the end of a mortal path, an individual can fully appreciate life. For Jaspers, death is an objective fact, not a limiting circumstance. Animals lacking this awareness do not grapple with this existential dilemma. Humans, however, are aware of their mortality, but they do not know when they will die. They are sure about its inevitability, but so long as there is no exact date for it, they try to postpone it (Jaspers, 1969, p. 193). The feeling of ever-present death haunts the main characters of the novels. However, despite facing such challenges as a hostile environment and starvation (*The Road*), hunger and arduous toil (*Atemschaukel*), and the war (*Internat*), they persistently try to prolong their lives.

Death is inevitable, and everyone is aware of its imminence, but as M. Heidegger (2008, p. 297) states, at the same time, death is vague, and no one knows when it comes; that is why there is no need to fear it. However, the lack of personal experience with death perpetuates fear due to limited knowledge (Jaspers, 1969, p. 195). As people are not able to survive their own death, they can understand it only through the experience of others. American literary critic L. Fiedler (1975, p. 201) remarks that this threat of death may also become a promise of life. The statement supports the idea that people appreciate their lives more when fully aware of their mortality. The protagonists' constant exposure to destruction and death deepens their understanding of life's fragility and the inevitability of its end.

In adherence to certain beliefs or as a means to avoid suffering, individuals may willingly choose to die. This aligns with J.-P. Sartre's (1956, p. 547) assertion that people are finite beings, but this finitude is not caused by death that may happen in the future, but rather a person's freedom of choice. This limitedness is based on the need to choose and act accordingly. Consequently, death is a threat to existence (Jaspers, 1969, p. 199),

which marks the finality of being.

Meanwhile, Polish philosopher Z. Bauman (1992, p. 3) defines death as the ultimate emptiness, a form of non-existence that paradoxically allows all beings to exist. The awareness of death makes people cherish life and strive to postpone the inevitable end. Thus, death and life complement each other, contributing to the natural balance and order of the world. In their journeys, the protagonists learn this interconnectedness and try to give their lives meaning.

## 1. Exploration of the existentialist motif of death in literature

McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Müller's *Atemschaukel* (2009), Zhadan's *Internat* (2017) are literary works that delve into the profound depths of human existence and the inexorable nature of mortality. The novels exemplify the exploration of death as an integral aspect of human experience. The works depict characters wrestling with the futility of life, the quest for meaning, and the search for authenticity amid seemingly insurmountable challenges.

In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, death looms as a constant companion to the unnamed father and his son as they traverse a desolate and devastated landscape. The world they inhabit is a bleak and ashen wasteland, devoid of life and filled with unspeakable horrors: "[...] the pieced land dead and gray, the fence, the road" (McCarthy, 2006, 118). The absence of a foreseeable future, combined with the relentless pursuit of survival, confronts the characters with existential dilemmas that mirror the essential questions of human existence.

In *Internat*, death becomes an ever-present spectre amidst the chaos and violence of the war, which takes place in the east of Ukraine. The protagonists, Pasha and his nephew Sasha, similarly to the main characters of *The Road*, try to survive in the hostile environment and find their way home. At the beginning of the novel, Pasha is indifferent and melancholic; the war does not concern him until he finds himself in the middle of the conflict. For the protagonist, the road to the orphanage and back home becomes a path to discover his true self and shape his character (Herasymenko, 2023, p. 6). During this trip, he reassesses his values, and the survival of his nephew, who he takes from the orphanage, becomes of primary importance. The orphanage here is not only a place for abandoned children, but it also carries a more profound significance, representing the feelings of being "rootless, lost, unsettled, and displaced" (Zaharchenko, 2019, p. 418).

Moreover, it is an isolated territory where the remnants of the soviet ideology coexist with the harsh realities of wartime life (Krasilnik, 2020, p. 92). This setting reveals the complexities of the conflict where relatives may find themselves on opposing sides. Thus, haunted by omnipresent death, the main characters contemplate the meaning and purpose of life amid overwhelming despair and try to find their own place in the world.

In Müller's *Atemschaukel*, the existentialist motif of death is deeply interwoven in the narrative. It serves to explore the human struggle for survival, identity, and meaning in life in a hostile environment. Set during the period of Stalin's regime, the novel follows the life of Leo Auberg, a young German-speaking Romanian who is deported to the

Soviet Union for forced labour. Leo is a representative of the millions who experienced the Gulag system. Unlike the Nazi extermination camps, the main aim of labour camps was economic. Nevertheless, people were sent there to work, and many of them died in those inhumane conditions (Haines, 2013, p. 123). In the novel, death is ubiquitous and embedded within the very essence of daily life; it lurks in the shadows of the labour camp and takes lives without warning and regret.

In *The Road*, *Atemschaukel*, and *Internat*, death is a central motif that extends beyond individual mortality, as it also sheds light on the consequences of human actions on both nature and society. The existentialist motif of death takes different forms in the novels. It manifests itself as the termination of life, the moral decay of humanity, and the demise of nature.

### ***1.1 Death as the termination of life***

The most evident form of death portrayed in the books is physical death, which represents the termination of life for living beings. In *The Road*, the dystopian landscape is plagued by death on a grand scale, where the remnants of humanity struggle to survive in a desolate and decaying world. The father and his son encounter death in the form of lifeless bodies scattered along their path: “The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 24). These dreadful symbols of mortality signify the inevitable fate that awaits all living beings. According to M. Wierschem (2024, p. 337), the dead is a recurring image in *The Road*. Like the father and his son, the deceased are pilgrims whose individual or collective journeys toward death have already ended. The number of survivors is so small that the dead are left where they perished, slowly turning into dust and falling into oblivion: “A man sat on a porch in his coveralls dead for years” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 199). The man’s lifeless figure emphasises the finality of existence and the enduring presence of death in this desolate landscape, embracing remnants of humanity with primal fear.

The fear of death is rooted in the fear of living, which is the primary dread of the protagonists. The boy’s mother could not stand such a harsh reality in which death is a certainty and violent death is a reality: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us [...]” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 56). As a mother, she worries not only about her own life but, above all, she is afraid to see her son murdered. The complexity of the choice between survival and suicide is a matter of personal experience; however, suicide is usually connected to a way of avoiding violent death (Hellyer, 2012, p. 46). Thus, the dread of life and disillusionment in the future, which originate from her observations and experiences, stimulate the mother to commit suicide.

The father is also weary of living in the depressing reality and wishes for the end of his existence: “There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 230). The character is tired of the constant fight for survival and aware that civilisation is lost and may never be rebuilt. This leads to the existential question of

“why one would choose to exist in a world without meaning or purpose” (Joyce, 2016). The answer for the man is simple, the only reason that keeps him alive is his son, as the father fears for the life of his child more than he disdains his own: “That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 29). Even if the man knows that this world may not have any future because all the resources are depleted, being at death’s door, he still cannot fulfil his promise to himself and kill his son: “I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 279). Unlike the mother, the father has chosen to keep living because of his child. Such distinct responses of the family members show how differently they interpret the notion of death, facing the demise of humanity and loss of culture. Thus, in the novel, death is a salvation that one wishes and is free to choose but still fears, as it means the end of existence.

War is a servant of death; with human hands, it takes an enormous toll on its master. Its cruelty and injustice have been skilfully depicted in *Internat*. In contrast to McCarthy, whose portrayal of death with all its disgusting details evokes in readers a sense of dread and unease, Zhadan takes a different approach and depicts it poetically and metaphorically. Although in the novel death is felt in the air, the author does not describe it directly but only hints at its presence: “[...] по той бік насипу, стоїть «урал», вантажений темними ящиками. Кабіна згоріла [...] а ось ящики чомусь не горять, лише тліють, і дим від них здіймається, мов із крематорію”<sup>1</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 272). These boxes, which barely burn but smoulder, allude to the finitude of life and the proximity of death during the war. The whole existence is under threat as death means the end of life and loss of individuality, which is most dreadful for a person. The fear of death can be seen in the eyes of people who huddle in the railway station, waiting for salvation which may never come: “[...] чорні тіла, що лежать попід стінами, тиснуться під батареї, оскільки біля батареї безпечніше [...]”<sup>2</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 74). However, more than death itself, people fear violent death and the suffering that it may cause.

In *Atemschaudel*, Müller skilfully captures the essence of death and its impact on the human psyche with subtle and poetic precision. Instead of graphic descriptions, the author employs rich symbolism and evocative language to delve into the existential implications of mortality and the profound sense of loss experienced by the characters. The end of one’s life is not perceived as bereavement in the labour camp, where death is an opportunity for others to prolong one’s life: “Wir haben im Lager gelernt, die Toten abzuräumen, ohne uns zu gruseln [...] wir essen ihr gespartes Brot. Nach dem letzten Atemzug ist der Tod für uns ein Gewinn”<sup>3</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 122). The survivors emotionally distance themselves from death to keep living. For them, one’s demise is just a good opportunity for profit as they can collect the objects left by the deceased. Survival is the main goal of camp

<sup>1</sup> “[...] there’s a Ural-model truck, loaded with dark crates [...] on the other side of the embankment. The cab’s burned out [...] For some reason, the crates aren’t burning, though, just smoldering, and smoke rises off them, like the truck bed is a crematorium [...]” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 263).

<sup>2</sup> “[...] black bodies lying by the wall, huddled by the radiators – it’s safer by the radiator” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 67).

<sup>3</sup> “In the camp we’ve learned to clear away the dead without shuddering [...] we eat their saved bread. Their death is our gain” (Müller, 2012, p. 112).

residents; thus, taking clothes and food of the demised is not considered wrongdoing: “[...] Tote keine Kleider brauchen, wenn Lebende erfrieren”<sup>4</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 69). Death here is so strongly interwoven in prisoners’ daily lives that their feeling of compassion is distorted so that they can stand the hardship of camp life. Leo, as other prisoners, is aware that he may die from hunger in these severe conditions: “Und gleichzeitig weiß ich, was der Hungerengel als meinen Tod sieht, ist mir vorläufig noch nicht geschehen”<sup>5</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 218), but he frantically tries to postpone this moment. However, not only the protagonist’s body but also his identity and the identity of his conceptual world can be annihilated by the disruptive power of the labour camp (Shopin, 2014, p. 202). So not to lose his personality and the connection with the real world, Leo clings to the most precious thing he has brought with him – a handkerchief: “Ich glaubte, das Taschentuch ist mein Schicksal [...] das Taschentuch war der einzige Mensch, der sich im Lager um mich kümmerte”<sup>6</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 80). For the protagonist, the handkerchief signifies a better life that exists beyond the camp walls. This piece of fabric brings him comfort and becomes a tangible link to his past life. Thus, in the novel, death is an inevitable future that may save human beings from suffering, but, at the same time, it is a dreadful reality that defines the end of existence and individuality.

## ***1.2 Death as a moral decay of humanity***

A moral decay of humanity is another form of death that means not a physical end of life but a moral degradation of an individual. Such embodiment of death has a metaphorical nature, as it doesn’t lead to a physical deterioration of a body. However, the loss of morality results in ruining a soul and erasing the borders that differentiate people from other beings. Death embodies life emptiness (Finkelstein, 1965, p. 117), while moral death represents meaningless existence. This decay can manifest itself through acts of violence, cruelty, and indifference, leaving behind a trail of emotional devastation.

In *The Road*, the natural or technological disaster, along with its aftermath, such as shortage of provision, climate change, and devastation, is not the only reason for deaths. Having observed the fall of civilisation, people initially attempt to follow moral norms and help those who need them. However, soon enough, it becomes evident that the old world is lost forever, and only a dreadful future is ahead. In desperate need of salvation, people turn to immolation: “Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road” (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 32–33). Murder has become a routine not only as a way of protecting those scarce supplies that have been left but also as a way to relieve stress and a method to feed oneself. The primitive instincts take over ethics, and the law of nature,

<sup>4</sup> “[...] the dead have no need of clothes when the living are freezing” (Müller, 2012, p. 60).

<sup>5</sup> “And at the same moment I know that the hunger angel sees me dead, but the death that he sees has not happened to me, not yet” (Müller, 2012, p. 207).

<sup>6</sup> “[...] the belief that the handkerchief was my fate [...] the handkerchief was the only person who looked after me in the camp” (Müller, 2012, p. 70).

according to which the fittest survives, comes into force. Cannibalism, one of the most repugnant forms of human degradation, becomes the cure to save the body but lose the soul, which, from the existential point of view, should be treated as a loss of individuality. Thus, on their way south, the boy and his father do not once encounter the awful signs of cannibalism, such as remnants of a child: “[...] a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 198). This mutilated human body stands as grim evidence of desperation where the instinct to survive can lead to the ultimate destruction of humanity.

Moral decay takes a chilling and disturbing turn when the most powerful individuals resort to enslaving others for sex and food: “[...] wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites [...]” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 92). Things, as well as individuals, become objects of consumption. This proves how easily people can cast aside their ethics and moral standards when in danger, contrary to the common belief that human beings tend to unite in hard times. Such a dark descent into inhumanity reveals the depths to which humankind can sink when ethical values and empathy are abandoned in favour of unchecked power and selfishness.

Similarly to *The Road* in *Internat* people outrage moral standards and abide by primitive instincts turning into ruthless creatures who do not disdain cutting off clothes from a stiff corpse: “Кров не встигла замерзнути: схоже, одяг зрізали з тіла щойно, зовсім нещодавно [...]”<sup>7</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 272). As violence and suffering become ubiquitous, the characters are thrust into an environment where survival takes precedence over ethical considerations. People get used to constant deaths and suffering; they no longer feel compassion and frantically try to save themselves: “Всі розуміють, що разом не врятуються, проте кожен сподівається врятуватися сам”<sup>8</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 206). They are now united by their fear of death and their reluctance to accept someone’s help, as they cannot trust anyone but themselves. During the war, human life becomes tragically devalued, reduced to a mere commodity traded amidst the chaos and violence: “Два товарняки з тілами. Два вагони.... Нічого немає, нікого не шкода”<sup>9</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 234). In the novel, a human being is often referred to as a body: “[...] там теж тіла на підлозі – брудні, вимучені, криваві [...]”<sup>10</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 312), making it a part of sheer statistics. The tragedy of war is such that the number of victims becomes overwhelming, making it impossible to grieve for each life lost. Thus, the human degradation in this case is marked by the loss of sympathy, treating human life as a commodity, and justification of murder on a grand scale.

<sup>7</sup> “The blood hasn’t frozen yet – looks like the garment was just cut off someone’s body, just a little while ago [...]” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 263).

<sup>8</sup> “Everyone realizes that they won’t all be saved, but everyone’s hoping to save themselves” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 197).

<sup>9</sup> “Two freight trains filled with bodies. Two whole cars. There’s nothing over there. Don’t feel sorry for anyone” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 225).

<sup>10</sup> “But there are bodies on the floor here, too – dirty, exhausted, bloody [...]” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 302).



In *Atemschaukel*, the limits of morality are investigated in extreme situations where people who would not typically interact closely are forcibly brought together, which creates a significant connection between the literature of the Gulag and that of the concentration camps (Haines, 2013, p. 130). The destruction of an individual, normalised by the existing regime, becomes inevitable for those who resist the system (Vogler, 2024, p. 140). The main characters undergo moral degradation and become subjected to physical and psychological torment since, in the labour camp, they constantly lack food and decent living conditions. Their actions are reduced to mere reactions, making them like lifeless mechanisms, and the only thing that matters is survival, which has nothing to do with life (Eßer, 2023, p. 53). Forced labour undermines their mental integrity, fragmenting the perception of reality to ease suffering (Vogel, 2023, p. 183). Hunger becomes a constant companion, forcing the prisoners to compete for meagre rations and transforming them into mere shells of their former selves. As their bodies waste away from malnutrition, so does their sense of dignity and compassion.

Starvation is the reason for the collapse of morality, which forces lawyer Paul Gast to steal his wife's bread until she dies of hunger. However, no one punishes him for this abominable act (Haines, 2013, p. 131), even though everyone sees it because no one cares for those who do not have enough strength to fight back. Everyone is selfishly trying to save at least one's own life. However, when Karli Halmet steals crumbs of bread from his bunkmates the prisoners beat him almost to death, as it is perceived as a violent act against their collective existence: "[...] wir waren eine Meute. Wir schleppten den Karli in der blutigen, verpissten Unterwäsche neben die Baracke hinaus in die Nacht"<sup>11</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 113). The struggle for survival unleashes a primal instinct for self-preservation that threatens to overshadow the core values that once defined them as human beings. However, the camp workers never kill anyone, unlike their masters, who, obeying Stalin's order, let millions of people rot in the Soviet's death machine. Here, as well as in Internat for those in power, people's lives become insignificant statistics: "Denn es gab in den Spuren der Mathematik, im März, im vierten Jahr schon dreihundertdreißig Tote"<sup>12</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 90), and human suffering remains unnoticed.

### ***1.3 Death as the demise of nature***

The demise of nature can be viewed as the destruction of biodiversity, the extinction of animals and plants, and the degradation of ecosystems. This extermination of nature poses a threat to human well-being, survival, and even existence. Everything is interconnected in the world, and human plundering actions towards nature may cause the annihilation of humanity. Meanwhile, the death of nature also has a metaphorical meaning and signifies the alienation of human beings from the natural world and the loss of spiritual connection with the planet.

<sup>11</sup> "[...] we were a mob. We dragged Karli in his bloody, pisssoaked underwear out into the night, next to the barrack" (Müller, 2012, p. 103).

<sup>12</sup> "The mathematical traces show that by March of the fourth year 330 people had died" (Müller, 2012, p. 79).

The demise of nature, as a gradual destruction of the natural world and its ecosystems, is vividly portrayed in *The Road*. Due to an unknown catastrophe, the world has turned into a lifeless desert, devoid of animals and plants: “The dead grass thrashed softly. Out there a gray desolation” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 221). The earth is covered with ashes, and everything gradually turns into dust. The air is so heavily polluted that the main characters ought to wear masks to breathe: “Their masks were already gray at the mouth and their eyes darkly cupped” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 159). Everything in this hostile world reminds us about the proximity of death, its unavoidability and severity. Forests that once thrived have died, grass that once swayed in the breeze now lies lifeless, and rivers that once flowed with vitality have become stagnant streams. The landscape has become just ‘the corpse of the world’ (Huebert, 2017, p. 73). Even commodities, which were once precious, have lost their value and now lie needlessly along the road, as their owners have already joined the eternal sleep: “Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths” (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 199–200). These abandoned goods symbolise the consequences of consumerism and the reckless depletion of natural resources.

The world in the novel is painted grey. The recurrence of the colour combined with the description of the relics of the lost world intensifies the impression of complete desolation and ruin: “Glass floats covered with a gray crust. The bones of seabirds [...] the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 222). Such a post-apocalyptic view emphasises the magnitude of loss and the weight of past mistakes. It also serves as a sombre reminder of the consequences of neglect and indifference towards the planet. As K. Bartczak (2014, p. 208) states, the final death of nature in *The Road* is the process of desertifying the world, the final solution to all human mythology, the history of epistemology and ontology.

In *Internat*, the destruction of nature is not the result of a catastrophe as in *The Road*; the war causes it, an unforgiving force that knows no boundaries and spares nothing in its path. Bombs that unceasingly fall on the city destroy everything on its way: trees, buildings, people; changing the place in a devastated area: “Ранкове місто, випалені, мов кімнатні каміни, під’їзди, розтрошені вітрини продуктових магазинів”<sup>13</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 244). The tranquillity of nature is shattered, replaced by the deafening sounds of destruction and the acrid smell of smoke that hangs in the air. The heavy grey sky is lightened by explosions: “Над їхніми головами освічується небо, сіре дощове тло пробивають яскраві повздовжні спалахи: «гради» б’ють із території заводу”<sup>14</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 249), which brings nothing but terror and death. As A. Kratochvil (2019, p. 226) states, the demolition of the city resembles an absurd apocalyptic scene. Meanwhile, it reminds us about the fatality of life and evokes the dread of death. Every living being is threatened and tries to escape from the horrors of war: “[...] вперед, подалі звідси, доки сюди нічого не прилетіло у відповідь, доки спалахи не осипалися на землю, заливаючи

<sup>13</sup> “Morning city, apartment blocks singed like fireplaces, shattered grocery store windows” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 235).

<sup>14</sup> “[...] the sky lights up above their heads. Bright, horizontal flashes slice through the gray, rainy expanse. Grad rockets are soaring from the factory, right over their heads [...]” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 240).

все металом і смертю”<sup>15</sup> (Zhadan, 2017, p. 249). However, the devastation extends far beyond the physical destruction, as the war leaves scars on the soul that may never heal. The destruction of nature becomes a metaphor for the demise of innocence and hope in the face of relentless conflict, which results in death, suffering, and scorched earth.

In *Atemschaukel*, the portrayal of nature reflects the harsh realities of labour camps. For the prisoners, the world there seems grim, hostile and, as in *The Road*, painted grey: “Oft gab es nur eine geschlossene Wolkendecke, einerlei Grau”<sup>16</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 27). This colour highlights the emotional state of people in the camp, symbolising the absence of hope and the monotony of their existence. The severity of the land together with unbearable and exhausting work creates an atmosphere of utter despair: “Die Erde war knochenhart gefroren. Die Spitzhacken prallten ab, die Brechstangen tönnten wie Eisen auf Eisen”<sup>17</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 74). Nature seems to oppose those attempting to penetrate and exploit its depth. Working in terrible conditions, camp residents mine natural resources, transforming the once lush landscape into a barren wasteland, deprived of its vitality and life. The prisoners are surrounded by ever-present cement: “Zement ist unausweichlich wie der Staub der Erde, man sieht nicht, woher er kommt, denn er ist schon da”<sup>18</sup> (Müller, 2009, p. 40). This material denotes natural destruction and reminds us that every human will eventually turn into dust. In the novel, the brutal surroundings of the camp reflect the prisoners’ bleak existence, devoid of freedom and hope. The relentless exploitation of resources and disregard for the environment mirrors the dehumanisation and disregard for human life in the camp.

## Conclusion

In fiction, the existentialist motif of death occupies a significant place due to its universality, which can be observed in McCarthy’s *The Road*, Müller’s *Atemschaukel*, and Zhadan’s *Internat*. Written in different periods and belonging to distinct cultures, these novels are united by their embodiments of death. The results of the analysis show that in each of these works, death is portrayed as more than just a physical end but also a reflection of the more profound struggles that define human experience. It takes on such forms as the termination of life, the moral decay of humanity, and the demise of nature. In the dystopian world of *The Road*, physical death intertwines with the demise of nature, and extreme cruelty leads to the degradation of ethics. Meanwhile, in *Internat*, multiple deaths are justified by the war, which causes not only the devaluation of moral norms but also the destruction of the environment. In *Atemschaukel*, the severe reality of survival

<sup>15</sup> “[...] farther away from here, before something hits in retaliation, before the flashes come crashing to the ground, flooding everything with metal and death” (Zhadan, 2021, p. 240).

<sup>16</sup> “Often there was nothing but an unbroken cover of clouds, a uniform gray” (Müller, 2012, p. 20).

<sup>17</sup> “The earth was frozen hard as bone. The pickaxes bounced off the ground, the crowbars clanged like iron against iron” (Müller, 2012, pp. 64–65).

<sup>18</sup> “Cement is as impossible to escape as the dust of the earth, you can’t tell where it comes from because it’s already there” (Müller, 2012, p. 32).

in the labour camp reveals the devastating consequences of starvation and unspeakable cruelty towards prisoners, which undermines ethical values and legitimises murder.

The existentialist motif of death can be represented and interpreted differently in various historical periods, but it always reflects the mood of society and its attitude towards this extreme situation. However, there is a notable lack of comparative findings of the motif. Their presence would shed more light on the perception of death during periods of peace compared to times of catastrophes or wars. Due to its multiformity, death is portrayed in numerous ways in literature, reflecting the diverse cultural, social, and individual experiences of different societies. Thus, the perspective studies other literary representations of death in 21st-century literature.

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