

Perception of Death in Lithuanian Traditional Culture

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The article, regarding Lithuanian idioms, narrative folklore and ethnographic material, deals with the notions of personified death in Lithuanian *traditional folk world*. The investigation has disclosed that, in folk narratives, death is mostly pictured as a weird woman dressed in white, whereas the widespread European perception of death, as a skeleton with a scythe, is of little significance there. In addition, death can be seldom portrayed as a man, a child, or an animal. The coexistence of a few different death concepts evinces an idea about the syncretic nature of the traditional world-outlook, as well as presenting interpretation and regulatory models as to how to transform the mystery of death into appreciable images.

The complex system of the worldview reveals human aspirations as comprehending the fundamental problems of existence. The notion of death can be considered as probably the most expressive phenomenon amongst them. Emotions, which are evoked by death, are quite contradictory: the mystery of death, on the one hand, stimulates natural curiosity, while on the other hand, it provokes fear in the face of the unknown. The traditional world concept is not a mere copy of the substantial reality but rather a creative interpretation of the environment in the realm of human consciousness (Bufienė 2000: 174). Therefore, it is characteristic of folk philosophy that the world is often interpreted in the anthropocentric context, when “non-human things are complemented with dimensions of mind and will, abstract and mental objects get a “body”” (Krikmann 2001: 91). In Lithuanian mythology, the mystery of death is also elucidated by means of animation or, more often, personification of otherworldly occurrence. Death is mostly portrayed in a human form, though it may also appear as an other animate phenomenon (e.g., a ghost) / living creature (e.g., an animal).

So, the world outlook performs an interpretational function (Gurevičius 1989: 27), which, consequently, enables the transformation of ambiguous human feelings towards death into visible and appreciable

images. These mental perceptions are no less real than the surrounding material universe, since the semantic model of the world is regarded as truly actual and reliable (Postovalova 1988: 46–47, 55). The interpretational factor of the mythological system, in its turn, is interrelated with the regulatory function (Postovalova 1988: 26), which provides the community with pre-existing, well-tried models of conduct in the face of death. The nature of these behavioural patterns can be perceived from both visible and mental signs of human activity. Folk narratives about death and funeral customs play a key role in this case.

An attempt to define the figure of personified death in Lithuanian traditional world outlook, regarding Lithuanian idiomatic sayings, narrative folklore, and ethnographic data should be considered as the object of this article.

It is worth to mention certain difficulties, which might arise in a process of the description of the death picture. To begin with, although death is portrayed in a similar way both in religious and fairy tales, the image of personified death differs slightly in Lithuanian mythological legends, religious tales and fairy tales. In mythological legends, the features of the death figure are more diverse, and these characteristics find their roots in the local, most probably, the pre-Christian tradition. Meanwhile, in Lithuanian folk tales, the picture of death is closer to the notion of Christian iconography, which became established in Lithuania, for the most part, during the Baroque period.

What is more, different mythical characters may figure in otherwise identical plots of Lithuanian mythological legends (Kerbelytė 1999: 53). In cases where they are directly named, it becomes evident, which supernatural beings are believed to appear before someone's death. It could be said that personified death / personified illness / souls / devil most often substitute each other in variants of similar plots. However, in a portion of mythological legends, mythical characters are not named and only features or actions are numbered. Since the beings, which are associated with death, possess certain common traits or behavioural characteristics, the researcher, hence, is forced to accept rather personal judgments, concerning which mythical character is referred to in these sorts of narratives (KTFL: 26; Vinogradova 2000: 18).

The confusion of the respective mythical characters might be connected with the decline of traditional worldview. On the other hand, however, such situations may reflect the syncretic nature of the traditional world outlook itself, when the same features might be attributed to different mythical beings that are believed to appear under similar circumstances

(Vinogradova 2000: 19–20).

In Lithuanian traditional culture, personified death is called by a few different names, which are, in the feminine gender, grammatically: *giltinė*, *mirtis*, *smertis*. The latter word “*smertis*” is Slavonic by origin. Nevertheless, it has been popular not only in the borderland with Russia, Belarus and Poland but also in the rest of Lithuania due to a few periods of Polishisation and Russification.

It is significant that, in the Lithuanian language, there exists a special proper name for personified death, – *giltinė*.¹ Mythical beings quite often are addressed by names of euphemistic character. These appellations may indicate “dwelling place, peculiarities of appearance, specific origin or even divine nature” of mythical character (Vėlius 1987: 35). According to the scholars, epithets, which had characterised deity in the beginning, might have been later turned into proper names owing to a process of sacralisation and mythologisation (*Mitologijos...* 1999: 483–484). The word “*giltinė*” is etymologically linked with words “*gelti*, *gilti*”, that is to “to sting like a bee / to bite like a snake”. This etymological model is partly confirmed by a few historical sources dating back to XVI century and several mythological narratives where an obscure figure of death as a being with a sting or with a long poisonous tongue is depicted. Therefore it could be presupposed that the name “*giltinė*” has originated from an epithetic form (i.e., “the one that bites/stings”), which, in the beginning, might have been used as some sort of euphemistic nomination.

Lithuanian death personification finds its roots in the general European extended image of death as a female being, dressed in white clothes. In folk carnival processions, people who acted the role of death also wrapped themselves in white fabric (Vyšniauskaitė 1994: 23). In addition, death may be portrayed as a being of white body colour. Therefore a pale person is addressed: “[You are] white as death” (“*Balts kaip smertis*”)(LMD I 891/6/). However, white colour is also characteristic of personified diseases (KTFL: 372), souls, or ghosts (KTFL: 464–465). Similarly, in mythological legends, a dead person who keeps coming home may appear in a white linen cloth, a white sheet, a white shawl, or a long white shirt (Korzonaitė 2002: 10). According to the researches, the significance of the white colour

¹ Very few Lithuanian mythological legends exist that speak about the death as a man. All these texts present a personal experience: someone meets a strange man, then somebody dies in a neighborhood and afterwards a conclusion is made: “This was death walking to the village”. The death is called “*smertis* / *giltinė*”, i.e., by grammatically feminine noun.

in these narratives is of archaic origin, since this colour was characteristic of a shroud and the mournful clothes of the ancient Balts (Dundulienė 1983: 34).

In Europe a change of white, as the original colour of sorrow, to black occurred in the Baroque period (Kilianova 1996: 384). At first, these alterations became noticeable among the nobility and in the middle class. Later on, this change in colour spread from cities to the countryside. In Lithuania, the black colour has had more noticeable impact on the habits of people's mournful clothing. Meanwhile, both in idiomatic sayings and in folk texts, personified death is seldom envisioned as a woman dressed in black. Heroes of mythological legends may collide with a human-shaped black figure carrying a scythe on a shoulder (LTR 1191/417/), or they may see a strange lady in black clothes wandering near a cemetery (LMD I 271/1/). These narratives end with an explanation that it was death. Such assertions mostly reflect the dominating opinion, at the time, that the text was recorded. However, they may express the individual storyteller's convictions, which sometimes are put into words because those who record the legends urgently ask the performers to explain what it was. In the opinion of Lithuanian folklorist Bronislava Kerbelytė, these assertions are not related to the structures of the mythological legends' plots and therefore they can easily be changed or omitted (KTFL: 26). Thus, it is difficult to make a definitive conclusion whether the above-mentioned statements about death are from a reliable grounding. On the whole, the black colour is more characteristic of other supernatural beings that are also believed to appear near a dying person or at the graveyard, e.g. animated diseases (Basanavičius 1998: 133–135), souls (ibid.: 151), or ghosts (KTFL: 465).

In mythological legends, personified death is usually portrayed as an elderly woman. However, in this situation a general tendency can be observed that the appearance of death depends on the sex and age of a dying person. A few narratives relate that a strange child, or a weird male being, is seen before the death of a child or a man, respectively. These peculiarities are especially obvious in those mythological legends that tell about children's death. For example, it is related that a countryman encounters a baby's death as a strange little child walking to the village and soon after a sick baby suddenly dies in the neighbourhood (KTFL: 465). On the other hand, souls of dead children (*Lietuvių...* 1981: 212) or personified illnesses (*Šiaurės...* 1985: 315) may also appear in the shape of a child.

Death can be met in a zoomorphic form as a small animal. In oral

tradition, though, corresponding texts are relatively scarce. Here is an explanation given in one mythological legend: “Death is a small beast. It is hard to tell, what kind of a beast death is. It is similar to a marten but it is not exactly a marten; it is similar to a fox but it is not exactly a fox. Well, it is similar to a dog, but still it is not exactly a dog” (Marcinkevičienė 1997: 19). In Lithuanian tradition, the occurrence of a strange animal (a dog, a cat) or bird (a goose, a pigeon) is more often regarded as a death omen (KTFL: 469). It is also believed that certain animals (for example, a cat, a dog, a horse) are able to see *giltinė* and therefore they can predict the approaching of their master’s death (KTFL: 492).

Animated death may also manifest itself in an invisible form. Nevertheless, death gives itself away with strange sounds or unusual phenomena. For example, people hear the door banging or observe it opening and then closing but nobody comes in (Basanavičius 1998: 138). This way, it is believed, *giltinė* steals into the house where someone will die in a short time. For that reason perhaps, it was a usual thing to tease a noisy person that he “knocks about like death” (“*Baldos kaip giltinė*”) (LKŽ III: 303).

In Lithuanian oral repertoire, there predominates a tendency that *giltinė* is envisioned as an individual being in those narratives where the mythical character portrayed is directly named as death. Such a mode of description is characteristic of Lithuanian folk tales (e.g., local variants of “Cheated Death” (AT (330), “The Smith and Death” (AT 330 A), “Death in the Knapsack” (AT 330 B) and certain mythological legends (KTFL: 465).

Meanwhile, there exists a group of narratives, in which several mythical beings are seen before death, yet their names are not always indicated. For instance, these can be two white ladies (Basanavičius 1998: 130), two men in white (ibid.: 150), three white girls (ibid.: 132), or four children dressed in white (ibid.: 139–140). When these beings are named, it becomes evident, that before great epidemics, three ‘Plaque Ladies’ wander around the country (KTFL: 123). The souls of dead relatives are also seen visiting a dying person in a big crowd (KTFL: 465). However, in many cases, the subordination of these numerous beings is not specified. Therefore, at times it is quite difficult to draw a clear conclusion concerning which mythical characters are referred to in a corresponding case.

Death is only directly addressed in the plural in Lithuanian idiomatic sayings. For example, in traditional swearing formulas, a person is cursed: “Go away to deaths” (“*Eik sau po giltinių*”) (LMD I 701/587/). And in folk similies, a man is compared with nine *giltinės*: “She walks crouched like nine deaths” (“*Ein susisokusi, kaip devynios gėltinis*”) (LTR 850/8/), “Grinned like nine deaths” (“*Išsisšiepė kaip devynios giltinės*”) (LKŽ XIV:

753). Phraseological expressions form a part of the language system, thus they are subordinated to the common traits of evolution of the latter. It has been noted by linguists that language is more resistant to changes than the cultural environment. Therefore, idiomatic units might preserve the archaic extra-linguistic information, without significantly affecting its content (Jasiūnaitė 2001: 138). Consequently, phraseological sayings, which refer to several deaths, might reflect the former reality of Baltic mythology.

On the other hand, it has to be noted, that in Lithuanian phraseology, there exist quite a few sayings of similar nature, which refer to other mythical phenomena or different numbers, e.g., nine or a hundred devils; four, seven or nine thunders; two or nine disasters; nine wolves, and so on. To the mind of folk researchers, in all cases mentioned, the connection between a mythical character and a certain number are not necessary of organic and indispensable nature (Laurinkienė 1996: 171–172). These numerals, in maledictions or curses, are supposed to express the magic of abundance and they must not be interpreted literally. Hence, the above-mentioned sayings about several or “nine” deaths are, most likely, also meant to increase the power of malediction or the suggestiveness of comparison.

Despite of all variations analysed, death is mostly portrayed as a strange being with the stress put on its ugliness. The symbolic interpretation of the environment in the traditional world outlook is virtually based on the opposition of the usual and the strange, i.e. the division into kin and alien from the point of view of humans. The outer world is believed to be dangerous and harmful to human society. Therefore, mythical beings, which are located in the other world, are endowed with demonic features, which are not characteristic of human nature (Toporkov 1989: 95). In its turn, the picture of death, in traditional narratives, is also quite often distinguished by its repulsive nature.

For example, idiomatic sayings emphasise those features of personified death, which are regarded as some sort of deviation in comparison with human appearance, e. g., thinness (“Thin as death” – “*Kūda kaip giltinė*” (LTR 822/74/); abnormal body colour (“White as death” – “*Balts kaip smertis*” (LMD I 891/6/); unusual coldness (“Frozen as death” – “*Sušalęs kaip giltinė*” (LMD I 932/8/); too wide a smile (“Grinned like nine deaths” – “*Išsīšiepęs kaip devynios giltinės*” (LKŽ XIV: 753), etc.

The analysis, of idiomatic sayings, also reveals the ways, in which *giltinė* is believed to cause death. She may strangle (LKŽ III: 303), suffocate (LMD III 173/33/), seize with nails a person’s throat or pinch away

(Paulauskas 2001: 217). However, phraseological units do not refer to the death that occurs after being stung by *giltinė*. In the opinion of Lithuanian scholars, though, this idea of passing away is considered to be the most archaic one (Balys 1958: 235; Beresnevičius 1999: 280). Nevertheless, the ways enumerated show that the process of death, in Lithuanian traditional culture, was mostly perceived as an act of killing, carried out by personified death.

The notion of death, which mows people like grass, or chops their heads off with a scythe, is also common in the Lithuanian traditional folk worldview. At the same time, the widespread European figure of death, as a skeleton with a scythe, has been popular only in the Lithuanian traditional carnival processions and folk art, though such an appearance is extremely rare in Lithuanian folk narratives. This image is portrayed in only a few Lithuanian variants of fairy tales and religious tales (e.g., AT (330), 330 A; 330 B). However, it is emphasised there that such a shape has not been originally characteristic of *giltinė*, as in early times she was good-looking and not so thin. These changes were determined by a long-lasting bad experience. For instance, *giltinė* was stuck in an apple tree and ravens peck off all the flesh so that only bones were left. Ever since *giltinė* has remained wizened like moss (Šiaurės... 1985: 128–129).

In Lithuanian mythological worldview, death is seldom portrayed as a skeleton but rather as a strange woman wielding a scythe, for example: “*giltinė* is very thin, she walks around wrapped in a mantle made of straw and carries a scythe on her shoulder” (Balys 1981: No. 1). This image of death is also common in Lithuanian phraseological expressions. For instance, an old or sick person is pitied: “Death hammers a scythe for him” (“*Jam giltinė jau dalgę gelanda*”) (LKŽ III: 303), “Death puts a scythe to his neck” (“*Jau smertis kiša dalgį jam už kaklo*”) (LKŽ XVII: 575). This notion is also reflected in Lithuanian folk beliefs that motivate people to hold onto certain traditions. For example, it has been considered dangerous to whet instruments late at night, since “a person who grinds a knife in the evening, whets the scythe for death” (“*Kas vakare peilį galanda, tai giltinė dalgį plaka*”) (Balys 1981: No. 50). In addition, similar beliefs are actualised in mythological legends that narrate about supernatural experiences during the annual cycle of holidays. Thus, it was supposed unsafe to walk about in the open air on Christmas Eve. However, one man went out just after Christmas Eve and he saw *giltinė* hammering a scythe by the roadside. The man became so frightened that he died shortly afterwards (Lietuvių... 1981: 213).

To summarise, the investigation has disclosed that it is not possible to

define a unified picture of personified death in the Lithuanian traditional worldview. In the course of ages, the analysed notion has undergone various influences. The research data shows that new ideas have gradually been layered on top of the older ones, creating a heterogeneous picture of personified death. Nevertheless, mythical phenomena, concerning death, are mostly objectified in a quite realistic way, the process being based on the anthropocentric understanding of the world. The diversity of death's appearance should not be regarded as chaotic. We may more clearly speak about the syncretism of a few death images in Lithuanian tradition when both older and newer conceptions of death coexist in the minds of people. Despite all the changes, in symbolism and picture, the old image of death, as a woman in white sometimes wielding a scythe, has been preserved until today. Notwithstanding a rapid decline of the traditional folk worldview, there can still be recorded traditional folk narratives about death in Lithuania. Various idiomatic sayings, which have preserved archaic features of personified death, appear to this day both in local press articles and in the everyday language of town-dwellers.

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