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## THE TOPOS OF PAIN IN “THE ANATOMY LESSON” BY PHILIP ROTH

**Summary.** The article examines the features of narrative representation of the topos of pain in “The Anatomy Lesson” (1983) by Philip Roth. The mechanisms of artistic conceptualization of pain in the literary and medical discourse have been traced; the features of implementing the morbidity poetics have been analyzed. It has been shown that chronic pain of the protagonist – the alter ego of the writer, – is a special way of revealing the author’s consciousness in the artistic text.

**Key words:** literary and medical discourse, the U.S. prose, the 20th century literature, topos of pain, narrator, reception

Pain is an existentially complex phenomenon, since it is a universal and at the same time a fundamentally personal experience [2, p. 28]. Researchers refer to this topos as “a ubiquitous feature of the human existence [1, p. 143], “which belongs to the most basic human experiences that make us who we are” [7, p. 1]. Indeed, reflections on pain touch upon the ontological dimensions of a human being. The issues of medicine in non-medical literature form a wide array of possibilities for research endeavors [3; 4; 5; 6]. The aim of the present research is to examine the narrative representation of the poetics in pain in the literary and medical discourse of the 20th century U.S. prose, as exemplified by Philip Roth’s “The Anatomy Lesson” (1983). The aspects of pain representation in fiction have been studied using modern literary criticism research in the areas of narratology and receptive aesthetics, which determines the relevance of the present paper. The theoretical significance of the research consists in the study of narrative techniques applied for representing the topos of pain in the 20th century U.S. prose.

“The Anatomy Lesson” is the third Roth’s novel, which features Nathan Zuckerman as the protagonist. This character was first introduced in “My Life as a Man” (1974) as the fictional creation of Peter Tarnopol. In 1979, Zuckerman emerged as the central figure in Roth’s “The Ghost Writer” (1979) and “Zuckerman Unbound” 1981. Zuckerman is a Jewish writer and the author of successful and notorious novel “Carnovsky”, which is criticized as anti-Semitic. It should be noted that Philip Roth applies numerous autobiographical details and deliberately designs Nathan Zuckerman’s character as his own *alter ego*. In “The Anatomy Lesson”, Nathan Zuckerman is forced to cope with a mysterious back pain (obviously, a psychosomatic illness). This chronic pain in his neck and shoulders renders him immobile and unable to write. Zuckerman’s pain is remarkable due to its undiagnosable nature: “By December 1973, he’d run out of hope of finding a treatment, drug, doctor, or cure – certainly of finding an honest disease” [8, p. 27]. In fact, pain is the mirror reflection of numerous professional, personal and inter-personal problems in Zuckerman’s life: the grief after his mother’s death, doubts and guilt for his novel, relationships with women, etc.

The novel utilizes the third-person narration, limited to Zuckerman’s point of view. The topos of pain unifies the narrative in the novel and is represented in the prefatory quotation from a textbook on

orthopedic medicine: “The chief obstacle to correct diagnosis in painful conditions is the fact that the symptom is often felt at a distance from its source” [8, p. 1]. Pain has tortured Zuckerman for 18 months: “*a hot line* of pain that *ran* from behind his right ear into his neck, then *branched* downward beneath the scapula *like a menorah held upside down*” [8, p. 4]. As one can observe, pain is represented in aggressive metaphors, implying the burning nature and rapid movement of the protagonist’s pain, as well as in similes, which are based on the Jewish symbolism. Pain is also features as a living being and simlized as a heavy burden, which the patient must carry: “pain made it difficult to walk for more than a few city blocks or even to stand very long in one place. Just having a neck, arms, and shoulders was *like carrying another person around*” [8, p. 3]. Zuckerman tries every imaginable kinds of therapy to mitigate his pain: “Six times a day he gave himself a low voltage shock for five minutes. And six times a day he waited for the pain to go away – actually he waited for it to go away a hundred times a day. Having waited long enough, he then took Valium or aspirin or Butazolidin or Percodan or Robaxin; at five in the evening he said the hell with it and began taking the vodka. And as tens of millions of Russians have known for hundreds of years, that is the best pain suppressor of all” [8, p. 27]. The protagonist has consulted all available medical professionals: “Since the pains had begun in earnest eighteen months before, he’d waited his turn in the offices of three orthopedists, two neurologists, a physiotherapist, a rheumatologist, a radiologist, an osteopath, a vitamin doctor, an acupuncturist, and now the analyst” [8, p. 14].

Zuckerman’s physical sensations are represented in several recurrent lexical units: along with the word “pain”, the author extensively applies such synonyms as “soreness”, “ache”, “tenderness” and “hurt”, thus providing a wide spectrum of the protagonist’s feelings: “While drying himself, he probed with his fingertips until he’d located the worst of the muscular *soreness* midway along the upper left trapezius, the *burning tenderness* over the processes and to the right of the third cervical vertebra, and the movement *pain* at the intersection of the long head of the left biceps tendon. The intercostals between the eighth and ninth ribs were only moderately *sore*, a little improved really since he’d last checked back there two hours before, and the *aching heaviness* in the left deltoid was manageable, more or less...” [8, p. 140]. Pain becomes the trigger to the protagonist’s self-reflection: “As Zuckerman was learning, pain could make you awfully primitive if not counteracted by steady, regular doses of philosophical thinking” [8, p. 5]. The writer realizes the etymological roots of the concept of “pain”: “Zuckerman was taking “pain” back to its root in *poena*, the Latin word for *punishment*: *poena* for the family portrait the whole country had assumed to be his, for the tastelessness that had affronted millions and the shamelessness that had enraged his tribe. The crippling of his upper torso was, transparently, the punishment called forth by his crime: mutilation as primitive justice. If the writing arm offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee. Beneath

the ironic carapace of a tolerant soul, he was the most unforgiving Yahweh of them all. <...> Yes, your illness is your necessity – that was the gist of it – and what prevents your recovery is you, you choosing to be incurable, you bullying into submission your own inbuilt will to be well” [8, p. 34]. In other words, pain can be regarded as the objectification of Nathan’s guilt for his novel.

The protagonist contemplates on the profound meaning of pain, which must comprise some kind of supreme purpose: “Everybody wants to make pain interesting – first the religions, then the poets, then, not to be left behind, even the doctors getting in on the act with their psychosomatic obsession. They want to give it significance. What does it mean? What are you hiding? What are you showing? What are you betraying? It’s impossible just to suffer the pain, you have to suffer its meaning” [8, p. 200]. Finally, Zuckerman concludes that pain has no purpose at all – it is essentially meaningless: “But it’s not interesting and it has no meaning – it’s just plain stupid pain, it’s the opposite of interesting, and *nothing, nothing* made it worth it unless you were mad to begin with, *Nothing* made it worth the doctor’s offices and the hospitals and the drugstores and the clinics and the contradictory diagnoses. *Nothing* made it worth the depression and the humiliation and the helplessness, being robbed of work and walks and exercise and every last shred of independence. *Nothing* made it worth not being able to make your own bed in the morning without crawling back in immediately afterwards” [8, p. 200]. Eventually, the protagonist reconciles himself with his pain: “...there was the decisive landmark decision made only the minute before – to have no pain even when he had it, *to treat it like pleasure instead*. He didn’t mean masochistic pleasure either” [8, p. 200].

It is chronic pain that stimulates Zuckerman to give up his writing career and pursue medical education: “I’m sick of raiding my memory and feeding on the past. There’s nothing more to see from my angle: if it ever was the thing I did best, it isn’t anymore. I want *an active connection to life* and I want it now. I want *an active connection to myself*. I’m sick of channeling everything into writing. I want the real thing, the thing in the raw, and not for the writing but for itself” [8, p. 204]. As one can observe, pain triggers the protagonist’s endeavors of self-development to eventually retrieve his identity. At the end of the novel, Zuckerman contrasts the two professions with obvious fascination of the doctor’s duty: “What a job! The paternal bond to those in duress, the urgent, immediate human exchange! All this indispensable work to be done, all this digging away at disease-and he’d given his fanatical devotion to sitting with a typewriter alone in a room!” [8, p. 291].

Thus, Zuckerman’s persistent pain in “The Anatomy Lesson” by Philip Roth plays a key role in designing the narrative space of the novel: it is the cornerstone that induces the protagonist’s self-reflections, self-searching and self-development. The topos of pain is implemented by means of a wide range of tropes (such as metaphors, similes and symbols). Pain is conceptualized as an aggressive (burning and constantly moving) agent, a heavy burden and an annoying living being. It is remarkable that physical pain in the novel represents the hero’s complex emotional landscape, as well as his efforts to deal with numerous professional, personal and inter-personal problems. The undiagnosable nature of the protagonist’s pain symbolizes the necessity of inherent balance: in order to be happy, one must be at peace with oneself and the surrounding world. The inclusion of autobiographical details within Zuckerman’s character allows the author to design a receptive game, in which the reader is welcomed to apply his / her interpretative abilities and act as an active co-creator of the meaning of the literary writing. In our opinion, further research is needed

to study the narrative techniques applied for representing the topos of pain in the literary and medical discourse of the 20th century U.S. prose. Examining the stylistic features of the topos of pain in fiction will improve the content of training courses in the world literature and form a methodological basis for the development of workshops, theme-based seminars and academic syllabi.

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#### Лисанець Ю. В. Топос болю в романі Філіпа Рота “The Anatomy Lesson”

**Анотація.** У статті досліджено особливості нарративної репрезентації топосу болю у романі Філіпа Рота “The Anatomy Lesson” (1983). Простежено механізми художньої концептуалізації болю у літературно-медичному дискурсі; розглянуто особливості втілення поетики морбідності у наративі. Показано, що хронічний біль протагоніста – alter ego письменника, – стає особливим способом оприявлення авторської свідомості в художньому тексті.

**Ключові слова:** літературно-медичний дискурс, проза США, література ХХ століття, топос болю, наратор, рецепція.

#### Лисанець Ю.В. Топос боли в романе Филипа Рота “The Anatomy Lesson”

**Аннотация.** В статье исследованы особенности нарративной репрезентации топоса боли в романе Филипа Рота “The Anatomy Lesson” (1983). Прослежены механизмы художественной концептуализации боли в литературно-медицинском дискурсе; рассмотрены особенности воплощения поэтики морбидности в нарративе. Показано, что хроническая боль протагониста – alter ego писателя, – становится особым способом проявления авторского сознания в художественном тексте.

**Ключевые слова:** литературно-медицинский дискурс, проза США, литература ХХ века, топос боли, наратор, рецепция.