

Cultural memory of Chornobyl in literature and fine arts (in case of a picturebook “The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor” by K. Mikhalitsyna and paintings by M. Prymachenko)

Maryna Vardanian^{1*}, Iryna Dyrda², Marharyta Kirieieva³

ABSTRACT

From the category “cultural memory”, the paper compares the works of different arts – a picturebook *Kvity bilia chetvertoho* (*The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor*) by K. Mikhalitsyna and paintings of a representative of naive art, an artist M. Prymachenko. The paper explores the interaction of various arts based on Chornobyl’s issue within the comparative interpretation. *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor* by K. Mikhalitsyna narrates the life of M. Prymachenko and refers to her paintings devoted to Chornobyl. From the reception of fine arts, the writer’s picturebook raises verbalised and visualised issues of generations, memory, and nature conservation.

Keywords: cultural memory, Chornobyl, fine arts, picturebook.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chornobyl represents tragic events in the history of Ukraine; it is depicted in numerous forms of arts, such as cinematography, literature, and the fine arts. Therefore, the complex of different artworks devoted to Chornobyl uppermost confirms the traumatic cultural background of Ukrainians together with eagerness of sharing this experience and comprehending intention to recall the cultural memory of Ukrainians. In this context, Y. Lotman appropriately accentuates on the interaction of cultures as unique structures which elements function both separately and as a whole unit: “The structure is entirely exposed for continuous complication – it has internal trend to complicate all its elements transforming them into independent structural components. And within the tendency – to semiotic organisms. Thus, outwardly the structure constantly gets into contacts with equal organisms generating a higher-level unit and transforming itself to a segment of this unit” [11, p. 203]. In other words, various artworks are simultaneously autonomous semiotic structures and mutual supplements, developing into a whole unit. The paper concerns syncretism of the picturebook *Kvity bilia chetvertoho* (*The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor*) by

K. Mikhalitsyna in comparison with the paintings of an artist, representative of naive art M. Prymachenko.

M. Prymachenko’s work continues to inspire creators of various arts, including animation. Thus, in 2021 the cartoon “Wonderland” was created, where strange and mysterious beasts by M. Prymachenko came to life. The image of the Lion in the animation refers to M. Prymachenko’s painting “The Lion” (Fig. 1). Other images of animals from M. Prymachenko’s paintings, which are on the walls of the Lion’s house, also appear in the cartoon.



Figure 1. A reproduction of M. Prymachenko’s painting “Lion” made available to the public through the website of the Encyclopedia of Visual Arts

¹ Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Department of Foreign Languages, 54 Gagarina Ave., Kryvyi Rih 50086, Ukraine.

² Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Department of Foreign Languages, 54 Gagarina Ave., Kryvyi Rih 50086, Ukraine.

³ Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University, Department of Foreign Languages, 54 Gagarina Ave., Kryvyi Rih 50086, Ukraine.

* Corresponding author: maryna.vardanian@gmail.com

The image of Lion is also present in K. Mikhalitsyna's book, along with the main character, that again does emphasize the connection between generations and the development of Ukrainian culture.

Due to our urge to examine several texts, it is appropriate for analysis to apply the method of the comparative interpretation. According to N. Lishchynska, "comparative interpretation can be defined as interpretation based on comparing some literature works representing different national literatures, with the similar subject matters and the same epoch background, or on confronting a literature works and any artwork. These works are elements of a single semantic field in the world of art. It based on common range of issues, subject matters, and motives" [7, p. 330]. When is the comparative interpretation among different arts possible? "When one of the compared objects or one of the elements is literary" – U. Weisstein replies [10, p. 407]. In this case, literature acts as a recipient. In other words, literature perceives visual information, interprets it and makes its own impression of the information, and then transmits it in its own way. In accordance with the scholar's approach, the connections between literature and the fine arts can be classified in the following way [9, p. 380]:

- 1). Artworks that describe and interpret an appropriate story but not such ones being a simple illustration to the text;
- 2). Literature works with separate artwork's description;
- 3). Literature works, creating and transforming the art models literary;
- 4). Literature works imitating figurative styles;
- 5). Literature works with technical methods of the fine arts (editing, collage, and grotesque);
- 6). Literature works that correlate with the fine arts and artists or share some specific knowledge of the history of art;
- 7). Synoptic genres (emblem);
- 8). Literature works with the same subject matters as artworks.

Such interpretations are implemented through reasoning of the mutual themes of different works of art, analyzing not only works where the art or artists appear directly but also those, as U. Weisstein considers, "where esthetic and technical issues connected with the art are structurally integrated into the plot and where it is emphasized that artistic approaches of an artist can be used to interpret universal problems" [9, p. 380 – 381].

From the comparative interpretation, we tend to take a scrupulous look at the implementation of the cultural memory in texts for children. According to Astrid Erll, cultural memory is "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" [8, p. 2]. Ukrainian culture depicts its significant senses via specific symbolic forms such as memorable places, dates, remarkable figures, and folklore, literature and figurative images which are transferred through generations. What causes such processes? In fact, these are some events and tragedies of the society. In our research, this is the Chernobyl catastrophe that happened in 1986 in Ukraine.

The subject of the cultural memory in texts for the children and youth about Chernobyl is accentuated on in the paper of M. Vardanian who has analyzed the collection by Yevhen Hutsalo *Dity Chornobylia (Children of Chernobyl)*. In the collection, one of the elements of the cultural memory is an image of a mother as dominant in Ukrainian culture, as Mother is not only a woman but the embodiment of the land, Ukraine [5]. In the research, we draw attention to a contemporary picturebook *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor* by K. Mikhalitsyna. It follows the issues of Chernobyl in Ukrainian children's literature, indicates its duration and necessity of traumatic experience reconsideration. Furthermore, it is essential to accentuate on peculiarities of a picturebook genre where the connection between a word and an image is urgent. As M. Nikolaieva asserts: "The unique character of picturebooks as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal. Making use of semiotic terminology, we can say that picturebooks communicate by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic, and the conventional" [12, p. 1]. The fundamental characteristic of a picturebook is tight interconnection of visual and verbal signs, the picture, and the word. These picturebooks assist children to decode the images of two different sign systems – the verbal and the visual. A picturebook by K. Mikhalitsyna refers to the paintings of an artist M. Prymachenko, recounts her story in Chernobyl. From the reception of fine arts, the author demonstrates the problems of generations, memory, and nature conservation that are implemented on the verbal and visual levels. The comprehension of mentioned problems is a subject of this research.

2. RECEPTION OF CREATIVE WORKS OF M. PRYMACHENKO IN A PICTUREBOOK AS REALIZATION OF GENERATIONS AND THE MEMORY THEME (VERBAL LEVEL)

The subject of generations and memory matters is principal in a picturebook *The Flowers beside the*

Fourth Reactor by K. Mikhalitsyna. It is depicted on both levels – visual and verbal. As M. Vardanian notes, K. Mikhalitsyna applies allusion referring to the figure of Ukrainian artist M. Prymachenko while the name of the work is allusion to a picture of the artist “Flowers grew beside the fourth power unit” [4]. In a book, there can be conventionally distinguished two-story lines: the first – a story of four generations of Ukrainian family of a girl Stasia after Chernobyl tragedy, the second – a story of the artist M. Prymachenko who witnessed the Chernobyl catastrophe. The very occurrences had an impact on her works. Both story lines interweave owing to a central character – a little girl Stasia and her great-grandmother who experienced all the tragedy of the Chernobyl disaster.

In the story, great-grandmother recalls the events of the Chernobyl disaster, the consequences for the environment and people: the infection of all nature with radiation, the evacuation of people from the city, how they left pets behind: “It was April, Saturday, the twenty-sixth day. The sun was burning. The cherries in the garden bloomed. (...) People were saying to each other that the Chernobyl disaster happened at night. Big accident, terrible. (...) Then the boys had strolled until early in the morning – well because it’s what young people do – and the fishermen who went fishing at night, told, as if they had seen a pillar shining in the sky right above the station. (...) Finally, big kingpins came to us and announced that due to the unfavorable radiation situation, our Bolotnya falls into a thirty-kilometer zone of mandatory resettlement. (...) “And what about the cattle? — we asked. “And our cats and dogs were loyal to us?” “Leave them,” they said. — They are contagious, radioactive” [1, p. 23].

The next image, which symbolizes the Chernobyl disaster, is wormwood. This image of a plant called Chernobyl refers to the origin of the name of the city Chernobyl. The author refers to the story of the great-grandmother who left her home, but as a memory kept the bouquet of dried herbs in a handkerchief with large flowers on it, which no one was allowed to touch, even her beloved great-granddaughter: “Those herbs smell like home. (...) Not your home but mine. My native one. An old wooden house, where we with the landlord, your great-grandfather, lived all our lives. And the one where I was born. In that house. Its windows were as blue as the sky. And the door. And you go out of the door – there is a forest nearby, and the river flows, it is called the Bolotnya” [1, p. 14]. For author, a house, a family, land – these are things that are cherished and priceless. But the great-grandmother’s story is constantly accompanied by cultural symbols and traditions that she seeks to tell the younger generation: a house, an embroidered towel, bread, wildlife, farming, etc.

For emotional reinforcement of the image of the Chernobyl disaster as a tragedy of the Ukrainian people, the writer puts wormwood in *khustka* (a handkerchief) because it is one of the oldest traditional elements of Ukrainian women’s clothing. It is associated with various rituals and customs (birth, christening, and marriage): “The handkerchief was considered a special sacred object and relic, which was passed down from generation to generation” [13]. In Mikhalitsyna’s text, the handkerchief is supported visually: in the picture, which depicts the great-grandmother putting wormwood, gray colors prevail, but the handkerchief itself has bright colors. There is a certain symbolism in this: the tragedy of motherhood, the loss of loved ones, and the intention to preserve the memory of the family, and the tragedy.

The main purpose of the image of the great-grandmother is to tell descendants about the family rooted in Ukrainian traditions and customs: “And my mother embroidered so well! There was such an embroidered crossbar above the door, my goodness! Alcea and forget-me-nots bloomed on it! And there was a lush towel over God Lord” [1, p. 14]. The artist M. Prymachenko, who is repeatedly mentioned in the book, earned her living by embroidering. The author seems to draw a parallel between different types of painting and embroidery, as an important cultural tradition of Ukrainians.

The great-grandmother’s stories are one way or another connected with the ones about M. Prymachenko. The great-grandmother mentions her for the first time when she sees her granddaughter’s drawings. In fact, the great-grandchildren’s drawings evoke the old lady’s memories of Chernobyl and the artist who lived in the same village of Bolotnya: “We had the one in our village who tended to pain the same. There are many paintings of hers left, so some love them affectionately, while the others do not have a clue what is so special about them” [1, p. 3]. For the second time, a part of M. Prymachenko’s biography and her recognition as an artist who refused to leave her native village after the Chernobyl disaster is said: “The wasteland is terrible. A woman is sitting just near one house, Maria. Maria had a healing power to make children get rid of the fear through whispering, so word of her healing power spread that even people from Kyiv came to her because of that. And how she painted! Among the whole Soviet Union, and maybe the whole world, she became an honored artist! So even then she was sitting near the house and painting on a piece of paper (...) She has never left her house and the native land because she can paint only in this place and lacking it her life is senseless” [1, c. 38 – 39]. The author raises the issue of love for the native land and nature, which must be protected. She also reminds of a difficult issue

such as replaced people or Chernobyl victims, who were wrongly socially perceived at that time. And the writer mentions M. Prymachenko for the third time at the end of the work, when she speaks on keeping traditions and preserving memory: “Your painting, your colorful and unknown animals, are similar to the ones our artist, Maria painted. The one who stayed at Bolotnaya until the end of her life. Maybe our native land gave you its strength, huh? And that artist’s name is Maria Prymachenko. If you come across this name, have a close look at it, listen to it. No matter that the land of Polissya is both infected and devastated, but it gives birth to gifted people, and it will be remembered due to them, child” [1, p. 44]. Thus, the author concludes that the Chernobyl disaster is a tragedy of the whole nation and its memory should be preserved by descendants precisely through the preservation of family stories.

3. PAINTINGS BY M. PRYMACHENKO AS PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY IN A PICTUREBOOK (VISUAL LEVEL)

The perception of M. Prymachenko’s works within the visual level is implemented on two levels. The first one is a direct allusion to her paintings, the second one is the presentation of the paintings of the main character Stasia performed in M. Prymachenko’s style. All the mentioned above is aimed at revealing the idea of preserving cultural memory and continuing the traditions of ancestors in the works.

M. Prymachenko is one of the representatives of naive art. According to Nataliia Pecherska, “naive art implies a style of simplified forms, crystal clear colors, violated perspective, and a fresh look” [14]. She emphasizes: “The plots of the paintings often center on folklore, and externally resemble children’s drawings. But this style was used by not only self-taught artists, but as well artists with academic education, who deliberately wanted to reduce the number of artistic means doing it for a specific purpose” [14].

This peculiarity of the artist’s creative style allowed the writer K. Mikhalitsyna in the works to reflect the illustrations of the main character Stasia, who has a talent for drawing. Indeed, Stasia’s drawings have a quite engaging plot: animals of unusual colors, in particular, an orange hare, and a pink horse with a fishtail arranged in a tea party (Fig. 2).



Figure. 2. An illustration from the book by K. Mikhalitsyna *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor*

If one compares the paintings of the girl’s and M. Prymachenko’s, one can see the similarity of shapes or patterns implemented on animals’ body. The works of the artist are based on folk tales, legends, stories, and the main characters of the artist’s paintings are fictional animals which have not yet been known in nature, as well as in nature among the flowers (Fig. 3).



Figure. 3. A reproduction of M. Prymachenko’s painting “Forest Cat”, made available to the public through the website of the Gallery of Nude ART

Such influences are tended to reveal K. Mikhalitsyna’s intentions to involve her heroine in the understanding of art, on the one hand, the introduction to Ukrainian culture, on the other hand. And also she leads to the understanding of another aspect of M. Prymachenko’s art, which is devoted not so much to Ukrainian culture, but expresses in the traditional way the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster which were extremely negative for nature and caused many mutations both in animals and humans. M. Prymachenko dedicated numerous paintings to the topic in question: “The threat of war”, “Nuclear war, may it be cursed!”, “The jackdaw is flying looking for the owner”, “In honor of Valery Khodimchuk”, “Fourth power unit”, “Kochubarka”. The paintings draw attention not only to the consequences of the human’s activity on the environment, but also to the sufferings of the Ukrainian people for their land.

In fact, K. Mikhalitsyna’s book with the paintings by K. Borysiuk begins with an epigraph, which is presented as an inscription on the back of M. Prymachenko’s painting “Flowers grew beside the fourth block”: “This

is how the fourth block was pictured in a dream. Flowers will grow on it, and children will carry flowers, as a monument will be forever around him, doves will fly to it, our heroes. They saved us and left us” [1] (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. A reproduction of M. Prymachenko’s painting “Flowers grew beside the fourth block”, made available to the public through the website of the Gallery of Nude Art

However, there is an opinion that M. Prymachenko has created such an inscription on another painting – “The Forth Power Unit”, dedicated to the liquidators of the accident. The picture shows birds flying over the power unit with a floral pattern, and next to it there are children honoring the memory of the heroes. Flowers on a red background are a symbol of the revival of Chernobyl land [6] (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. A reproduction of the painting by M. Prymachenko dedicated to the liquidators of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, available to the public through the website of the Institute of Education

Moreover, in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster, M. Prymachenko creates a painting with a bizarre creature “Threat of War”, which she signs as follows: “Mr. Reagan, look at this picture and come to your senses as for how heavy and unbearable and stupid this atom is...” [13] (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. A reproduction of M. Prymachenko’s painting “Threat of War” available to the public through the website of the Institute of Education

In her picturebook *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor*, K. Mikhalitsyna also reflects the Chernobyl motives. Panoramic colorful illustrations of the village, the Ukrainian house with embroidered towels, jugs, embroidered tablecloths, a portrait of the artist against the background of her painted hut and flowers, contrast to black and white paintings of city streets and Stasia’s house, and most importantly – with three double spread illustrations dedicated to the explosion at Chernobyl nuclear power plant (Fig. 7).

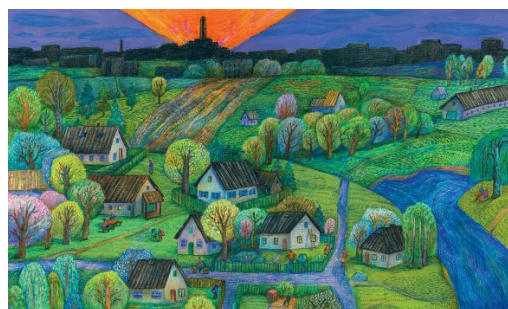


Figure 7. An illustration from the book *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor* by K. Mikhalitsyna (the beginning of the reactor explosion) made available to the public through the website of the publishing house “Portal”.

The last illustration is in black color, which depicts as well all the other colors – green and yellow. The horror of the situation due to the Chernobyl explosion at Chernobyl nuclear power plant is also felt through the image of people’s fear, which is reproduced in the reflection of the gas mask glass. However, the writer and illustrator provide a happy ending to this story. In the last illustration, we see the granddaughter and great-grandmother along with photograph of relatives, flowers, and rural landscapes. And in the final double spread illustration – we see the native village, where nature has come back to life. There are animals, but no people because they have destroyed this world.

CONCLUSION

1. Chernobyl is a world event that is reflected in various kinds of art. Ukrainian art reveals the peculiarities of the cultural memory of the Ukrainian

people, which is based on memorable dates, places, and works, in particular, the events of the Chernobyl disaster. The combination of literature and fine arts ensures the formation of cultural memory, the transfer of knowledge, events, and memories to the younger generation.

2. K. Mikhalitsyna's book *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor* draws attention to the lives of people after the disaster, the problem of transmitting information to their family and the memory of certain events. One of the central images in the book is the artist M. Prymachenko, whose paintings are impressive due to their originality. The figure of Maria Prymachenko is one of the elements of the cultural memory of the Ukrainian people. The artist has created numerous paintings dedicated to the events at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Therefore, her work continues to inspire writers and animators.

3. The comparative interpretation of literature and fine arts not only allowed to consider works of different arts dedicated to Chernobyl, but also to comprehend the reception of fine arts (paintings by M. Prymachenko) in K. Mikhalitsyna's picturebook *The Flowers beside the Fourth Reactor* on two levels – verbal and visual. On the first level, there is a story about the artist M. Prymachenko and the Chernobyl disaster; on the second level, there is a reception of her work at the level of illustrations to the book, where we see not only bizarre animals in the drawings of the girl Stasia, but also black and white illustrations and paintings in black color after the Chernobyl explosion. Both levels contribute to the realization of K. Mikhalitsyna's artistic idea: not only to actualize the traumatic cultural experience of Chernobyl, but also to encourage young people to preserve the memory of tragic events, respect the family, Ukrainian culture, nature, and animals.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Mikhalitsyna, *Kvity bilia chetvertoho*, illustrated by K. Borysiuk, Portal, Kyiv, 2020.
- [2] Multiserial «Dyvotsvit», 1 epizod. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCOYy7Ff4G8>
- [3] M. Prymachenko, WikiArt, Entsyklopediia vizualnykh mystetstv. URL: <https://www.wikiart.org/uk/mariya-primachenko/all-works#!#filterName:all-paintings-chronologically,resultType:masonry>
- [4] M. Vardanian, Literaturna heohrafiia iliustrovanykh dytiachykh knyh (na materialii ukrainskykh tvoriv ta perekladiv XX – XXI stolittia), in: T. Cherkashyna (Ed.), *Geography and Text: a Literary Dimension: a monograph*, V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv, 2022, pp. 17–40.
- [5] M. Vardanian, Reading Chernobyl Catastrophe Within Ecofiction, in: *Children's Literature in Education* 53, issue 1 (March 2022): 1–17. DOI: 10.1007/s10583-021-09437-w
- [6] B. Voron, Chornobylyskiy bestiarii Marii Prymachenko, in: *Mystetskyi almanakh ARTES*. URL: <https://artes-almanac.com/mariya-primachenko/>
- [7] N. M. Lishchynska, Porivnialna interpretatsiia yak metod doslidzhennia, in: *Pytannia literaturoznavstva*, vol. 75, 2008, pp. 329–335.
- [8] Erll, Astrid, and Ansgar Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2008.
- [9] U. Vaisshtain, Porivniannia literatury z inshymy vydamy mystetstva: suchasni tendentsii ta napriamy doslidzhennia v literaturoznavchii teorii i metodolohii, in: D. Nalyvaiko (Ed.), *Suchasna literaturna komparatyvistyka: stratehii i metody. Antolohiia*, Vydavnychi dim «Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia», Kyiv, 2009, pp. 373–392.
- [10] U. Vaisshtain, Vzaiemovysvitlennia literatury ta muzyky: sfera komparatyvistyky?, in: D. Nalyvaiko (Ed.), *Suchasna literaturna komparatyvistyka: stratehii i metody. Antolohiia*, Vydavnychi dim «Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia», Kyiv, 2009, pp. 393–410.
- [11] Y. Lotman, Do pobudovy teorii vzaiemodii kultur (semiotychnyi aspekt), in: D. Nalyvaiko (Ed.), *Suchasna literaturna komparatyvistyka: stratehii i metody. Antolohiia*, Vydavnychi dim «Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia», Kyiv, 2009, pp. 197–210.
- [12] M. Nikolajeva, S. Carole, *How Picturebooks Work*, Routledge, London, New York, 2006.
- [13] Scientific and Technical Library. *Khustka yak davnii symvol ukrainskoi zhinochnosti*. URL: <http://library.nltu.edu.ua/index.php/novyny/968-khustka-iaak-davnii-symvol-ukrainskoi-zhinochnosti>
- [14] N. Pecherska. *Fantastychni zviri, shcho rozbihlys svitom, abo Chomu kartyny Prymachenko spravdi kruti*. Instytut Prosvity. URL: <https://iprosvita.com/fantastychni-zviri-shcho-rozbihlys-svitom-abo-chomu-kartyny-prymachenko-spravdi-kruti/>