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The “Life/Death” Binary Opposition in Folk Prose Narratives

Olesia V. Naumovska

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

Nataliia I. Rudakova

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

Nataliia Ie. Naumovska

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

Abstract--The article is dedicated to the characteristics of the “life/death” explication in prose narratives of Slavic folklore in particular. The authors were able to study and understand the archaic beliefs immanent for the ancient Slavs through researching the words and fairy-tale images that personified life and death in this type of literature. The relevance of this topic derives from the insufficiency in the research of representation of “life/death” binary opposition in various languages and in folk prose narratives. This study contributes to understanding the attitude towards this binary opposition in the distant past and its impact on the modern people’s attitude towards life and death. The purpose of the study is to investigate the binary opposition and its perception among people through folk prose narratives. The authors chose an integrated methodological approach for researching this issue. It helps to comprehensively analyse the attitude towards the binary opposition. The study successfully used the methodology and techniques applied in humanities, primarily in philology and philosophy. While researching the topic the authors found out that in some cases this binary opposition is perceived figuratively, and in others cases it is dramatically diametrical, which is reflected in fairy tales, proverbs, curses, etc.

Keywords--archaic beliefs, binary opposition, folk narrative tradition, proverbs’ Slavic folklore, tales.

Introduction

Before looking into the issue, it is preferable to analyse the basic concepts used in our study. The first one is “binary opposition”, which is representative for all-natural processes as they comprise the two opposite phases or sides. [Matyash \(2003\)](#), believes that nowadays binaries are in a dominant position. Notably, the reinterpretation of these ideas has been the critical reflection of the new European culture and has begun during the lifetime of the famous philosopher ([Nietzsche, 1900](#)). However, the theoretical, ideological, cultural, logical, and other prerequisites for the domination of the binary opposition in modern society were formulated only in the middle of the twentieth century ([Flynn & Adams, 2009](#); [Serpell, 2010](#)).

Often the folk prose narratives include the concept of binary opposition, which means the juxtaposition of two opposite concepts. At the same time, the research results have shown that this concept can have a figurative meaning if the boundaries between the juxtaposed categories are quite unsteady and blurred. One of such binaries is a “life/death” duality. Its modern perception originated from ancient times and is reflected, primarily, in folk prose narratives and folk poetry. In the last decade of the XX century, researchers from different countries have drawn their attention to the particular sociocultural value of “life/death” binary opposition. They attempted to define social and cultural consequences of binary opposition’s dominance ([Moore et al., 2017](#); [Seif & Ahmadi, 2015](#)).

The relevance of the study derives from the lack of research of this issue in ethnology, philology and philosophy. The theoretical significance of the study is in providing a deeper understanding of the binary opposition’s role in the folk prose narratives of different ethnicities, and, first of all, of Slavs. Notably, the juxtaposition “life / death” is also one of the basic concepts in a linguistic world-image that despite the apparent opposition has close connection between the two parts, which follow one another ([Dubchak, 2011](#)). [Vinogradova \(2016\)](#), notes that data retrieved from folklore provide closer review of the archaic beliefs of ancient ethnicities. Since many modern nations’ beliefs about religion and ideology emerged in the distant past, historians and ethnologists discovered a large number of ancient religious vestiges that still remain relevant ([Davydiuk, 2005](#)). Therefore, the study of this binary opposition will be useful for the analysis of modern people’s religious and mythical beliefs. The practical significance of the study is that its results can be included in folklore, ethnology, philology, history and philosophy textbooks. Conducted research assists in semantics analysis of the binary opposition in folk prose narratives ([Acerbi et al., 2017](#); [Dimoulas et al., 2014](#)).

Literature review

[Marunovich & Kononenko \(2020\)](#), conducted research of the binary opposition in Slavic languages. [Utaker \(1974\)](#), considered linguistic binary opposition to be a criterion for distinguishing different phenomena. [Rosengen \(2018\)](#); [Alwi et al. \(2019\)](#); [Vinogradova \(2005\)](#); [Yarmolenko \(2015\)](#); [Guseva et al. \(2019\)](#); [Dunaievska \(2009\)](#); [Oliinyk \(2009\)](#); [Kyryliuk \(2005\)](#); [Naumovska \(2009\)](#); [Yakovleva \(2014\)](#), conducted a study of folk prose narratives and the role of the image of Baba Yaga

in a "life/death" binary opposition. [Phindane \(2019\)](#), applied binary opposition to analyse the meaning of folk fairy tales. In his research [Davydiuk \(2005\)](#), identified archaic Slavic mythological representations in folklore in general and in the folk fairy tale. [Vinogradova \(2005\)](#), plays a special role in the study of Slavic folklore and the "life/death" binary opposition. A few of her works analysed the nature of some Russian fairy tale characters and revealed their true meaning. [Guseva et al. \(2019\)](#), have also devoted her research to the character of Baba Yaga in Russian folklore and its counterparts in other cultures. In her book "Baba Yaga: The Wild Witch of the East in Russian Fairy Tales" S. Forrester has analysed Baba Yaga's stupa as an attribute and suggested that the pistil, which is also an integral attribute of this old woman, appeared much earlier than the stupa ([Forrester, 2013](#)).

Professor [Dunaievska \(2009\)](#), studied the imagery of folk prose narratives (fairy tales and mythological legends) that represent the "life/death" binary opposition. The researcher analyses Ukrainian folk prose narratives (legend, fairy tale) and does not omit the versatile personification of the concepts of death and immortality. She traces the spatial, actional, and subject codes of "death" in fairy tales, and defines death as an anthropomorphic image and the narrative implementation of the concept of "immortality" at the level of artistic devices. [Kyryliuk \(2005\)](#), researches the antithesis of "life/death" with the third logical component "immortality" as the general universal and cultural matrix of the structure of the fairy tale discourse. The researcher projects fairy tale narratives on the instinctive moderators of human behaviour: aggressiveness, mortality, vitality, alimentary, erotic code, genesis and immortality. Also, [Yakovleva \(2014\)](#), studied the three metaphysical aspects of human life. [Oliinyk \(2009\)](#), analysed the imaginative space of Ukrainian magical fairy tales through the category of flexible "native/ foreign" binary opposition as a reflection of the "life/death" opposition from the perspective of the structural poetics of folk narratives. [Naumovska \(2009\)](#), analysed the fictional contradiction of the life and death motives in Ukrainian folklore ([Syzydykov, 2014](#); [Karasik, 2015](#)).

[Toporkov \(2010\)](#), is studying mythology, folklore, folk prose narratives and various spells in particular, which are still popular among the Slavic nations. Some spells are associated with "life/death" binary opposition ([Ioffe et al., 2017](#)). He has written nearly fifty studies, one of which is devoted to the archaic roots of Soviet myths and the cult of the leader V.I. Lenin. This work reflects a special trinity of "life/death/conditional immortality". After analysing the existing studies on the subject matter, the authors have determined that certain aspects of "life/death" binary opposition in folk prose are not researched insufficiently. Particularly, the role of certain fairy-tale characters, which personify this juxtaposition, is not researched and analysed enough. In addition, there is almost no comprehensive approach to research of this problem ([AbouZahr et al., 2007](#); [Munroe & Jacobson, 1990](#)).

Materials and Method

In preparation for this research, the authors collected and analysed the studies in different languages that were devoted to this and similar issues. The authors translated the foreign sources to determine which aspects have remained

unsolved and identified methods most appropriate for this research. The main methods were descriptive, analytical, semantic and pragmatic. The research is also supported by linguistic, stylistic and discourse analysis. A group of Ukrainian researchers emphasise the importance of such an analysis in their article (Podsievak et al., 2020). A structural method was used to discover the "life/death" binary opposition in the structure of folk prose narratives. Z. Aimukhambet, A. Abdilmanatkyzy, K. Baitanasova, M. Seiputanova, K. Kurmambayeva point out the importance of this method for studying binary opposition in literature (Aimukhambet et al., 2017).

The oppositional nature of the mythical worldview, which is reflected in folklore prose, conditioned by dialectical development of the world. Mythological motifs and characters describe the development of life by forming the juxtaposition. In this case, the juxtaposition is represented by "life/death" binary opposition. Also, juxtapositions of mythical motifs and characters mentioned in folk prose narratives often form a binary-dyadic integrity by complementing each other. Binary opposition as a linguistic concept is a type of communication within a semiotic system that makes sense only in connection with a certain concept in opposition to another concept (Vocroix, 2021; Velasquez et al., 2018).

This issue is a subject matter of folklore, philology, ethnography, history and philosophy. Thus, the applied methods are those that are used in these fields. The systemic (comprehensive) method deserves a notable mention as it involves a comprehensive study of the folklore of specific ethnicity, including everyday life and ethnographic realities. Also, the cartographic method is worth noting as it contributed to the establishment of the distribution of certain genres of folklore prose narrative in time and space. Cartography is usually carried out according to ethnic, territorial, temporal principles and traces the occurrence and forms of genres of folklore prose narrative among different nations and ethnic groups in different periods of their history. Typological method is one of the modern methods for studying this phenomenon. It helps to establish a pattern besides explaining the separate facts. A. N. Veselovsky (1838-1906) created a special approach – historical poetics, which explores historical processes related to the development of folklore (Shaitanov, 2007). In conclusion, the variety of approaches to the study of folklore and synthesis of the applied methodology indicate the attempts of a new stage in the development of folklore studies to cover the entire subject as a complex system of the whole genre system (Werdistira & Purnama, 2020; Pelepeychenko et al., 2021).

Results and Discussion

Primarily, folklore prose narratives (folk narrative tradition) include fairy tales, legends, myths, traditions, parables, stories, anecdotes. "A fairy tale is a genre of oral folk prose: magical-fantastic, allegorical and social-everyday stories with a peculiar system of artistic means subordinate to the heroisation of positive characters and satirical denunciation of negative ones that is often done through a grotesque depiction of their interaction" (Dunaievskaya, 2009). The basic law of a fairy tale as a folklore genre is an orientation towards fantasy. A folk fairy tale is part of a folk culture and heritage that represents society's identity. It exists in the form of a story that conveys meaningful messages and embodies cultural

identity (Alwi et al., 2019). Researchers emphasise that fairy tales are a special body of creative work that reflect ancient Slavs' archaic ideas (Davydiuk, 2005). Notably, folk tales are being forgotten by the younger generation despite the social positive value that they have carried for centuries (Wang, 2019; Rinartha et al., 2018).

In contrast to fairy tales, the main feature of a non-magical folk prose narratives is the orientation towards the truth. This type of folklore includes legends, retellings, bylinas and folk tales. Legends and retellings describe long-gone events (the epic time distance here is long-standing), while in the bylinas and folk tales are about events that seem to have happened in relatively recent times (the epic time distance here is relatively recent or current). At the same time, mythological features are immanent for legends and bylinas since. Unlike folk stories these genres are distinguished by the presence of the supernatural characters or their features transferred to real people. Therefore, a legend is a story of mythological, apocryphal or historical-heroic content, and bylina is an urban legend or fabulae, which describes the collision of a person with other side, with demonic powers (witches, house elves, woodman, merman, mermaids, etc.), witnessed by the narrator or someone they know (Myshanych, 1983).

There is a clear emphasis on the duality of "living/dead" in both folklore as a whole and folk prose narratives in particular. This binary opposition is determined not only by its connection with the main conceptual categories of human consciousness. It is also determined by more complex, more ambiguous and more controversial internal connections of "live/dead" juxtaposition than in other binaries. Contingence of the polar opposites in the duality of "living/dead" duality and a certain blurriness and vagueness of the boundaries between these juxtaposed features could be found in folklore on various levels, including in folk prose narratives. According to Slavic traditional views, human life does not end upon death. Therefore, the term "soul" is often applied to both the deceased and the living person. There are such phraseological units in folk and author' prose narratives as "not a single living soul" (empty, there is no one), "barely keeping body and soul together" (about a weak, sickly person), "peace of mind" (pray for the deceased), "dead souls" (non-existent people, information about which was used for bureaucratic purposes mentioned by N. V. Gogol in the novel "Dead Souls"). In traditional Slavic beliefs death is described as "eternal second life" or the "eternal sleep". However, in Russian language it is often said about a deceased person that "one ordered to live long", which means to die.

There is an expression in Serbian folklore about a deceased person that moved from this temporary life to eternal life. This epitaph is often written on tombstones. According to one of the Russian proverbs "A man is born - to death, and dies - to an eternal life" Therefore, in Slavic folklore life and death is a rather contingent opposition. Lamentations were widespread among the Cossacks in Ukraine. According to popular beliefs, dreaming about a wedding or someone in a wedding dress foreshadows a future funeral or someone's death. One of the elements of a traditional wedding is a mother's lamentation for her daughter. In ancient times, it was believed that a wedding was a kind of transition associated with initiation: the dying of the bride as a girl and the rebirth as woman. Also, in accordance with an ancient Ukrainian tradition, which remained relevant today,

when an unmarried guy or girl of marriageable age dies, they are buried in a wedding dress and a funeral-wedding ceremony is arranged. They choose a groom (most often) or a bride (rarely), elders and sing the wedding songs, etc. Russians and Romanians have similar rituals. In Balkan folklore, there is an inversion of this idea: the wedding is perceived as a funeral, and a funeral is perceived as a wedding. One of the external sources in the composition of the wedding-funeral ritual is the combination of various concepts of marriage and death known to folklore. This custom also illustrates this binary opposition. The theme of the wedding-funeral is reflected in the fairy-tales of different nations. These are Ukrainian fairy tales “The groom-grass snake”, “The unfortunate crayfish and his faithful wife”, Russian fairy tales “The little scarlet flower”, “Finist, the brave falcon”, Romanian fairy tale “Fet-Frumos and Ilyana Kosinzyana”, French fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast”, British fairy tale “Three Feathers”, German fairy tale “Beauty and the Horse”, Norwegian fairy tale “The Bear King”, Chinese fairy tale “Son-in-law is a Monkey”, etc.

The “life/death” binary opposition is prominent in folk fairy tales, which roots go back to the Slavic pagan past. The academic study of fairy tales helps to reconstruct ancient Slavic beliefs. The well-known image of Baba Yaga as well as death with a scythe, which became a kind of evolution of her image, personifies the old woman who guarded the entrance to the world of the dead and was the guide to the other world. Baba Yaga, who had one ordinary leg and one “bony leg”, symbolised this binary opposition most vividly. The fact that this binary opposition is embodied in one character emphasises contingent perception of life and death among Slavs. It is known that she lived at the edge of the forest, and the forest was most often associated with death. And the far-away kingdom mentioned in many tales is nothing more than the afterlife. Likewise, the symbolism of the hut on chicken legs, which turns to the hero of the fairy tale frontally and backwards to the forest, is a corridor from the world of the living to the world of the dead. This image connects to the process of human burial of the ancient Slavic, Finno-Ugric and other ethnicities in special ceremonial buildings, which were wooden “domovynas” put on special pillars to avoid the damage during the floods and smoked to prevent rotting and scare insects away. In this case, “chicken legs” do not mean literal chicken legs but pillars smoked with incense. Notably, the custom of burying in a wooden crypt was widely spread in Europe and some parts of Asia at the time. Perhaps this type of burial was the evolution of the famous Scythian burial tumulus.

The “domovyna” on pillars became the prototype of the hut and on chicken legs, where Baba Yaga lived. Interestingly enough, the word “domovyna”, which means “coffin”, is present in today’s Ukrainian and Belarusian languages. I. S. Guseva correlates the image of Baba Yaga with the archetype of the Great Mother and believes that some analogues of Baba Yaga are found in the folk prose narratives of other ethnicities. The analogues’ names contain the root - ie and also reflect the binary opposition discussed in this study. In ancient Indian mythology Yama was the lord of the kingdom of the dead and also possessed a bony leg. In the mythology of the ancient Romans two-faced Janus, who possessed the dual nature of the living and the dead. He also had a female personality named Jan (Diane) (Guseva et al., 2019). In addition, there are similarities between Baba Yaga and the characters of German mythology such as Frau Holle (Golda,

mistress of the kingdom of the dead), which is also characterised by an ugly leg, and Stampfen, whose name is translated from German as to pound or walk heavily. The word “stamp” has the same root. Her name correlates with the stupa, which Baba Yaga is associated with constantly. A stupa and a pestle are integral attributes of Baba Yaga in Russian fairy tales, in Belarusian ones she travels with a goat that she speeds with a push (Forrester, 2013). According to Ukrainian beliefs, witches flew in stupas. Thus, according to the research, with whom the authors agree, so her image is associated with witches.

In the Slavic tales, male incarnation of Baba Yaga is Koschei the Immortal (the Soulless), who is either her son, or her nephew (Gimbutas, 1987). "This image is specific for Ukrainian fairy tales, but widespread in Russian fairy tale prose". He is one of the most mysterious characters in folk fairy tales. Koschei's mysterious and ambiguous nature became one of the most vivid personifications of the "life/death" binary opposition. The name of this character is usually connected to gauntness or witchcraft. There is a word "koschunstvo" in Russian language. Hence, the verb "koschunstvovat" means doing magic, bewitch. There is also a version that his name comes from Turkic word "koshchi" – a slave. In this case, it means a slave of evil sorceresses. He acquired negative features after the establishment of Christianity. He was a neutral character during pagan times. On the one hand, Koschei the Immortal could be placed in the world of the dead. On the other hand, he does not fit completely into the canons of the realm of Death. Therefore, he became the personification of the studied binary opposition. This hero only considers himself immortal but in reality, he could die. It is not easy for him though. The death of Koschei is in the egg and usually looks like a needle. The egg here deserves a special notice as in many folk stories it means life. Breaking an egg signifies the beginning of a new life, a victory over death. The egg is connected to the riddle, where it is said that the living will give birth to the dead, and the dead will give birth to the living. This riddle demonstrates the contingent binary opposition of these concepts in folk prose narratives. Therefore, an egg often personifies life and death in folk prose narratives.

In the context of the symbolism of the egg, it is worth recalling the popular Ukrainian fairy tales "Yaitse-Raitse" and "Riaba the Hen", in which an egg is a valuable gift to people from representatives of the animal or “other” world (in the fairy tale "Yaitse-Raitse" a hero receives an egg as a reward from the father of the eagle he saved, and in "Riaba the Hen" the poor old people cannot cope with the egg that their chicken laid). In these fairy tales, chaos ensues after the egg breaks. In the fairy tale "Yaitse-Raitse" a hero cannot cope with the cattle that fell out of the egg. Only the snake helps him to drive the herds back into the egg, but as a reward the snake asks to promise it something that the hero has but does not know about yet. And as it turns out his wife gave birth to a son, of whom he did not know. In the fairy tale "Riaba the Hen" the mouse waved its tail that made the egg fall and break. The snake and the mouse are messengers of the lower world, who destroy the world and give an impetus to a new life simultaneously. Ukrainian fairy tale “Krasnosvit” provides another interesting example. The plot of the fairy tale revolves around the old men who did not have children and found an egg under the bushes. He put it on the ceramic oven and at night a boy of incredible beauty emerged from the egg. This tale also demonstrates the myth of the creation of cosmos from chaos through the incorporation of the cosmic egg

received from the “other world” into the home space symbolised by the oven. Hence, these fairy tales are a reflection of cosmogonic myths (about the creation of the Universe) and reflect the change in worlds and the “life/death” binary opposition.

In the Russian fairy tale "Morozko" the manifestation of this binary opposition personified in the description of the blind man's bluff. The Russian name of the game “zhmurky” comes from the word "zhmurets" that means "dead man". Thus, blind man's bluff is a ceremonial game of death, an original imitation of ideas about life and death and one of the most striking manifestations of the juxtaposition of “life/death”. To this day children still accurately recreate this ancient ritual, which over time has lost its sacred meaning. The game of tag has a ritual meaning as well, which is associated with the cult of ancestors and the “life /death” binary opposition.

The Ukrainian stove is one of the ambiguous symbols associated with life and death. Ancient beliefs have it that death and birth are linked through the stove, where the dead live and feed on the smell of fresh bread. In our opinion, in the Ukrainian fairy tale "About the grandfather's daughter and the grandmother's daughter" the stove that helps the orphan symbolises the spirit of her dead mother. South Slavic and Romanian stories about vampire, succubus, etc prove the quite shaky boundary between the living and the dead is quite a blurred line between the living and the dead (Vinogradova, 2005). The well-known character of Dracula comes from the Romanian folklore. It has influenced Bram Stoker's novel “Dracula” (1897) and became its main character. This contingent connection between the living and the dead legends relies on the strong memories that dead relatives were once alive and that there are special connections between this and the other world.

Particularly, the authors address the widespread image of a nymph (mavka, niavka) in Ukrainian folk legends. This name is of the Proto-Slavic origin, where the root “nav/navj/navja/navie” (“nav”) means “deceased”. This symbol is also associated with a "life /death" binary opposition and refers to ideas about the connection between this and the other world. The Ukrainian ancient have it that the deceased visit their living relatives during the period of seasonal and ceremonial holidays. In different regions of Ukraine on Tuesday or Thursday after Easter people commemorate their ancestors on Niavskiy Velykden (another name is Dead Easter), when the dead come out of their graves and punish those who did not respect their dead relatives. They cannot be affected by the "holy cross" or a prayer. To this day, people tend to the graves, leave food there, give treats to old people with a request to pray for the deceased. On the very day of Niavskiy Velykden it is forbidden to call the souls of the ancestors "dead" (only call them by their names). At home one needs to light a candle or a sanctuary lamp so that the souls of the dead can find their way home easily, put a commemorative dish "kolyvo" on the windowsill and bake ceremonial bread. Legends about the return of the dead on Niavskiy Velykden are very common for Ukrainian tradition. In western Bulgaria and eastern Serbia, it was believed that “mavky” (plural from “mavka”) can appear as the flock of birds. They pose a serious danger to humans, especially for women in labour and their children. The image of mavka in the form of a bird originates from the Proto-Slavic idea that the deceased can visit the

world of the living as birds. In southern Serbia and Macedonia, *navi*, *navoi*, *navoi* can appear in a whirlwind in the form of special women (*samovily*). People believed that if a whirlwind, where these mythical women appear, swooped down on a woman in labour, she would get sick immediately.

Apart from Ukrainian fairy tales, similar heroes and similar narratives could be found in ancient Greek, ancient Egyptian, Scandinavian and Chinese mythology. This fact indicates the expansion of “life/death” binary opposition in many cultures and points to its versatility. Notable, the Fiery River with the Arrowwood Bridge in Ukrainian fairy tales and Currant River in Russian bylinas and fairy tales symbolised the border between the world of the living and the dead similarly to how the Styx River represented a stream of raging flame for the ancient Romans. The Russian name “Smorodina” (the “current” comes from the word “smorid”, which means a putrid smell). It was possible to cross the river by the arrowwood (“kalynovyi”) bridge, which meant that it was red-hot (“rasskalyonyi”). If heroes stood on the side of the river that belonged to the world of the living, the Serpent was waiting on the other side. The Serpent is one of the most common and, at the same time, one of the most complex and mysterious images in world folklore and religion. The main features of evil-doers in folklore are concentrated in this image to a different extent (Dunaievskaya, 2009). The “life/death” binary opposition in folk prose narratives matches with the concept of “sleep-awakening”. According to L. Dunaievskaya, the motive of sleep as a motive of death and rebirth relates to the ancient mythological motive of a dying and resurrecting deity. It reaches the genesis of a totemic patron capable of resurrecting an initiate into the world of ancestors (Dunaievskaya, 2009). In the folk prose narratives, the motive of the dream, which associated with the death of the hero, is very common. German fairy tales “Snow White” and “Sleeping Beauty” are the vivid examples of this association. Here, heroines do not die but fall asleep in a deathlike sleep and come to life with the kiss of the groom. Hence, temporary death equates to sleep. Sometimes a dream symbolises a temporary death associated with the initiation of the hero. For example, in Ukrainian fairy tale “Okh”, the antagonist burns the hero alive when he falls asleep and then sprinkles the coal with life-giving water, which brings the hero back to life and makes him even more beautiful than he was. The hero of the fairy tale “The Flying Ship” falls asleep and receives a magic flying ship after he wakes up. The same goes for the character's warrior dream after defeating the enemy as well as to the formulas along the lines of “I have slept for so long” expressed after the character came to life in Ukrainian fairy tales “The Tale of Luhai”, “The Tale of Ivan the Bohatyr”, “Ivan Bohdanets”, etc.

Notably, water (moisture, dampness) or, in other cases, dryness (drought, dry wood) is an ambivalent symbol associated with both life and death in many cultures, including Slavic. Therefore, here the contingent “life/death” binary opposition was transformed into a contingent binary opposition of “dry/wet”. On the one hand, a comparison of the deceased with a dry tree could be found in folk prose narratives. There is a Ukrainian riddle about a funeral and a deceased: “Runners are running, roarers are roaring, a dry tree is being carried”. This riddle has an equivalent in Russian folklore. Also, there is the Belarusian curse that means a death threat: “Go climb on a dry forest!”. The Ukrainian word “vidsyhaty” (“to dry up”) means to die, become lifeless, immobile (it could be said about the

hand or tongue) (Zhaivoronok, 2006). On the other hand, the motives of "water" and "wet" are often used to signify death. For example, the association of death with the water is used in a number of Belarusian curses: "Let the water take you!" or "Let you soak and never dry!" Some common Slavic tokens have been associated with this binary opposition since ancient times. For example, it was forbidden to speed the sheep with a dried twig since it was believed that the sheep could dry out and, thus, die. It was also believed that if speeding the sheep with a green, fresh, live rod, they will be fat and produce a good offspring. If one speeds the sheep with a dry rod, they will be thin and have no offspring. Such symbolism was present in fortune telling with the greenery, where a sign of "fresh" or "faded" green predicted the "life/death" for the one whose wondering about their future.

In conclusion, the "life/death" binary opposition, in this case, can have directly opposite meanings since the symbol of death in folk prose narratives could be both something dry and something wet. On the one hand, moisture is associated with a green plant that symbolises health and life. On other hand, it is associated with a wet, swampy, boggy mortal land that symbolises death. In some cases, death is represented by a withered plant. Perhaps the idea of humidity being equated to death was formed due to the geographical factors. For example, in Ukrainian and Belarusian Polissia there are numerous marshlands, where a significant number of people died throughout history. In a desert area, the attitude towards water and moisture is completely and more explicit: water brings life. Here the authors were able to trace the influence of geographic and climatic factors on the establishment of the "life /death" binary opposition among the people of different nations.

Also, the double meaning of water is common among the Vepsians. First, they saw water as life. Folk sayings have it that life without water is impossible. Therefore, Vepsian folk prose narratives provide many examples that point to the symbolic connection of water and future life's birth and development along with its augmentation and renewal. Water is often identified with vital body liquids. Vepsians saw water as resemblance of blood, which is one of the important substances of life. Secondly, as well as some other ethnicities Vepsians perceived water as synonymous with death. Drowning in water is reflected in the traditional Vepsian divination practices. Popular beliefs have it that the lavation of a deceased meant washing the life off. Thus, the soul of the deceased, while passing through the water, had to be cleansed (Vinokurova, 2010). All of these ideas are reflected in folk prose narratives.

In Ukrainian folk fairy tales (for example, in the fairy tale "Ivan Holyk and His brother") there is a widespread motive of the hero testing "life-giving" and "dead" water a wooden twig, which blooms in life-giving water and dries up in dead water. Notably, the motive of "life-giving and dead water" is inherent mostly to Slavic folk fairy tales. As a rule, there is only the motive of "life-giving" water in the fairy tales of other ethnic groups around the world. Hero's companions sprinkle the slain and chopped hero's body with dead water first, that causes the body parts to grow together again. The authors assume that this motive is associated with mythological beliefs that the continuation of life after death and the rebirth of the deceased is possible only upon the condition of the integrity (preservation) of the body. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that after

victory in a battle the hero of Ukrainian fairy tales usually burns down the antagonist's body and scatters the ashes in the wind (for example, the fairy tale "Popovych Yasat"). Therefore, the concepts of "dead water" and "life-giving water" in Slavic fairy tales are not opposed but complementary to each other. This fact reflects the mythological idea that death is not perceived as an inevitable end of existence. In folk prose narratives a similar duality is presented in the description of death in such phrases as "going down" or "going up." On the one hand, death is defined as "going down" (compare the Ukrainian proverb "go to the black soil" or Russian "go down"). On the other hand, death is associated with the upward movement (Russian saying "Go up to the mountain" (about a dying person) or "Going up the hill" (to die), Belarusians folk speech presents such curses as "Let you be taken up from the tree", "Let you have gone up with the smoke!" (Vinogradova, 2005).

While considering this binary opposition, it is worth paying attention to the ambiguous image of the mirror and omens and superstitions are associated with it. As well as a hut on chicken legs the mirror was perceived as a corridor to the other world. Therefore, many nations follow a custom to cover the mirror with a cloth or turn it against the wall if someone died in the house. Also, it is believed that the mirror bisects the image of a person and creates the illusion of duality. Also, the binary opposition of the image of the mirror in folk prose narratives derived from the fact that one can see and communicate with spirits from the other world through the mirror. Since the mirror was not common for many people the water surface reflected the symbolism of the mirror. The sorcerers used the mirror and the water surface to obtain information from the other world.

At the same time, some Slavic beliefs tend to oppose the concepts of "life" and "death". It is represented in some popular sayings such as "The dead is not a friend to a living", "Living is born from dead", "The dead is in the pit, the living is with us", etc. The attitude towards deceased people is ambivalent as well. In some cases, the image of death and a deceased person are characterised by features that have opposite meaning in folk prose narratives. Notably, traditional terminology often describes death and terminal state through verbs that indicate movement: go, leave, set out (dies), transfer. Riddles about death often mention "running", "chase", or "specific fight." For example, "who runs and who chases, two fighters are fighting?" The most common feature of a dead man in the folk prose narratives is the absence of movement. For instance, in the riddle: "One has hands and feet but does not get up from a bench". Some characteristics of death are featured in folk prose narratives: no breathing, no sight, inability to speak, etc. This is proved by the statements "one was breathing and became lifeless", "one could see and became blind", "one could speak and became silent".

The "life/death" binary opposition is expressed by dramatic juxtapositions such as movement-immobility, breathing-breathlessness, sight-blindness, speech-silence. These are fundamental features that help to distinguish the living from the dead man in folk prose narratives. While researching this binary opposition in Slavic folk prose narratives, the authors have noticed that there are certain taboos related to the vocabulary associated with death. A person has always sought to avoid words connected to the realm of death in some way. At the same time, "death" as the second concept in the binary opposition often plays a more

significant role in folklore. L.N. Vinogradova points out that this tendency was noticed by V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov. While describing the "life/death" binary opposition, they observed the displacement of the central meaning towards the second category, which has more variety in its manifestations. This fact is supported by the more active use of determinations involving death than those that involve life (Vinogradova, 2005). One can often find the epithets "navsky" (an ancient Slavic word for death), dead, mortal in folklore prose narratives. At the same time, the definition of "living" is almost absent. For example, the expressions "Dead week", "Dead day", etc. are commonly used in Belarus. Similar expressions can be found in other Slavic languages. At the same time, it is worth noting the presence of the "alive/dead" binary opposition in the Belarusian names of Monday and Tuesday of Foma's week. The common token's description says that it is best to plant vegetables during the living Radunytsia, which is the Monday of Foma's, and it is advisable to avoid planting vegetables on Tuesday, which is associated with death of Radunytsia. At the same time, the symbolism of death in popular interpretations of dreams has been thoroughly developed. Probably, this phenomenon derives from the common analogy of "dream-death" that the authors mentioned above. V. Krawczyk-Wasilewska composed a dictionary of dreams which comprises approximately 700 images associated with different dreams. Notably, about 300 of them are metaphors of death or its approaching. Meanwhile, the concepts of "life" or "living" are used only in 11 of images of dreams (Krawczyk-Wasilewska, 2015).

Proverbial genres are the closest to folk prose narratives: proverbs, sayings and riddles that reflect the national character vividly. After analysing the texts in these genres that contain the concepts of "life" and "death", the authors identified 3 categories:

- The first category includes proverbs in which death becomes inevitable and logical: "Sometimes death will pass by, and sometimes it will look into the eyes but it will always come on time", "Everyone will die as the time comes", "The one to whom the time has come dies", "Hope to live but get ready to die", "Death is not afraid of remedies", "Death does not ask when to visit", "Twice there will be no death, but once you have to die", "There is always death with a scythe behind the giant", "The hare is fast, but it won't run away from death", etc. Notably, the semantics of these proverbs demonstrates the absence of fear of death (another vivid example is "Death is not as terrible as illness"), it is frequently presented as a personified phenomenon. This group is the largest in quantity that confirms the high degree of this perception of death in Ukrainian mentality. Similar ideas about death can be traced in Ukrainian fairy tales. For example, in the fairy tale "Godmother Death" the anthropomorphic Death, which is portrayed as an old woman, becomes the godmother of a poor man's child. She advises him to become a doctor and helps him to get rich by showing the patient could be treated or if there is no hope for them (if Death stands at the patient's feet, then he will still live, and if she stands at the head, he will die). Then she shows the man many candles, some of which begin to burn, while others are already burning out, which means the approach of death. Each candle symbolises the life of a specific person. The doctor's candle had almost burned out, so he tried to trick the godmother Death by making a

spring that twisted his bed. But nothing helped: Death appeared at his head every time and he realised that there was no escape from death. This tale has many variations in Ukrainian tradition. As well as the proverb, it showcases the ideas about the inevitability and certainty of the time of death in Ukrainian folklore.

- The second category includes proverbs that, first of all, show a positive perception of death. Secondly, proverbs that include beliefs in the continuation of life after the physical death. Thirdly, the proverbs that include the idea of Death's justice and the dependence of the deceased's well-being in the other world on their actions. "Death does not mow people with a scythe but the grass on the path to Paradise", "The coffin is a new home when one meets Death", "Death only escorts someone to Paradise, someone to Hell, and a person chooses the path for life". Remarkably, the proverb of this group contains reflections of Christianity (lexemes "Paradise", "Hell") as well as ancient pre-Christian ideas (the perception of the "coffin" as a future home discussed previously in the article). The motive of the protagonist's journey to another world is popular: either to the underworld (for example, in the fairy tales "Okh", "Haihai", etc.) or to the magical "faraway kingdom", "silk country", "glass mountain", etc. (for example, in the fairy tales "Ivan Holyk and His brother", "The Silk Country").
- The third category consists of the proverbs that trace information about moral values in the axiological scale of Ukrainians in the context of life and death: "If you lead a simple life, you will live for a hundred years, and if you act crookedly, the demon will crush you", "He lived his life in a way that even Death laughed at his deathbed", "He died like a dog and lived like a dog", "He was born small, grew up drunk, died old and lived so that he did not see the world". The first proverb advises to live honestly. It is expressed in the form of an imperative and an indication of the direct dependence of a long life and sudden death on the obedience/disobedience to moral standards. Other examples confirm that Ukrainians believed an early, "bad" death to be a result of a person's low morale in life. This is also the main idea of folk fairy tales, where the protagonist, who embodies the national ideal, lives happily, and antagonist, who personifies the worst human qualities, often dies (for example, in fairy tales "Mare's Head", "The Tale of the Luhai" and others).

Notably, the authors managed to find only two proverbs that express the desire for life and sadness caused by death: "Where they die, there they cry", "His time is up but he still wants to live". This rarity confirms the conclusions regarding the popular understanding of the life/death antinomy. Also, the second proverb implicitly demonstrates a negative connotation prescribed to a person who does not accept the laws of life expectancy and the arrival of death. The ideas about the laws of the natural cycles of life and death, which arise as an indivisible unity, are also reflected in the Ukrainian cosmological riddle "There is a tree, there are flowers on the tree, a cauldron under the flowers, an eagle is above the flowers, the eagle picks flowers, throws the flowers, throws no less flowers, there are no more flowers in the cauldron that were before" In this riddle, the symbol of life is the tree of life – one of the most archaic symbols in the cultures of many nations around world. The flowers plucked by an eagle symbolise the dying of living beings at the will of the deity. Notably, in this example life and death determine

the adherence to world equilibrium, which is a necessary condition for the preservation of cosmos.

Folk prose narratives that mention the “life/death” binary opposition had an impact on the Ukrainian and other Slavic writers that is worth noticing. Ukrainian writers Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko (1778-1843), N. V. Gogol (1809-1852), Kotsiubinskyi (1864-1913), Lesia Ukrainka (1871-1913), Russian writers A.S. Pushkin (1799-1837), A.P. Chekhov (1860-1904), and others took inspiration from the images of witches, nymphs, niavkas that are demonological beings who belong to the world of the living and the world of the dead at the same time. For example, [Gogol \(2009\)](#), wrote about the Cossacks, who carried the coffin with the maiden, and afterwards performed a cleansing ritual by putting their hands on the stove. The modern Ukrainian writer Maria Matios (1959) captures popular beliefs about the afterlife and about the relationship between a person's life and their death (description of the "light" and "heavy" death of 31 dead). She explores the taboo on excessive crying for the deceased, which is believed to harms them, and the Bukovinian custom of making a grave for oneself during his lifetime. Ya. Savoshchenko studies the mythopoetics of Maria Matios' work ([Savoshchenko, 2017](#)). Literature of other nations also use the motives present in folk prose narratives. One of them is "the world" ([McNally, 2019](#); [Khagozheeva, 2015](#)). This binary opposition also influenced modern folk prose narratives such as for black humour, which is common for every genre: from children's horror stories to various anecdotes. This subject is studied by R. Williamson ([Williamson, 2014](#)).

In conclusion, this issue is understudied. However, it is quite important for understanding the origins of some traditions, tokens, beliefs that are still present in modern society but take their origins from the archetypal, pagan beliefs of ancient people. In addition, a detailed study of folk prose narratives helps to establish the origin of some fairy-tale heroes, proverbs, riddles, curses, tokens, etc. It is necessary to use both general multidisciplinary methods of academic research as well as specialised ones to study the “life/death” binary opposition. This issue is studied insufficiently by both native and foreign researchers. Some of its aspects have not been considered from the academic standpoint. Our research novelty is a complex approach to study of the “life/death” binary opposition in the folk prose narratives of different nations, particularly Slavs. The authors also established the presence of parallel, mythical and fairy tale heroes who personify this binary opposition in folklore and mythology of different nations and draw some analogies with the characters of Slavic fairy tales such as Baba Yaga, Koschei the Immortal and an old woman with a scythe, whose image often represents death.

Notably, that the “life/death” binary opposition in folk prose narratives and in the minds of the people takes its origins from the ancient pagan beliefs and rituals of our ancestors. For example, the image of a hut on chicken legs from Russian fairy tales is the personification of a special structure, “domovyna”, where the dead were buried by the pagan Slavs and Fino Ugrians and other tribes who lived nearby. It was established that ancient customs resonate in Ukrainian and Belarusian languages, where the word “domovyna” is still used for the name of the coffin. It was found out that this binary opposition is of contingent nature and the border between the concepts of "life" and "death"; "real world" and the "world

of the dead" has been rather conditional. This notion is proved by the analysis of such Slavic fairy tale characters as Baba Yaga, Koschei the Immortal and such symbols as egg, water, dryness, etc. in omens, sayings, proverbs, curses. The most striking personification of the "life/death" binary opposition is the image of an egg. In folk prose narratives a mirror is associated with this binary opposition. It is represented in the mirror as a corridor to the other world similarly to the hut on chicken legs. The authors of this study also analysed the influence of this binary opposition in folk prose narratives on Ukrainian and Russian writers. It was discovered that the theme of death and life borrowed from folklore was found in the works of Kotsiubynskyi, Lesia Ukrainka, A.S Pushkin, M.V. Gogol and other writers, who have been inspired by the motives from folk prose narratives.

After studying the existing researches, the authors found it necessary to conduct an integrated and more focused analysis of the presented issue that will consist of the analysis of separate works from folk prose narratives and images that it contains. This will help to study the issue of the "life/death" binary opposition in a more holistic way. The study of the role of this binary opposition in magical prose was initiated by L.N. Vinogradova. Hence, her findings are valuable for this field. It is necessary to study individual fairy tale images in more detail and analyse them through this binary opposition. This study is also an attempt to comprehensively interpret the results obtained by previous researchers and develop and improve their concepts.

Conclusion

The data of the conducted research indicates that, in some cases, the "life/death" binary opposition in folk prose narratives has a contingent nature, while, in other cases, this nature is dramatically opposite. The authors of the study also emphasised the inversions of some symbols such as water and moisture that can identify both life and death even within the same ethnic group. The concept of "dryness" is a part of the similar inversion. At the same time, the attitude towards moisture and dryness conditioned by the climatic factors for a particular ethnic group. In regions with a hot climate water always symbolises life, while in swampy areas such as Belarus water often symbolises death since there have been a large number of deaths in swamps throughout history.

In conclusion, the most vividly the "life/death" duality is personified by such Slavic folk tales' characters as Baba Yaga and Koschei the Immortal, who originated from Slavic pagan beliefs. Analogues to these characters could be found among other Indo-European nations from Ancient Rome and Germany to India. Notably, in all cases, they bear the characteristics of both life and death. The house of Baba Yaga is a hut on chicken legs, which is the indicator of the method of burying the dead in a special building ("domovyna"), which was practiced across Europe and among some ethnicities in Asia. Presumably, the "domovyna" is the result of the evolution of the Scythian burial tumulus, which were widespread in the steppe part of Eurasia. To conclude, the study of the folk prose narratives in general and its contingent "life/death" binary opposition contributes to the research of archaic beliefs and cultural traditions of ancient and modern ethnic groups. Particularly, it is necessary to consider the images of folk prose narratives that identify the binary opposition "life/death" to

characterise the heroes and narratives of individual fairy tales, proverbs, riddles. In addition, it is necessary to study the versatility of this binary opposition more carefully and find heroes and narratives similar to those of Slavic folklore and in the cultures of other ethnicities, both ancient and modern. These similarities indicate the common roots of many cultures and folk prose narratives of Slavic cultures. Folklore prose narratives also contribute to the preservation of ancient customs, beliefs and spells and influence the modern people's ideas about the world in the form of superstitions, especially those that contain this binary opposition.

In particular, it is necessary to study the "life/death" binary opposition in folk proverbs, sayings, curses, riddles and attempt to establish the true meaning and carry out a classification. Famous writers have repeatedly used the motives of folk prose narratives in their works. Therefore, the separate area of research can be established through the study of images borrowed from folk prose narratives that contain this binary opposition and the study of the influence of this binary opposition on the writers' work.

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