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## NEOHUMANS AS A POSTHUMAN FUTURE IN MICHEL HOUELLEBECK'S NOVEL "POSSIBILITY OF THE ISLAND"

*The article is devoted to studying the features of the posthuman future and the nature of its portrayal, which manifest themselves at the level of the specific interpretation of the utopian model of world order in Michel Houellebecq's novel "The Possibility of an Island." The emergence of new variations of dystopia in 20th-century French literature is considered, among which the "anthropological" dystopia has rightfully taken its place, introducing a new type of hero, the posthuman, as presented by Michel Houellebecq in contemporary literature. The review of scholars' ideas on the nature of dystopia and its main forms has been analyzed. The novel "The Possibility of an Island" by M. Houellebecq has been examined as an example of the utopia genre, characterized by the features of both utopia and dystopia. The influence of philosophical and literary traditions on the formation of the analyzed work is traced. It is argued that M. Houellebecq achieves the stated goal through the use of the principle of diachrony, a multi-layered plot, and a distinct poly-genre approach. All of this allows us to speak about the notable genre renewal of the discussed work, which has a truly shocking impact on readers. It is emphasized that the style of the analyzed dystopia is characterized by: the influence of the science fiction genre (the use of scientific terms, setting the action in the future, etc.); the use of grotesque; the poetics of the absurd; anti-aestheticism (deformities, anomalies); genre features of diary entries; the intersection of artistic imagery and elements of sociological research. It is concluded that Houellebecq's dystopian novel fits into the context of prognostic literature of the 20th and 21st centuries, and dystopia does not simply describe the posthuman world but engages in a controversy with utopian ideas of societal construction. The main goal of dystopia is not to intimidate the reader or deprive humanity of faith in a better future, but to warn against possible negative consequences for which we ourselves are the cause.*

**Key words:** French literature, Michel Houellebecq, utopia, dystopia, anthropological dystopia, neohuman, clone, posthuman future.

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## НЕОЛЮДИ ЯК ПОСТЛЮДСЬКЕ МАЙБУТНЄ У РОМАНІ МІШЕЛЯ УЕЛЬБЕКА «МОЖЛИВІСТЬ ОСТРОВА»

*Стаття присвячена вивченню особливостей постлюдського майбутнього та характеру його зображення, що виявляють себе на рівні специфіки тлумачення утопічної моделі світоустрою у романі Мішеля Уельбека «Можливість острова». Розглядається поява нових варіацій антиутопії у французькій літературі ХХ ст. серед яких своє законне місце зайняла і «антропологічна» антиутопія, завдяки їй у сучасній літературі з'являється новий тип героя – неолюдина, представлений М. Уельбеком. Проаналізовано огляд ідей літературознавців про природу антиутопії та її основні форми. Роман М. Уельбека «Можливість острова» проаналізовано як приклад жанру утопії, для якого характерні особливості утопії та дистопії. Відстежується вплив філософських та літературних традицій на формування аналізованого твору. Обґрунтовано, що М. Уельбек вирішує поставлене завдання за допомогою принципу діахронії, сюжетної багатоплановості, своєрідної поліжанровості. Все це дозволяє говорити й про відоме жанрове оновлення аналізованого твору, що справді шокує читачів. Акцентовано, що для стилю проаналізованої антиутопії характерними є: вплив жанру наукової фантастики (використання наукових термінів, віднесення дії в майбутнє тощо); використання гротеску; поетика абсурду; антиестетизм (потворності, аномалії); жанрові ознаки щоденникових записів; схрещування художньої образності та елементів соціологічного дослідження. Зроблено висновок, що антиутопічний роман Уельбека вписується у контекст прогностичної літератури ХХ та ХХІ ст. і антиутопія не просто описує постлюдський світ, а вступає в*

*полеміку з утопічними ідеями побудови соціуму та головна мета антиутопії – не залякати читача чи позбавити людство віри у краще майбутнє, а застерегти від можливих негативних наслідків, причиною яких ми самі є.*

*Ключові слова:* французька література, Мішель Уельбек, утопія, антиутопія, дистопія, антропологічна антиутопія, нелюд, клон, постлюдське майбутнє.

**Problem statement.** Modern society, living in an era of unprecedented technological progress, increasingly turns to the possible understanding of the future. It is inherent in humans to ponder what will happen to them over a certain period of time. Moreover, this is manifested not only in an egocentric aspect, humanity has always sought to predict the future: even the simplest scientific and everyday manifestations of human activities are related to this (astronomy and cosmogony raise the question of the evolution of the Universe, which leads to people being fascinated by horoscope research in biology raises questions about the evolution of species in all living things, etc.). The humanities also do not disregard interest in the future – Prognostic literature of any era primarily acts as a barometer of societal moods.

In response to the current sociopolitical situation, the writing of dystopian works becomes a reaction aimed at warning about the future and humanity's place in it. The growing interest in prognostic contexts in literary creation is inevitable; the secret to the genre's popularity lies in its ability to "address the questions about society, about the state, that modern people ask themselves" (Sabat, 2002: 16). Despite the popularity of literary dystopia, there are numerous controversial issues associated with the theoretical definition of the genre and the identification of its structural, typological, and artistic characteristics.

Despite the unique "intermediate" position of dystopia on the border between scientific disciplines (sociology, political science, philosophy, historiosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, etc.) and literary fiction, as well as its close connection to social forecasting, in the 20th century, dystopia acquired genre autonomy and is no longer identified as a non-genre formation that, similar to satire, can lend distinctiveness to various genres.

In a narrow sense, dystopia is a literary genre that engages in dialogical and discursive relations with utopia, presenting a description of a negative social model that extrapolates current trends in societal development. In a broader sense, it is a type of consciousness and a distinctive method of artistic foresight, aiming to demonstrate from a universal human perspective the unacceptable variants of societal development constructed based on tendentious sociopolitical, economic, religious-cultural, and other concepts.

The period of stabilizing the genre's structure and accumulating normative constants falls in the

20th century, the time of the emergence of classic dystopian works (by authors such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, etc.), when the ideological, thematic, and artistic distinctiveness of the genre was finally formed.

Throughout the century, the dystopian model in literature has been characterized by features such as abstraction, idealized models of society portrayed negatively in an artistic manner, and a tendency towards depicting social regression. The future world depicted in literary dystopias is portrayed as worse than the one criticized by the contemporary author. The main emphasis in dystopia was placed on the complete denial of any improvements and a lack of faith in any possible future developments; it showcased the worst possible outcome among all possibilities.

Another characteristic of 20th-century dystopian literature is its anthropocentrism in novels. It is precisely the conflict between humans, their social environment, and the world of the future. This focus on the individual and their social model characterizes dystopia as a genre of literature that, in its mode, explores not only the conflict of the future but also concentrates on the question of the human being as the center of the future. It turns out that the fate of the world in the future depends on humans and whether they allow negative aspects of development or prevent them.

In a philosophical sense, dystopia has primarily been regarded as a method of foreseeing the future. Its distinct feature of modeling and anticipating the future in its most negative light has sparked an interest in the philosophical component of dystopia.

An important quality of dystopia in the context of philosophy is undeniably its orientation towards the future. Dystopia, as a method of foreseeing the future, has provided philosophers with fertile ground for extensive research over the years.

Dystopian texts created in the early 21st century have not been sufficiently explored in theoretical, literary, and methodological aspects and require comprehensive study. Therefore, the relevance of this work is determined by the need to comprehend the issues related to the development of dystopia as one of the popular genres in contemporary literature, which is tendentiously shaped and shapes our perception of the current reality.

One of the notable representatives of the dystopian genre in French literature is Michel Houellebecq. Michel Houellebecq (M. Houellebecq, born in 1958) is a French poet, novelist, and essayist and the winner of the 2010 Prix Goncourt. His fame is both controversial and polarizing, with descriptions such as «a new extraordinary talent,» “literary trash”, “pornographic squalor”, “the most read and quoted writer in France”, “a distorted mirror of a generation”, “one of the most significant writers of our time”, “a literary outsider” (Nogues, 2006: 5, 7), and so on.

Houellebecq is a vivid experimenter, and the leading genre idea of dystopia in his prose works took shape as early as his second novel. Both his novels and poetry have been widely embraced by a global readership, as evidenced by the extensive range of translations.

#### **The degree of research of the problem.**

The most extensive work in recent times that presents a picture of a post-human future is Michel Houellebecq’s novel “The Possibility of an Island” Houellebecq (real surname: Thomas) has become one of the most renowned French writers of the past two decades. His debut novel, “Extension du domaine de la lute” (translated as “Whatever” or “Whatever: The Mechanical Bride”), was published in 1994 and immediately gained the author fame, along with controversial criticism. Each subsequent book released by Houellebecq generates tremendous public resonance. Each book released generates tremendous public resonance. In the electronic version of the journal “Foreign Literature”, there are 62 references associated with Michel Houellebecq. These materials can be divided into two groups: the majority consists of works dedicated to the writer’s persona, where the most frequently used word is “scandal” (appearing 102 times). The second group comprises reviews directly related to his literary works. Unfortunately, there are disproportionately few of them. A serious study of Michel Houellebecq’s works has only just begun. His novel “The Possibility of an Island” (2005) was identified by critics as a “social dystopia” and has since been translated into 36 languages and received the Interallié literary prize (Kantemyr, 2010).

Today, Michel Houellebecq is one of the most prominent and controversial figures in French literature, as evidenced by the polarizing differences in critical assessments of his work. According to Olivier Bardolle, Houellebecq is the only writer in contemporary French literature, following the likes of Marcel Proust and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who should be read and must be read. This opinion is shared by renowned novelist and essayist Dominique Noguez, who considers Houellebecq one of the greatest realists,

blending philosopher, poet, and novelist, as well as by Aurélien Bellanger, author of the book “Houellebecq – The Romantic Writer” (2010). At the same time, Éric Mollo considers him a representative of mass literature and labels the writer as one of the “station novelists” (un romancier de gare). Thus, within the framework of the contemporary French research continuum, which includes more than ten monographs, significant disagreements arise when analyzing Michel Houellebecq’s literary activity. Scholars such as Olivier Bardolle, Aurélien Bellanger, Myriam David, Benoît Viart, Denis Demonpion, Marie-Laure Clemens, Vincent Lange, Dominique Noguez, and Jean-François Patricola have all approached the study of the writer’s works (Hillen, 2006).

Despite the popularity of the writer’s novels, Michel Houellebecq’s works have not been the subject of comprehensive analysis in Ukrainian literary studies, which underscores the relevance of our investigation. In the textbook on the history of French literature from 1945 to 2000 (compiled by V. Fesenko), a brief overview of three novels by Houellebecq (“Extension du domaine de la lute”, “Atomised”, “Platform”) and a biographical note are provided (Fesenko, 2015).

**The goal of this article** is to identify the features of a post-human future and the nature of its portrayal in the novel “The Possibility of an Island” (“La Possibilité d’une île”, 2005), which manifest themselves in the interpretation of the utopian model of world organization.

**Results.** The plot of the novel is based on the autobiography of the main character. The narrative encompasses two temporal layers: the first is contemporary reality (early 21st century), and the second transports the reader two thousand years into the future (approximately the 30<sup>th</sup>–31st century). The story is told from the perspective of the main character, Daniel, who, like a character in a classical dystopia, feels himself a part of society and characterizes this society from within. He keeps a diary, describing the events of his life and the life of society. “The manuscript that the protagonist is writing can be seen as an indictment of society as a whole. The thing is, the protagonist’s manuscript is only conditionally intended for self-reflection. In reality, besides self-expression, its purpose is to warn, inform, draw attention, and provide information – in short, to convey to the reader information about the possible evolution of contemporary social structure” (Hillen, 2006). The diary entries are interspersed with comments from clones (Daniel 24 and 25), narrating the decline of humanity as a biological species and the emergence of posthumans in its place.

The world in the novel is a contemporary Western society, essentially on the brink of catastrophe. The main character is a comedian who satirizes people's readiness for violence, infanticide, prostitution, and terrorism and is astonished that the audience genuinely finds it amusing: "Consumption, oblivion, poverty. On such topics, I had full halls splitting their sides with laughter; moreover, I made quite a lot of money from them" (Houellebecq, 2006: 29). The protagonist's realization that he notices the sores of society more acutely than others brings him pleasure and wealth, but gradually the euphoria gives way to sadness. The comic sketches, with their irony and sarcasm, now only evoke nausea: "Every time the audience laughed (and I anticipated those moments in advance; I knew how to dose the effects, I was an experienced professional), I had to turn away so as not to see those gaping maws, hundreds of contorted mouths seething with hatred" (Houellebecq, 2006: 18). Gradually, any desire to «cure» society fades, and the protagonist chooses to stop being a part of the system. According to the laws of the dystopia, he should have perished, but in the author's vision, contemporary society is willing to grant complete freedom of thought, action, and speech in the presence of money. The state itself now guarantees security: "The entire social system stood guard over people like me" (Houellebecq, 2006: 128). The protagonist gradually becomes disillusioned with humanity, but ultimately finds salvation in love: "... Something inside me knew, always knew, that in the end, I would encounter love – I mean mutual, shared love, the kind that truly matters, the kind that can genuinely bestow upon us a different order of perception, where individuality bursts at the seams, the foundations of the universe appear in a new light, and its further existence seems entirely justified" (Houellebecq, 2006: 56). However, what brings tranquility and happiness eventually turns into a new disillusionment: "yes, love makes a person weak, and the stronger one suppresses, torments, and ultimately kills the other, without any malicious intent, not even deriving pleasure, with absolute indifference; that is what people usually call love" (Houellebecq, 2006: 62), summarizes the narrator.

The emptiness, expanding its boundaries in the hearts and minds of people, is gradually "replaced". The author presents his own somewhat ironic and fantastical version of societal reconstruction. The beings of the future (including the clones of the narrator-protagonist) emerged from the quasi-religious sect of the Elohimites. Elohim is one of the designations for God in the mythologies of the Old Testament (appearing in the Bible nearly 2,000 times). The word "Elohim", being a plural form, carries

within it the remnants of the ancient polytheism of Jewish tribes. However, this very form, almost always agreeing in the Bible with singular verbs and adjectives, expresses more so the essence, the highest degree of divine quality, the completeness of divinity in the form of a singular God who encompasses all previously existing gods (cf. "God of gods" – *elohey haelohim* – Deut. 10: 17). The followers of the sect anticipate the return of the creators of humanity – extraterrestrials – to Earth, believing that "they are entirely material beings who stood at a higher stage of evolution than we did, capable of interstellar travel and the creation of life; furthermore, they have conquered old age and death and are eager to share their secrets with the most worthy among us" (Houellebecq, 2006: 35).

The only difference between such beliefs and other ways of "brainwashing" is that the followers will have the opportunity to be reborn through cloning. Upon reaching a certain age and realizing the approach of old age, members of the sect must end their lives through suicide, leaving behind a brief biography and a DNA sample.

After generations, the problem of cloning was resolved, and the promised immortality was achieved. The lives of clones are not burdensome at all: they keep diary entries for future copies, and when they reach a certain age, they exit life, making way for the next generation of clones. According to the will of the sect's creators, this cycle is meant to continue until the arrival of the Future Ones.

The clones in M. Houellebecq's novel represent neo-humans who are genetically almost indistinguishable from their predecessors. They can be seen as the incarnation of the spirit within a material body. Their external characteristics remain unchanged, with only a reduced sensitivity to physical pain. These artificial beings no longer require regular food consumption. The new human like creatures live through photosynthesis, which was once the privilege of plants. By harnessing solar energy, plants have achieved practically unlimited lifespans. The future humans sustain themselves through solar energy, water, and a small amount of mineral salts. The clones in M. Houellebecq's novel represent neohumans who are genetically almost indistinguishable from their predecessors. They can be seen as the incarnation of the spirit within a material body. Their external characteristics remain unchanged, with only a reduced sensitivity to physical pain. These artificial beings no longer require regular food consumption. The new human-like creatures live through photosynthesis, which was once the privilege of plants. By harnessing solar energy, plants have achieved practically

unlimited lifespans. The future humans sustain themselves through solar energy, water, and a small amount of mineral salts. The need for a digestive system disappears, as do certain other systems. At the same time, this transforms humans into something that defies precise definition: “A decision was made regarding the Standard Genetic Rectification, which all revived DNA units were required to undergo, marking the final rupture between neohumans and their ancestors”. The rest of the genetic code remained unchanged; however, we were dealing with a new natural species and even, strictly speaking, a new kingdom separate from the animal and plant kingdoms. In the novel, this eventually allowed the neohumans to survive the climate catastrophes that led to the near-total disappearance of humans of the previous race and remain practically the sole inhabitants and masters of the planet.

Unlike the external appearance, which held little significance, the author depicts profound changes occurring in the sensations, instincts, and needs of the clones. The system of values in the post-human future, as portrayed by M. Houellebecq, is underdeveloped. Life is no longer the duration of an individual's presence on Earth; hence, it passes aimlessly, awaiting the last day. Such an existence is devoid of anxieties, delusions, faith, love, and communication in all its forms: “In the past, when human beings lived together, they satisfied each other through physical contact; this is clear to us, for we have received a message from the Supreme Sister”. “In contrast to the external appearance, which had little significance, the author describes profound changes that occur at a deeper level – in the emotions, instincts, and needs of the clones. The system of values in the posthuman future, as depicted by M. Houellebecq, is not developed. Life is no longer a limited period of an individual's existence on Earth, and as a result, it passes without purpose, awaiting the final day. This kind of existence lacks fears, illusions, faith, love, and communication in all its forms: ‘In the past, when human beings lived together, they satisfied each other through physical contact; this is clear to us because we have received a message from the Supreme Sister’. “Here is the message from the Supreme Sister in its intermediate version: ‘Understand that humans possess neither dignity nor rights; that good and evil are simple notions, slightly theorized forms of pleasure and suffering. Treat everyone as an animal deserving of understanding and compassion, both in regard to their souls and bodies. Do not deviate from this noble, grand path” (Houellebecq, 2006: 12) For the clones, who have ceased to identify themselves with humans, their distant natural creators have

simply become part of the animal world, and they are even referred to simply as mammals. F. Fukuyama repeatedly mentions the time when cloning will achieve success and firmly integrate into society. He warns of the danger of the actual displacement of humanity by clones, who have positioned themselves at the pinnacle of evolution.

The goal of human prototypes is to study the human race and subsequently deny their own affiliation with it: “We usually do not condense human narratives about life, no matter how much disgust and boredom their content may evoke. It is precisely boredom and disgust towards these texts that we should cultivate within ourselves in order to separate ourselves from humans as a natural species. Only under this condition, as notified by the Supreme Sister, will the advent of the Future Ones become possible” (Houellebecq, 2006: 32).

From the author's point of view, traditional notions of a patriarchal society, where the teacher, mentor, prophet, and God are predominantly associated with the male gender, are fading away, and now all knowledge is concentrated in the non-woman. Despite the involvement of “guardians” in all spheres of life, each of the post-human beings has the right to think independently, express themselves openly, and even leave the community. No one will be sentenced to death; no one will be persecuted, which is usually encountered in works of the explored genre. But even under these conditions, nothing changes.

Michel Houellebecq satirizes by describing the securely protected homes of the future inhabitants, as no one leaves their abode for longer than a twenty-minute stroll. The notions of “visiting»,» spending time in the company of friends, and simply engaging in conversation are all relics of the distant past. For the clones, the arrangement and defense of their dwellings are remnants of their predecessors. The act of writing loses its relevance, as there is nothing worth documenting on paper. This is reflected by the author in the structure of the novel. While the authentic Daniel informs about the events of his life and the lives of those around him, suffers, and merely exists on numerous pages of text, Daniel's 25th copy recounts his life in brief, emotionless notes devoid of the sensuality and depth characteristic of his predecessor: “My life flows calmly and joylessly; the size of the villa allows for short walks, and a full set of exercise equipment helps to keep the muscles toned” (Houellebecq, 2006: 23). In the clone's active life, there is no sense, as they already know that everything surrounding them is merely an intermediate creation – an “intermediary”.

**Conclusions.** Michel Houellebecq believes that the responsibility for the possible future lies with contemporary society, which is devoid of spiritual and moral guidance. Such a society becomes the cause of catastrophes, wars, deaths, violence, and the disappearance of humanity itself. The old world is replaced by a new one, with its neohumans, essentially

devoid of anything truly human, repeatedly cloning themselves to lead a meaningless life.

The posthuman future described by Michel Houellebecq is too close to us for any doubts to remain about the need for humanity to truly reassess everything that is happening. Only in this case can we hope for the prosperous existence of human civilization on Earth.

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