

Thanatological Discourse In Contemporary Uzbek Prose: The Case Of Temirpo'lat Tillayev

Shohzoda Tursunboyeva

Independent Researcher at Gulistan state university, Uzbekistan

Received: 02 December 2025; **Accepted:** 23 December 2025; **Published:** 28 January 2026

Abstract: This article analyzes the artistic and semantic functions of thanatological motifs in contemporary Uzbek prose, drawing on Temirpo'lat Tillayev's novella *The Abyss of Death* as a case study. The analysis demonstrates that death in the text functions not merely as a plot device, but as a symbolic, aesthetic, and epistemological category. Relying on Roman Krasilnikov's thanatological theory, the study shows that the primary archisemantic meaning of death ("the end of life") is relegated to the background, while connotative meanings such as fear, existential crisis, psychological disintegration, and the impulse toward cognition come to the fore.

The article further elucidates the interconnections between the symbol of the "abyss" and a range of motifs – madness, oneirological (dream-related) imagery, incessant rain, and enigmatic numbers – by situating them within mythological, religious, and philosophical layers of meaning. These signs frame death not as an abstract phenomenon, but as an aesthetic experience and a mode of artistic expression. In conclusion, the study argues that thanatological motifs constitute a key factor in articulating the author's creative stance and play a decisive role in shaping the work's structure as well as guiding the reader's emotional perception.

Keywords: Thanatology; motif of death; thanatological signs; mysticism; symbolism; magical realism; poetics of death; symbol of the "abyss"; oneirology; contemporary Uzbek prose; Temirpo'lat Tillayev; "The Abyss of Death".

Introduction: The phenomenon of death is frequently employed in detective and mystical fiction as a means of constructing plots that attract the reader's attention, intensify emotional engagement, and evoke a sense of fear, anxiety, and curiosity. Motifs of mysterious death, supernatural events, and the afterlife are universal to such works. Reflecting on the artistic representation of these themes, R. Krasilnikov notes that "a thanatological narrative may be connected with death or thanatological reflection; however, death itself and the state after death always remain within the realm of transferred meanings, conjectures, and hypotheses. As a result, the connotative components in the semantics of thanatological signs may become more significant than the initial archiseme, which recedes into the background and is only implied, while new dominant semes of a metaphorical nature emerge in its place" [1].

In this sense, the archiseme denotes the most

fundamental and universal semantic core of a word. In the context of death, however, this basic seme ("the end of life") is displaced to a secondary position, giving way to connotative and symbolic meanings. Consequently, death is interpreted through metaphorical semes such as "liberation," "a new beginning," "rebirth," or "eternal absence." In every culture, thanatological signs tend to represent death not directly, but through symbols, linguistic euphemisms, and artistic imagery. For this reason, death in a literary work does not function as a source of factual knowledge; rather, it becomes an aesthetic experience and a mode of expression. Although death constitutes an epistemological boundary and an undeniable reality, it remains logically incomprehensible; therefore, narratives about death do not provide knowledge in the strict sense but instead shape imagination and interpretation. As has been observed, literature does not explain death, but

enables an approach to it, allowing it to be felt and experienced [2]. In other words, such texts offer not definitive truths, but the contours of a concept.

METHODS

This study is based on qualitative analysis and examines the literary text within an interpretative framework. The object of the research is Temirpo'lat Tillayev's novella *The Abyss of Death*, selected for its rich system of thanatological motifs and symbols. The subject of the study is the identification of the symbolic, semantic, and structural functions of death within the novella.

In the course of analysis, structural and textual methods were employed to examine plot construction, narrative strategy, and the recurrence of motifs. Semantic and contextual analysis was used to identify lexical units related to death, metaphors, and their connotative meanings, with R. Krasilnikov's thanatological concept serving as the principal methodological foundation. In addition, mythological and religious-analytical approaches were applied to interpret the symbols of the "abyss," rain, the figures of Gog and Magog, and enigmatic numbers within the contexts of Islamic eschatology [3] and world mythology [4], [5], [6].

To elucidate the characters' psychological states, psychological and oneirological analysis [7] was employed, considering dreams and madness as artistic expressions of inner processes of cognition and self-awareness. The integrated application of these methods made it possible to determine the place of thanatological motifs within the structure of the work and to reveal their aesthetic functions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Such a symbolic representation of the afterlife or the process of dying is vividly embodied in *The Abyss of Death* by Temirpo'lat Tillayev, an author who entered Uzbek literature in the 1990s with novellas marked by a distinctive stylistic approach. Although nearly three decades have passed since their initial publication, Tillayev's works have not lost their artistic or spiritual value; in 2024, they were republished as a collection by one of the country's leading publishing houses, Akademnashr, within its prestigious Akadem nasr series dedicated to selected prose.

The novella opens with news of death from its very first

lines. In general, the author's narrative strategy is unconventional: he introduces the outline of a single event, then leads the reader into the history of seemingly unrelated episodes, only to return – after a circuitous path – to the continuation of the initial situation. Understanding the internal logic of events and grasping the novella's coherent plot requires sustained attention from the reader. The author's diction and syntactic construction are deliberately austere; the concentration of thanatological motifs occupies a central place in the text, and as the narrative progresses, the lexicon of death, fear, and horror gradually permeates the entire work. Mysticism fully appropriates what might otherwise be described as magical realism. The author does not restrain himself in sentence construction, steadily instilling a sense of anxiety and a premonition of death in the reader. Even descriptions of nature and atmosphere are rendered in a thanatological register that mirrors the protagonists' psychological states and the overall spirit of the work, as in expressions such as "a repulsive horizon like a corpse's face" [8], "dead sand," and "terrifying eyes hollowed out like a grave" [8].

At the center of the narrative stands the "abyss" (choh), which drives the characters toward death by infecting them with a "contagious secret" that manifests as a severe psychological disorder. At times, this abyss symbolizes an inner void, despair, or spiritual torment; elsewhere, it represents death, eternal disappearance, or the unknown, as well as the fear associated with the end of human existence or an encounter with mysterious forces. Most importantly, however, the "abyss" in the novella functions as an expression of philosophical reflection – of the search for the meaning of life or the striving toward truth; in broader terms, it signifies understanding. As a symbol of a journey toward knowledge or truth, *The Abyss of Death* reveals a discernible affinity with the motifs of the labyrinth and the mirror found in the works of Jorge Luis Borges. The novella begins with the sudden visit of Hakim, a young man originally from Elsaroy but now living in the city, to the home of the narrator, and with his account of the death of their fellow villager, Turon. It is revealed that Turon had fallen under the influence of "dark thoughts," resulting in a state of madness. The fatal outcome of this madness is emphasized at several points in Hakim's narrative. In the novella, the onset of

this obsession is linked to seven consecutive days of relentless rain in Elsaroy. Each day of rain coincides with a misfortune: on the first day, the village's learned man, Robbim Qori, dies; on another day, a woman sets herself and her children on fire; on yet another, brothers quarrel and maim one another and someone falls from a horse and is seriously injured. Hakim explains these calamities as follows: "It seemed to me that the damp and heavy air had introduced some alien, unseen force into the always profound spirit of the people of Elsaroy. And each movement of this awakened force demanded a sacrifice from them" [8].

The motif of incessant rain recalls its frequent symbolic use in mystical literature as an emblem of fear, horror, and looming danger. This device is widely employed to create dark, mysterious, and supernatural atmospheres in the works of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King. Moreover, rain is "interpreted in many mythologies as a symbol of spiritual influences directed from heaven to earth" [9]. In *The Abyss of Death*, the unceasing rain foreshadows the extraordinary and terrifying events that unfold throughout the narrative. It may also be read as a symbolic representation of socio-political processes: Robbim Qori, lying on his deathbed, likens the rain to "dripping blood"; after the rain, the proliferation of dogfish; Turon's frantic cries – "Cursed dogfish with chains on their tongues!" and "Hey, dogfish, it's been more than a hundred years since this rain began!!!"; and his desperate plea to Hakim, "Doctor, wipe out this submissive mob – yes, wipe them out! This wretched crowd deserves death..." all suggest that the rain symbolizes oppression and despotism, while the "dogfish" and the "submissive mob" stand for people who have silently endured more than a century of tyranny.

In sum, it becomes clear that on the seventh day of rain in Elsaroy, Turon succumbs to the obsessive illness. After Turon's death, this psychological disorder is transmitted to Hakim through Turon's blue diary, and from Hakim to the narrator. Yet the text ultimately implies that the only person in Elsaroy who wrote under the pseudonym Turon was the narrator himself.

In literary works, the motif of madness or mental disorder often signifies the ability to perceive truths invisible to ordinary people. Although such a character appears "mad" in the eyes of others, they may in fact

have attained a deeper understanding of reality. In the novella, Turon, Hakim, and the narrator all perceive the "abyss" that others cannot see. As Nazar Eshonqu writes in the foreword to *The Abyss of Death*: "In order to prove the existence of an abyss that no one else sees, Turon sacrifices himself to it, much like Jesus Christ willingly went to the cross" [8].

Turon's death itself is depicted in a particularly horrific manner; the description of his body alone is enough to provoke visceral revulsion. His body resembles a sack of torn flesh, yet from the neck upward – his head – remains completely intact, untouched. It is as though he had fallen from an immense height onto that very abyss – the execution ground of a pagan realm. This imagery suggests that while a person striving for knowledge or understanding may have their body destroyed, their intellect and thought remain beyond violation.

Changes in the characters' psychological states are revealed through oneirology, that is, through symbolic dreams. In the initial stages of madness, the protagonist experiences dreams of a fully thanatological nature. At first, Hakim dreams of corpses – more precisely, skeletons stripped entirely of flesh yet running about like living people. Later, he dreams the same dream again, this time vividly and in greater detail, recalling it clearly. In this subsequent vision, he sees corpses enduring endless torment in what resembles the Valley of Punishment or the Field of Judgment. This dream depicts the suffering believed, in both Christian and Islamic doctrines, to await a person after death. The dream is entirely suffused with agony, calamity, and terror. Yet these dreams represent the mind's response to the awakening processes of understanding and comprehension within the protagonist's soul. In realistic literary works, depictions of base or horrific death exert a profound emotional impact on the reader, evoking intense affective responses, amplifying the significance of events, and enhancing the overall dramatic force of the narrative. Authors often resort to such representations of death as an expressive means to foreground social issues such as war, violence, oppression, and injustice. Moreover, the systematic portrayal of death in its most terrifying forms may be linked to the author's personal experience of loss, exposure to war, or confrontation with large-scale catastrophes, which leave a lasting

imprint on the writer's worldview and artistic sensibility.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Temirpulat Tillayev's *The Abyss of Death* shows that thanatological motifs function as key symbolic and epistemological elements shaping the novella's aesthetic structure. Death transcends its literal meaning and appears as a multidimensional phenomenon associated with fear, existential crisis, and the search for knowledge, confirming R. Krasilnikov's view on the dominance of metaphorical and connotative meanings in thanatological narratives.

The abyss symbolizes spiritual emptiness and metaphysical uncertainty, while mythopoetic elements such as dreams, ritualized numbers, and eschatological imagery transform death into an experiential and cognitive category. By avoiding romanticization and emphasizing corporeality and violence, the novella preserves the ontological gravity of death. Overall, thanatological motifs articulate the author's creative worldview and position the work within contemporary literary discourses on mortality and identity.

REFERENCES

1. Krasilnikov, R. L. (2011). *Tanatologicheskie motivy v khudozhestvennoy literature* [Thanatological motifs in fiction]. Doctoral dissertation abstract. Moscow, Russia, p. 25.
2. Dudareva, M. A. (2023). *Tanatologiya v russkoy literature XIX – nachala XX veka: ot fol'klornykh istokov k individual'nomu osmysleniyu* [Thanatology in Russian literature of the 19th–early 20th centuries]. Doctoral dissertation. Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, p. 12.
3. Khudoyberganov, R. (2010). *O'lim va barhayotlik to'g'risida ilmiy va diniy g'oyalarning falsafiy tahlili* [Philosophical analysis of scientific and religious ideas about death and immortality]. PhD dissertation. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 128 p.
4. *Lirika Drevnego Egipta* [Lyric poetry of Ancient Egypt]. (1965). Moscow, USSR, pp. 84–85.
5. Kulakovskiy, Y. A. (1899). *Smert' i bessmertie v predstavleniyakh drevnikh grekov* [Death and immortality in the beliefs of the ancient Greeks]. Kyiv: S. V. Kulzhenko Printing House, pp. 21.
6. Tokarev, S. A. (Ed.). (2008). *Mify narodov mira: Encyclopedia* [Myths of the peoples of the world]. Moscow, Russia, p. 606.
7. Semikina, Y. G. (2002). *Khudozhestvennaya tanatologiya v tvorchestve L. N. Tolstogo 1850–1880-kh gg.: obrazy i motivy* [Artistic thanatology in Leo Tolstoy's works]. PhD dissertation. Volgograd, Russia, 180 p.
8. Tillayev, T. (2024). *O'lim o'pqqoni* [The Abyss of Death]. Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Akademyashr, p. 87.
9. Cirlot, J. E. (2001). *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, p. 271.
10. Yusupov, J. (1999). *Xorazm ertaklarining genezisi, asosiy xususiyatlari va poetikasi* [Genesis, features, and poetics of Khorezm folktales]. PhD dissertation. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 174 p.