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Téma smrti ve vybraných románech Iaina M. Bankse

Martina Švábková

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.

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Podklad pro zadání BAKALÁŘSKÉ práce studenta

Jméno a příjmení: **Martina ŠVÁBKOVÁ**
Osobní číslo: **F19751**
Adresa: **Nábřeží 542/25, Těrlicko – Horní Těrlicko, 73542 Těrlicko, Česká republika**
Téma práce: **Téma smrti ve vybraných románech Iaina M. Bankse**
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Vedoucí práce: **Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D.**
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

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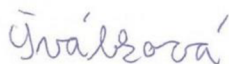
Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem smrti ve vybraných dílech Iaina M. Bankse. Zaměřuje se na první tři romány ze série *Kultura*, jmenovitě *Pomysli na Fléba*, *Hráč* a *Použití zbraní*. Banks v nich vypráví nejen o radostných chvílích, které jeho postavy zažívají, ale také o utrpení, bolesti, a nevynechává ani samotnou smrt. Ta je zmíněna za různých okolností, ať už se jedná o úmrtí v boji, nebo o myšlenky na sebevraždu. Tato práce zkoumá tyto okolnosti a poskytuje pohled na to, jakou roli hraje smrt ve zmíněných dílech.

This bachelor thesis deals with the theme of death in selected works by Iain M. Banks. It is focused on the first three novels from the *Culture* series, namely *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games* and *The Use of Weapons*. Banks describes not only his characters' happy moments, but also their suffering, pain, and he does not leave out even the death itself. It is mentioned in different circumstances, whether it is death in combat or thoughts about suicide. This thesis analyzes those circumstances and provides an insight into the role of death in works mentioned above.

Seznam doporučené literatury:

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci na téma "Téma smrti ve vybraných románech Iaina M. Bankse" vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V dne.....

Podpis

Poděkování

Na tomto místě bych chtěla poděkovat Mgr. Emě Jelínkové, Ph.D., za odborné vedení práce, poskytování cenných rad a materiálových podkladů k práci.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Iain (M.) Banks	3
3. Introduction to the Culture Series	5
3.1. The War	6
3.2. Defining the genre.....	7
4. Death in literature.....	9
4.1. Death in Science Fiction.....	10
5. Consider Phlebas	13
5.1. Thinking about impending death and suicide.....	13
5.2. Afterlife and immortality.....	15
5.2.1. Long-term storage	16
5.3. Identity theft of the dead	17
5.4. Risking one's own life and the lives of others.....	17
5.4.1. The Planet of the Dead.....	19
5.4.2. Damage – A deadly game	20
5.5. Grief and mourning	21
6. The Player of Games	23
6.1. Death and power	23
6.2. Assassination attempts	24
6.3. Racially motivated murders.....	25
6.4. Social death.....	26
6.5. Musical Instruments.....	26
7. Use of Weapons	28
7.1. Darckense's death	28
7.1.1. The Chair.....	29
7.2. Zakalwe's suicide.....	30
7.2.1. Identity theft	30
7.3. Long-term storage.....	31
7.4. Thinking about impending death	31
8. Conclusion	33
Resumé	37
Bibliography	40

1. Introduction

There has always been a certain amount of curiosity when it comes to dealing with death. It is surrounded by mystery and questions that cannot be answered. Some people want to avoid discussion on this topic while others seek answers. Literature has proved to be an efficient tool for exploring different ideas and possibilities about death, what precedes it and what comes after it. Additionally, the science fiction genre extends the possibilities by introducing technologies that may possibly alter our lives, and deaths, in the future.

In this thesis, I am discussing death in *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons* by Iain M. Banks. All three novels are part of the science fiction series called the Culture series. The aim of this thesis is to analyze how death is portrayed in the selected novels with the focus on how characters come in contact with death and how they deal with it.

The first introductory chapter is focused on the author himself. I am discussing his childhood, his beginnings in writing and what was he like as a person. This chapter also discusses whether Banks's personal experiences or interests are reflected in the novels and if so, how.

The following chapter introduces the Culture series to provide a background for the three selected novels. It focuses on similarities between individual novels and that they, in fact, reflect some aspects of Banks's life. War is presented here as the main cause of death, but this thesis is not focused on its other impacts. It is rather focused on how death is portrayed and experienced by the characters. In the same chapter, the genre of the series is discussed by looking at the meaning, or rather function, of science fiction. This discussion also sets the boundary between science fiction and fantasy.

The focus is then shifted to death in literature in general. It is discussed that death is too complex to be described generally, but the motivation of the writers to write about it may be rooted in the fear of the unknown. I am highlighting the Victorian era because their fascination with death is apparent both in literature and their lifestyles. Discussion on death in literature is then followed by focusing on death in science fiction. As was mentioned in the previous lines, sci-fi adds technology to the literature, so it provides other ways in which death can be observed and experienced.

In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I am discussing how death is portrayed in the individual selected novels. I am doing so by focusing on the characters, how they come in contact with death and how they deal with it.

The first novel I am analyzing is *Consider Phlebas*. It is discussed how characters think and feel about their last moments and how in some cases they also reflect on the afterlife. In connection with afterlife and immortality I am also discussing cryogenics because it shows how technology can affect the life and death of an individual. Another way to alter one's life is to steal someone else's identity which is possible because of one's death. Risking lives is also a great part of the novel. It is discussed by looking closely at two events, one being the visit of the Planet of the Dead and the other is playing the game Damage.

The second novel that is analyzed in this thesis is *The Player of Games*. I am firstly focusing on how one's death can be convenient for gaining power by looking closely at two assassination attempts and what comes after them. Then I am discussing death as a result of racism by focusing on the main character and his experience with it. The main character also provides an insight into how death is tied with music. That is discussed by looking into the symbolism of musical instruments.

The last novel analyzed in this thesis is *Use of Weapons*. I begin with reflecting on two characters whose deaths are important for the whole novel. The first one is the death of Darckense that is discussed by looking into how her death is symbolized and why is it important for the story. The second death is that of her brother Zakalwe that, similarly to *Consider Phlebas*, is followed by identity theft. In the chapter on Turning off someone's life, I am pointing out how the character named Elethiomel reflects on life and its fragility. The last chapter is focused on Elethiomel's attitude towards death that takes into consideration his past experiences in life.

In the last section, I am summarizing the findings of this thesis and suggest further exploration of death in Banks's works.

2. Iain (M.) Banks

Iain Menzies Banks was born on February 16th 1954 in Dunfermline, Scotland. He had a sister who unfortunately died at six weeks old before Banks was born which makes him an only child.¹ Banks himself says that his childhood was quite normal, except that he was spoiled as the only child, but he was neither bullied nor abused.² Abuse is sometimes considered to be the explanation for one's twisted imagination and ideas, but it is not in Banks's case.

He attended Greenock High School where he met Ken MacLeod, who is also a science fiction writer. They were good friends, which provides an insight into Banks's beginnings as a writer and also into who he was as a person. In his chapter in the book *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks*, MacLeod goes on to describe Banks as a funny, creative person with an interest in science, literature, philosophy, and psychology.³

Banks started writing in high school where he and other students were encouraged by their English teacher to pursue writing. She organized a writing circle where they, apart from writing, talked about life and the universe.⁴

Banks faced rejection of his science fiction until he decided to write and publish his first non-sci-fi novel *The Wasp Factory*. Banks said it was his attempt to write "an ordinary conventional novel" to have a chance to have his work published,⁵ but it may not be seen as an ordinary novel with its raw portrayal of violence, murder and death. Even though *The Wasp Factory* is not science fiction, it contains a possible reference to Mary Shelley's science fiction novel *Frankenstein* because both novels deal with body alterations and science. The reference is even more obvious when one considers the fact that the main character from Banks's novel is named Frank.⁶

While discussing Banks's science fiction, it is important to mention his name itself. He started to publish his non-science fiction works under the name Iain Banks. Under that name, he managed to publish three novels – *The Wasp Factory*, *Walking on Glass* and *The Bridge* – that brought him success.

¹ Paul Kincaid, *Iain M. Banks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017) 12.

² Simone Caroti, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015) 32.

³ Nick Hubble, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Joseph Norman, *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks* (Canterbury: Gyplhi Limited, 2018) 21-34.

⁴ Hubble, MacCallum-Stewart and Norman, *The Science Fiction of Iain M. Banks*, 22.

⁵ Kincaid, *Iain M. Banks*, 18.

⁶ Kincaid, *Iain M. Banks*, 19.

However, his first science fiction novel, and the first novel from the Culture series, *Consider Phlebas*, was published under Iain M. Banks. Banks himself was not happy with the distinction because it separated science fiction from mainstream fiction.⁷ Even though he did not like that, nowadays that additional M. functions as a marker for readers to distinguish between his sci-fi and non-sci-fi works.

In addition to his novels, Banks also wrote short stories, poetry and one travelling book about whisky called *Raw Spirit* in which he describes his road trips through Scotland while looking for the finest whisky. He published two short stories collections. One of them is called *The State of Art*, which is sometimes considered to be a part of the Culture series even though it is not a novel, because it is tied to the Culture.

Apart from writing, reading, and drinking, Banks also enjoyed driving fast cars. On one occasion, he hit a brick wall while under influence and had his license suspended.⁸ Another occasion that involved drinking and adrenaline seeking was when he climbed a hotel building, as his friend Neil Gaiman recalls: “The police had to be persuaded that this was a respectable author who liked climbing things from the outside and not an inept cat burglar returning to the scene of his crime.”⁹ According to his other friends, Banks liked climbing a lot, and it is reflected even in his novel *Consider Phlebas*, where one of his characters, Fal ‘Ngeestra, fell while climbing. His adventurous soul and lack of fear is overall present in all of his works.

In April 2013, Banks was diagnosed with cancer. On his website he writes, “I am officially Very Poorly” and proceeds to explain his diagnosis in more detail. In the same post, he talks about the time he was about to spend with his wife Adele, their friends and family, and how he asked her to be his widow.¹⁰

His work and life are celebrated even outside the field of literature. The CEO of SpaceX (a company that focuses on space exploration) Elon Musk named two drone ships after the ships from *The Player of Games* – Of Course I Still Love You and Just Read The Instructions.¹¹

⁷ Caroti, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction*, 39.

⁸ Caroti, *The Culture Series of Iain M. Banks: A Critical Introduction*, 19.

⁹ Neil Gaiman, “Iain Banks Was One of Us, Whatever That Meant,” *The Guardian* 9 June 2013, 25 March 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/09/neil-gaiman-iain-banks>>.

¹⁰ Iain M. Banks, “A Personal Statement from Iain Banks,” *Iain M. Banks* 2013, 25 March 2022, <<https://www.iain-banks.net/iainbanks-posts/2013/04/03/a-personal-statement-from-iain-banks/>>.

¹¹ Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “Elon Musk’s new drone ships are a tribute to sci-fi author Iain M. Banks,” *The Daily Dot* 24 January 2015, 25 March 2022, <<https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/elon-musk-drone-iain-m-banks/>>.

3. Introduction to the Culture Series

Death is present in different forms throughout the series and its main cause is the war about which I am going to talk about in the following subchapter. In this part I focus on other general ideas and elements portrayed in the series and thus provide a brief context for the novels that are the main focus of this thesis.

There are nine novels (ten books in total, if *The State of Art* short stories collection is included) with the first one published being *Consider Phlebas* (1987) and the last one *Hydrogen Sonata* (2012).

Culture is a society well advanced in all aspects of life. As Banks himself explains in “A Few Notes on the Culture,” they are advanced in technologies, education and even in control of how their bodies function because of different mutations that evolved over time. One of the mutations is their unusually long life span in comparison to an average human being, which makes an average Culture citizen to live up to 400 years. Additionally, they can choose if and when they die.¹²

In “A Few Notes on the Culture,” Banks discusses the key ideas that make Culture so advanced as a society. Neither humans nor machines are exploited, and everyone has enough of everything because they are able to produce what is needed at low cost.¹³ The idea that not even machines are exploited for work proves the importance of artificial intelligence in the Culture and that technology plays a great role in their lives.

When it comes to the law, there are no written laws in the Culture. They agreed on some norms which they follow and the worst crime they can commit is murder, which is not punished by going to prison or a death sentence, but one gets a slap drone. That means that one death is not repaid by another death, or at least not in the typical sense. This kind of death is further discussed in the chapter on *The Player of Games*.

The remaining two aspects that I am going to talk about in this section, and that reflect Banks’s personal interests in his works, are music and games. Music is the most significant in the novel *The Hydrogen Sonata*, as the title itself may suggest. However, music appears in other novels as well. For example, in *Look to Windward* where the main character is a composer, or in *The Player of Games* where the instruments are made of bones which symbolizes the presence of death.

¹² Iain M. Banks, “A Few Notes on the Culture,” *Vavatch Orbital* 10 August 1994, 30 March 2022, <<http://www.vavatch.co.uk/books/banks/cultnote.htm>>.

¹³ Banks, “A Few Notes on the Culture.”

Playing games is not at all innocent in the Culture series. They can symbolize the will to power, like Azad in *The Player of Games*, or they result in war as in *Surface Detail*. They are insidious, dangerous and turn violent, but one game in particular, which is discussed in more detail in the chapter on *Consider Phlebas*, called Damage is especially important because death of many is quite the point of the game. Banks's playful and witty personality is further enhanced by his twisted imagination which is apparent in cases where something fun like games is turned into a murder scene.

3.1. The War

Literary works usually reflect their historical and cultural backgrounds, in other words, they represent what is currently on the minds of people in a given era. The historical event that may be considered crucial for the Culture series is the Cold war that lasted from 1945 until 1991. It also includes the fear of possible nuclear war that was present since the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Even though many people and science fiction writers knew about the danger that comes with the invention of the atomic bomb, there were also many of them who celebrated the new technology. By the year 1954, nuclear war became a cliché in the science fiction genre.¹⁴ It is thought that science fiction inspired the evolution of war technologies to some extent. For example, *The World Set Free*, that was written before the first World War by H.G. Wells talks about radioactivity and nuclear war, with the novel being followed by the laws made by physicist Leo Szilard which made nuclear weapons possible.¹⁵

Either way, if sci-fi influenced the evolution of technologies used in wars, or not, the fascination of scientists and writers with nuclear war and its aftermath is apparent. It is after all in human nature to be curious about what future brings, and in this case, if humanity will be able to survive it.

There is no evidence that could prove Banks's fear of nuclear war, but he included the use of nuclear weapons in war in the Culture series. Even though only the first four novels of the series were published during the Cold War, and during the times where

¹⁴ Paul Brians, "Nuclear War in Science Fiction, 1945-59," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 November 1984, 255.

¹⁵ Chris Hables Gray, "'There will be war!': Future War Fantasies and Militaristic Science Fiction in the 1980s," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 November 1994, 318.

people feared nuclear war the most, in some of the novels after 1991 nuclear weapons are present as well.

From the selected novels for this thesis, the nuclear threat is most apparent in the first novel, *Consider Phlebas*. For instance, the character named Lamm has a nuclear device in his suit which he says he would use if he was ever captured and the same time, he threatens others not to upset him or he would set off the device.¹⁶ So not only are they in danger because of the on-going war, but also because of their unstable crew mate.

Novels from the Culture series that were published after the year 1991 and that talk about the nuclear threat are for instance *Look to Windward* and *Surface Detail*. What they have in common with the above mentioned novels, considering that they were published after the era in which the fear of nuclear war was at its peak, is the fact that they all deal with fear of nuclear weapons, their effects, and consequences of the war.

Even though the influence of historical events like the discussed Cold war or the invention of nuclear weapons may play a role in Banks's works, it has not been proved yet. In the end, it does not really matter what kind of weapons are used in wars because the result is always the same – death. The Culture series and its portrayal of war is necessarily accompanied by violence and resulting death.

3.2. Defining the genre

The Culture series is said to be science fiction, or more specifically, a sub-genre called space opera. The border of the genre is not as clear as it may seem, and other genres may be mixed in. In this case, it is the distinction between science fiction and fantasy, which I am going to briefly discuss in this section as a part of an introduction to the novels selected for this thesis.

Where science fiction and fantasy cross each other, another genre called science fantasy may appear. As the name suggests, it is a combination of those two. Carl D. Malmgren provides an explanation as follows, "Like fantasy, science fantasy contains at least one contravention of natural law or empirical fact, but, like science fiction, it grounds that contravention in a discourse rooted in the scientific epistemology."¹⁷ But the question is where to draw the line between those two.

¹⁶ Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1987) 68.

¹⁷ Carl D. Malmgren, "Against Genre/Theory: The State of Science Fiction Criticism," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 12, No. 1 1991, 142.

To provide a clear definition of science fiction is a difficult thing to do because many definitions do not say what it is, but they rather say what it does. That is supported by Malmgren who points out Albert Wendland's thoughts on defining the genre by saying that in order to define it, we have to address what it does instead of what it is.¹⁸ Malmgren also takes into consideration C. N. Manlove who says that definitions may be applicable to various books, but it is not enough to cover the genre as a whole, which makes the definitions too abstract.¹⁹

The most prominent feature of both of those genres may be the way in which they portray reality or create their own. Science fiction is based on empirical findings of science, and it further explores those ideas. Some gadgets or inventions portrayed in those works may seem a bit too unreal, but they are not, in theory, impossible. The concept of reality is thus important because sci-fi draws from what is happening in the real world. As opposed to the fantasy, where the reality is intentionally unreal. It does not draw on the real world and it rather creates its own.

In other words, even though both genres are still fiction, what is portrayed in sci-fi works is more likely to happen than what is portrayed in fantasy. Sci-fi provides a view into a possible future by using the knowledge that we have now to further develop what we could have, while fantasy avoids that.

It is obvious then that the Culture series is written as science fiction because of the role the science and technology play in it. The characters use many different gadgets either for transportation, communication or as weapons. It shows that even if the events, or the technology are unreal at this moment, they are not impossible.

¹⁸ Malmgren, "Against Genre/Theory: The State of Science Fiction Criticism," 133.

¹⁹ Malmgren, "Against Genre/Theory: The State of Science Fiction Criticism," 132.

4. Death in literature

In this chapter, I am briefly discussing the portrayal and significance of death in literature as a whole. The main focus is on emotions and on the writers' motivation to even discuss death in their literary works. The theme of death in literature is complex on its own, so I will not be able to go into much detail but discussing at least some aspects of this topic is crucial for this thesis. The following subchapter is then focused on portrayal of death in the science fiction genre.

Literature provides an insight into how society changes and shows the current issues and interests, which includes the changes in perception of death. Charles I. Glicksberg suggests that this change is caused by the evolution of technology and the fear of what it brings because death is no longer "an abstract vision."²⁰ In other words, people are afraid of and interested in the unknown at the same time, and literature provides a way of dealing with those emotions.

Even though death in literature is an extensive theme because of its rich history, the Victorian period is an admirable era to highlight. It provides an interesting insight into this theme because of the society's attitude towards death. Their obsession with death is apparent in popularization of mourning and excessive taking care of dead bodies which can be seen in pictures and paintings from that era. Jolene Zigarovich calls it "cult of death" and explains their attitude by saying: "Underlying this embrace of death was an uneasiness about the rapidity of change."²¹ This "rapidity of change" was caused by the Industrial revolution, which supports Glicksberg's claims about technologies bringing fear of death and the unknown.

As for the form, the theme of death is not tied to only one form. To provide an example, Edgar Allan Poe wrote about death both in fiction (*The Tell-Tale Heart*) and poetry (*The Raven*). Other examples of the portrayal of death in fiction may be Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*. In both of those works, death is connected to the feeling of loneliness and emptiness, while it is romanticized in Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. Coming back to poetry, and to the Victorian period, probably the most famous poem about death from that era is *In Memoriam* by Alfred Tennyson.

²⁰ Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Literature of Death." *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 30, No. 2 1956, 117.

²¹ Michelle W. Wang, Daniel J. Jernigan and Neil Murphy, *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021) 288.

According to Zigarovich, there is no other poem from the Victorian period that better captures the attitude towards death, and grief in particular.²²

Portrayal of death in literature can also be helpful to patients who are close to dying, and their families. The fear of the unknown can be quite overwhelming, especially when it comes to something like death, where no one knows what happens next. However, it may be easier to deal with those emotions when someone else is able to understand.

In his paper, John Skelton discusses the importance of writing and reading about death. According to him and his experience, it can help the patients to communicate how they feel. He says, “One of the uses of literature in the health professions is to help people to become more articulate about their concerns and their worries: to help them to ‘talk about their feelings’.”²³ According to Skelton, it can help the patients and their families to get closer in hard times. This closeness, as he puts it, relieves “the burden of loneliness.”²⁴

4.1. Death in Science Fiction

The portrayal of death in science fiction goes beyond our emotions. It is rather focused on the technologies and inventions that cause the death, but it does not mean that the emotions are not there. The reader can still experience sadness, pain and other feelings connected to death through the actions, experiences, and feelings of the characters. Even though this thesis is not focused on the deadly technologies in Banks’s sci-fi novels, it is important to mention them in connection to the genre itself, and to the emotions they bring up in people about death.

The possibility of immortality and the possible existence of afterlife are two concepts that are often mentioned in science fiction works. When it comes to defining immortality, Brian Stableford proposes that it is more suitable to use the term “unnatural longevity.” As he explains, “True immortality, in the sense of an absolute immunity to death, is usually seen in a religious context as the prerogative of some nonmaterial essence whose incarnation is a temporary affair, perhaps part of a potentially infinite series of incarnations” to which he adds that being made out of flesh (being human) is not desired

²² Wang, Jernigan and Murphy, *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*, 289.

²³ John Skelton, "Death and dying in literature," *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, vol. 9. 2003, 216.

²⁴ Skelton, "Death and dying in literature," 213.

by this “nonmaterial essence.”²⁵ In other words, true immortality is god-like, and humans can reach “only” unnatural longevity because they are not gods.

Stableford’s proposed distinction between immortality and unnatural longevity points out the influence of religion on the genre of science fiction. That is given by the fact that both are, to a certain extent, concerned with immortality and afterlife.

This idea is also supported in paper by Stephen Burt “Science Fiction and Life after Death.” He is not as concerned with immortality, as he is concerned with life after death and how the perception of it in sci-fi is influenced by religion. He says that until the beginning of science fiction, thoughts about afterlife were associated only with religion.²⁶

The difference is that science is empirical, which means that its goal is to examine the possibility of afterlife beyond “just” faith, thus it may seem that it challenges religious beliefs. However, this “challenging” of faith in science fiction is more of an addition and further development of the idea. Burt adds to this that “SF provides both rival and a replacement for the afterlife as described in revealed religion; that versions of the afterlife in SF echo versions of afterlife constructed outside SF.”²⁷

Both discussions of Stableford and Burt prove not only that the religion influenced science fiction, but also how significant the theme of death is in this genre in connection to society and its beliefs and interests.

Going back to the topic of technologies, they not only take lives, but are also able to make lives longer. Cryogenics, or in other words, technology that allows bodies to be frozen in storage units, can alter life, but differently from afterlife or immortality. In *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*, Brian Stableford mentions that people “cheat” death when they use long-term storages²⁸ which seems logical. That is because death is natural and by using those technologies, the users postpone it for however long they want, or for however long it is possible to stay frozen.

People who want to be kept in long-term storages have different reasons to do so, for example they hope for the cure of terminal illness, or as Stableford mentions, they hope for their investments to make them rich over time.²⁹ As it is discussed later in this text, long-term storage may also be a way of dealing with unpleasant emotions. In reality,

²⁵ Brian Stableford, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2006) 274.

²⁶ Stephen Burt, “Science Fiction and Life after Death,” *American Literary History* 3 January 2014, Vol. 26, No. 1 ed., 184.

²⁷ Burt, “Science Fiction and Life after Death,” 175.

²⁸ Stableford, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*, 109.

²⁹ Stableford, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*, 109.

cryogenics is not safe for humans yet, and it may never be, but science fiction genre does not reject the possibility to “cheat death” by using technology.

As discussed previously, dealing with death comes with the fear of the unknown. However, fear of “the known” is also present in the genre of science fiction and it is portrayed through the use of deadly weapons, such as death rays or battle ships. Even though lasers and flying battle ships are not currently used, one can imagine that the use of them would result in certain death. The question is what makes writers and readers interested in the subjects like war (even fictional) when we fully realize that war brings mainly death and suffering.

Teresa Heffernan proposes that returning to such traumatic events like war is given by what Sigmund Freud calls “death drive.” She explains that it is the opposite of the well-known will to live, and it means that people are naturally drawn to destruction because people are organic, and according to Freud, everything that is organic wants to naturally return to its “inorganic state.”³⁰ In other words, even though the idea of death is not pleasant and sometimes even traumatic, our curiosity is stronger and probably driven by nature.

³⁰ Teresa Heffernan, "The Post-Apocalyptic Imaginary: Science, Fiction, and the Death Drive ." *English Studies in Africa* 58 (2) 2015, 66-67.

5. Consider Phlebas

This chapter deals with the first novel that was published as a part of The Culture Series, *Consider Phlebas*. In the following subchapters, I am looking into how death is portrayed in this novel, and what role it has, if any. The subchapters deal with thoughts either about impending death or suicide, afterlife and immortality, risking lives, grief and mourning, and identity theft of the dead.

5.1. Thinking about impending death and suicide

To think about death in real life is almost inevitable. Even though some people may try their best to avoid it, there are times where it is just not possible, and their intrusive thoughts do not allow them to think of anything else. Similarly, the characters in *Consider Phlebas* often find themselves in situations where to not think about death is just not possible. They are either close to being killed, or they are considering committing suicide as a form of escaping their situation. Even though many characters from the novel die, only a few actually think about that moment.

One instance in which a character is thinking about suicide is when Horza's spaceship crashes and he ends up on an island where he meets cannibals called Eaters. He is tied to a pole and left to observe their feast. They bring out another man and eat him in front of Horza's eyes then proceed to tell him that he is their next meal. Throughout this passage, one can feel his fear and frustration while he is unable to move. After some time being trapped, he considers killing himself.³¹

However, he decides against it. He remembers how the members of Culture are able to auto-euthanize if they want to and how they would definitely do that in his situation.³² Even though his situation seems hopeless, he does not want to be as desperate as he thinks the Culture citizens are. In the end, he survives meeting the cannibals and it is actually his own pride that saves him.

The rest of this chapter deals with thoughts on impending death, meaning the characters are either in life-threatening danger, or they are trying to cope with the fact that they are actually dying. The first instance that I am going to discuss is the latter.

³¹ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 162.

³² Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 162.

The following segment is the thought process of an injured Idiran who is certainly about to die that provides an insight into what it feels like for him to die:

“...ah my soul my soul, all is darkness now. now i die, now i slip away and nothing will be left. i am frightened. great one, pity me, but i am frightened. no sleep of victory; i heard. merely my death. darkness and death, moment for all to become one, instance of annihilation. i have failed; i heard and now i know. failed. death too good for me. oblivion like release. more than i deserve, much more. i cannot let go, i must hold on because i do not deserve a quick, willed end. my comrades wait, but they do not know how much i have failed, i am not worthy to join them. my clan must weep. ah this pain... darkness and pain...”³³

Robert Detweiler says that if the moment of death cannot be observed by the living, it can be filled in with imagination.³⁴ His paper was written in 1972 and even though nowadays we are able to imagine what the moment is like more than before because of many insights of people who survived their clinical death, in literature, the imagination still plays a huge part. According to Detweiler, the process of dying and resulting death is usually described with phrases like "darkness came over his eyes," "black night covered his eyes," or "his eyes were dimmed."³⁵

Coming back to the dying Idiran, it is apparent that he feels guilty that he is dying in such a way, injured and hopeless, and not like a true warrior. He feels not only shame, but also pain. Additionally, he describes the process of dying as if darkness was consuming him, which corresponds with the way Detweiler describes the usual portrayal of dying in literature.

Another character that is thinking about impending death is Balveda. The first moment is when the crew gets to The Planet of the Dead and she is still considered Horza's prisoner. She is sitting in a dark room on cold ground and does not feel hopeful about her situation. In this case, the darkness does not symbolize death in the same way in which it does in the case of the dying Idiran. She is not dying, yet the darkness enhances her feelings of hopelessness and loneliness while she wonders if this is the day she is going to die.³⁶

³³ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 380.

³⁴ Robert Detweiler, "The Moment of Death in Modern Fiction," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 13, No. 3 1972, 270.

³⁵ Detweiler, "The Moment of Death in Modern Fiction," 272.

³⁶ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 343.

The second instance I am going to discuss occurs later in the novel. During an exhausting fight, Balveda finds herself hanging from a ramp, holding her whole body in the air with one arm, while her other arm is broken. It is almost certain that she is going to die which is described in her thought process, “*I’m going to die*, she thought, and was almost more surprised than terrified. *Here, now. After all that’s happened, all I’ve done. Die. Just like that!*”³⁷ She does not show fear, rather disappointment, which seems similar to what the dying Idiran was experiencing during his last moments. Balveda’s and the Idiran’s thoughts show that being close to death does not need to be accompanied only by feelings of fear or sadness, but also shame and disappointment.

5.2. Afterlife and immortality

The two concepts – afterlife and immortality – are closely related. One begins after death which means that the act of dying is crucial, and the death itself is considered to be inevitable. The other denies the fact that one could ever die. Even though neither afterlife nor immortality play a huge role in *Consider Phlebas*, there are some instances that bring this subject to light. Those instances may make one think about death as something more than the end of life.

In *Consider Phlebas*, the only characters that are described as immortal are the Idirans. However, they are immortal “only” biologically which means that they can be killed, or in general, that they can die of whatever other reason than the natural process of ageing. Their body is thus temporal, but they believe that it is their soul that is immortal.

Their belief in the immortality of their soul is expressed in the following statement, “Whoever heard of a mortal body having an immortal soul?”³⁸ In other words, Idirans believe that they are the only species with immortal souls because their bodies are closest to being immortal in comparison to other species. One may think that Idirans think too highly of themselves since their claims about their souls have not been proven, almost as if they were godlike. Actually, even some other characters in the novel think of Idirans as a “higher” species. That is captured for example in Fal 'Ngeestra’s thoughts while reflecting on the war they were in, “*Here we are*, she thought, *killing the immortal, only just stopping short of tangling with something most people would think of as a god.*”³⁹

³⁷ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 435.

³⁸ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 34.

³⁹ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 94.

Additionally to their belief about the immortality of their soul, there is an instance in the novel where one of the Idirans, Quayanorl, mentions that there could be something more after his passing. He thinks to himself, “Do I die when I get to the train’s control area, and continue my journey on the other side, in death?”⁴⁰ This statement suggests that the Idirans believe in afterlife, possibly in reincarnation when they believe their souls are immortal. That suggestion can be supported by the fact that Idirans are religious creatures which is mentioned many times throughout the novel, for example when another Idiran, Xoralundra, says to Horza “God be with you, human”⁴¹ or when he forces Horza to pray even though their religion is against Horza’s own beliefs.⁴²

As was discussed in the subchapter “Death in Science Fiction,” religion can be considered as something that hugely influenced the genre of science fiction (and literature in general) when it comes to the perception of death and what happens after one dies. The influence of religion in the question of afterlife or immortality in *Consider Phlebas* can be observed in the above-mentioned situations.

Stephen Burt mentions that “The pervasive presence of life after death in SF calls into further question the already controversial claims (the best-known is Darko Suvin’s) that SF, as a genre must favor the rational, or the empirical.”⁴³ The idea that life after death must be empirical in order to be scientific goes against the religious beliefs in afterlife since it is not possible to prove that there is something after death yet.

Looking back at the Idiran’s thoughts about afterlife, it is possible to observe that in that case, religion and science go hand in hand. The Idiran considers the possibility that something awaits after his death, but he does not tell or show what, not in that moment, and not later in the story.

5.2.1. Long-term storage

In *Consider Phlebas*, long-term storage is mentioned only with the connection to Balveda, a woman who outlives all of her companions that she meets while she is working for the Culture. There are numerous reasons why one would like to be put in long-term storage, but Balveda’s reasons are quite obvious. It is her trauma response to the horrors she has experienced.

⁴⁰ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 393.

⁴¹ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 33.

⁴² Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 34.

⁴³ Burt, “Science Fiction and Life after Death,” 168.

Her actions show that long-term storages are not only for those who want to experience future technology, but also for those who cannot deal with their feelings anymore, yet they do not want to die. That suggests that the storage may be viewed as a form of death that can be reversed.

5.3. Identity theft of the dead

The novel tells a story about a character named Horza who agreed to work for the Idirans. He is supposed to travel to The Planet of the Dead and catch an escaped Mind, which is an AI in the Culture. However, his task is not easy, and he needs to find a way to accomplish his mission. He gets on board of a ship called Clear Air Turbulence which makes it easier for him to accomplish his task.

Horza is loyal to the Idirans and he is willing to do anything it takes to serve them. He decides to take over the ship, including the crew, by killing the current captain Kraiklyn. Kraiklyn's murder is described quite graphically by saying that Horza was repeatedly banging Kraiklyn's head against the concrete.⁴⁴ However, Horza seems to show no remorse regarding his actions which may be the case because he is blinded by his own belief that he is doing "the right thing" by doing whatever he can to obey the orders of the Idirans.

At this point, it is crucial to point out that Horza is a Changer, which means that he can alter how his body looks if he decides to do so. He takes advantage of this feature of his and steals Kraiklyn's identity by imitating his appearance. Even though he cannot keep his new look, it buys him time to persuade the crew to keep working with him.

Brian McHale points out that death can work as a motif on its own, but "sometimes it mainly serves to motivate other motifs."⁴⁵ This is the case in Kraiklyn's murder which results in his identity being stolen and it further motivates Horza's desire to control other crew members which helps him to finish the job given to him by the Idirans.

5.4. Risking one's own life and the lives of others

Risk taking in real life is accompanied by a certain amount of danger, but the majority of people tend to avoid situations in which they could lose their own life. Similarly, situations in *Consider Phlebas* are dangerous as well, but many characters,

⁴⁴ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 218.

⁴⁵ Wang, Jernigan and Murphy, *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*, 10.

both voluntarily and involuntarily, put themselves in a position, where their life can be taken in a blink of an eye. In this subchapter, I am focusing on the characters' risky behavior, and I will also discuss what is their motivation to do so, since it is almost certain that their actions will result in their death.

It is almost at the beginning of the novel where it is said whose story is going to be the focus of the book – the main character named Horza who is asked to work for Idirans. It is also the first moment where the risky behavior that leads to the deaths of many appears, and from where all the action emerges. Horza's task is to catch an escaped Mind, which is an AI in the Culture. To do that, he needs a spaceship and a crew, and he acquires both of them. After he becomes a captain of the ship, it is much easier for him to obey Idirans' orders.

The crew follows Horza's orders, before him, they followed Kraiklyn's. Both men are leaders, but Kraiklyn is leading for his own personal gains, while Horza is leading because of his promise to the Idirans. Their motivation is different, but the result is the same – risking lives and coming towards the death sooner than is necessary. In fact, some of the crew members die as a result of risking their lives for beliefs that were not even theirs.

There is an instance where Horza is talking to Balveda, a Culture agent who is, like Horza, brought into the Culture-Idiran war but is on the opposite side, and he explains to her the reasoning behind his actions. He says, "I'm fighting for them because I think they're right and you're wrong" and then he follows by saying that he is "prepared to die for them."⁴⁶ The main reason for what motivates Banks to make his characters risk their lives is most probably to keep the action going, but one possible way of interpretation is that the risk-taking is a direct result of the war that they find themselves in. As was mentioned in the subchapter discussing the war, war brings the feeling of fear and uncertainty which makes risk-taking quite inevitable. That suggests that even though Horza's risky behavior leads to many deaths, including his own, he does not have another option.

Looking into the behavior of the crew, one of them stands out more than the others regarding risk-taking. It is Balveda, Horza's sworn enemy, who becomes a crew member after some time spent in their captivity, and who is willing to risk her own life for someone who supposedly hates her. In the culmination of the novel where the final fight is

⁴⁶ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 28-29.

happening and where Horza is being attacked, Balveda has two options – to flee, or to help her capturer. She chooses the latter even though she could have died herself. What motivates her to risk it may be the same as for Horza, she is in war and has no other option, but it would not explain why she risks it for someone who captured her and at one point wanted her dead.

It may be a reminder of the classic Romeo and Juliet trope where they are forbidden to love each other, but they still do. In this case, it is not necessarily love what motivates Balveda to save Horza, but there are definitely some positive feelings towards him that changed over time. This can be seen in an instance towards the end of the novel where Horza cannot remember his name because of his serious injuries, and Balveda reminds him with tears in her eyes.⁴⁷ This shows that when feelings are involved, it may be easier for one to look death in the face and risk one's life for someone else.

5.4.1. The Planet of the Dead

The Planet of the Dead is a place where Horza is heading to from the beginning of the novel which may be a foreshadowing to his own death. Through his lying and manipulation, he finally gets there accompanied by the remaining members of the Clear Air Turbulence's crew. It cannot be more obvious that what awaits them on the planet is death. Before they land, they are even warned multiple times by security systems of that planet that "THERE IS DEATH HERE"⁴⁸ but they still proceed to land.

The planet itself can be considered as a symbol of death because of its name, but the characters uncover more of those symbols as they explore it. For instance, they come across dead bodies that belong to Changers, some of whom Horza knew personally. The atmosphere in the novel becomes tense in this part, since Horza cannot believe what he sees. It is further enhanced by the fact that there is ice everywhere, so it is cold. Ice, low temperatures, and winter often symbolize death in literature, for example in Robert Frost's poem *The Onset*, a death is symbolized by snow.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 441.

⁴⁸ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 293.

⁴⁹ William T. Moynihan, "Fall and Winter in Frost," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 73, No. 5 May 1958, 350.

5.4.2. Damage – A deadly game

Playing games may not be something that one expects while reading science fiction novel. However, it is not so surprising when it is a novel written by Banks. As was discussed in the chapter on Banks's life, games are one of the things from his personal life that he introduces in his writing too. In *Consider Phlebas* there is a game called Damage that can be considered as a symbol of death. Even though this game is mostly about gambling money, playing it also involves risking lives of others, and it is also possible to risk one's own life.

To understand why the game symbolizes death in this novel, it is crucial to first explain the rules. Damage is “a fancy card game: partly skill, partly luck and partly bluff”⁵⁰ and it ends “when only one player has any Lives left.”⁵¹ The point of the game is that every player has three Lives and each time they lose, they lose a Life.

It is very similar to losing lives in video games, but the important aspect of Damage is the fact that those Lives are living people who are stunned by some kind of gadget that affect the neurons in their brain. This gadget causes the Lives to be incapable of anything. They cannot talk, or move, they just sit behind the players and wait for their death.

One question that may arise is how the organizers persuade the Lives to come to the game, and where they find them. One option is that the Lives volunteer for money, and since it is almost certain that they are going to die, the money is instantly sent to someone close to them or donated to an organization of their choice. The other option is that the organizers get the Lives from facilities like hospitals, asylums or prisons.⁵² That may suggest that the death of someone who is not able to take care of himself does not matter to them at all.

The players do not see the Lives as worthy of being alive and they take away from them the right to choose if they even want to die. They are not afraid to look the death in the face when it is not their death, which is proven by the fact that the instances in which the players themselves risk their own lives are rare.⁵³

⁵⁰ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 194.

⁵¹ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 196.

⁵² Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 194.

⁵³ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 201.

5.5. Grief and mourning

Grief and mourning are an inseparable part of dealing with death in many cultures. Throughout history, grief and mourning were also used to portray death in literature, for example in the previously discussed Victorian period. Sandra L. Bertman points out psychological processes that are thought to be necessary when one is mourning, namely acceptance of death, grieving, reconciliation, detachment, and memorializing.⁵⁴ James Brown narrows those processes into three phases – being bereaved, grieving, and public mourning.⁵⁵ I am going to use both of their views to look into the portrayal of grief and mourning in *Consider Phlebas*.

Since grief and mourning are the result of death, the first death I am going to focus on is Kraiklyn's. Until his murder, he is a captain, which suggests that he has some kind of relationship with his crew. Even though they often express annoyance towards his selfless attitude, one may think that they would still be affected by his death more than they actually are when they find out. When Horza tells them the truth about their former captain, they are angry with Horza for lying, and they do not really address what happened with Kraiklyn.

According to Bertman, people grieve mainly when they lose a loved one or someone close to them.⁵⁶ That suggests that in Kraiklyn's case, the crew does not grieve because their relationship was not good enough.

As opposed to the situation where Horza comes across his dead peers, and among them, he finds a girl he loved before. It seems like he does not want to believe what he sees, and for a moment, he thinks (or hopes) that the girl is sleeping.⁵⁷ Since they are on The Planet of the Dead and, as was mentioned above, there is snow there and it is cold, the body of his loved one is frozen. He decides not to stay there too long, but his grief is obvious. He does not show his sadness physically, meaning he does not cry, or mourn in another way. The phases of dealing with death that were discussed by Bertman or Brown may not apply in Horza's case because he still has a job to do and he does not have time to mourn.

⁵⁴ Sandra L. Bertman, "The Language of Grief: Social-Science Theories and Literary Practice," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 1982, 154.

⁵⁵ John H. Han and C. Clark Triplett, *The Final Crossing: Death and Dying in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2015) 189.

⁵⁶ Berman, "The Language of Grief: Social-Science Theories and Literary Practice," 153.

⁵⁷ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 305.

What usually accompanies death and mourning are funerals. However, when another character Dorolow proposes to bury the dead Changers to honor them, Horza refuses and wants to take them away instead. He is grieving, but it seems that his form of mourning is not organizing a funeral, or even crying, but rather it is a revenge. He looks forward to killing the killers of the Changers and it is said that “he might even enjoy it.”⁵⁸

An instance where it is possible to observe “typical” mourning is the final scene from the novel where Horza is dying and Balveda is trying to save him. She starts to cry when he begins to lose consciousness because she probably knows he is not going to make it. She was crying while she was getting him on board of the spaceship and continued after he died.⁵⁹ Balveda’s dealing with death does not correspond to Bertman’s nor Brown’s propositions. She is grieving and mourning, but it seems that she does not reconcile with the fact that not only Horza, but many other people she knew died. She opts for being put into long-term storage, and even after she is woken up again, she chooses to be auto-euthanized.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 317.

⁵⁹ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 446.

⁶⁰ Banks, *Consider Phlebas*, 465.

6. The Player of Games

This chapter is concerned with the second novel from the Culture series, *The Player of Games*. In the following subchapters, I am going to discuss the portrayal and significance of death in more detail by looking at different instances and the behavior of characters in those moments. In comparison to *Consider Phlebas*, war does not play a significant role in *The Player of Games*, thus death is portrayed differently.

I am going to start with discussing the portrayal of death in connection with maintaining or gaining power, which is connected with a game, as the title may suggest. Then I am discussing assassination attempts, racially motivated murders, and last but not least, a social death.

6.1. Death and power

It can be observed in multiple historical events, that getting rid of people who stand in one's way can be used as a method to gain or maintain one's power. It is then logical that death is the result of those actions and that by one's death, the other one either gains power, or is able to maintain the power they already have.

To understand the correlation between death and power in *The Player of Games*, it is important to first introduce another game briefly from the Culture series called Azad. It is different from the game Damage that is played in *Consider Phlebas* in the way that Azad is not originally designed to kill anyone. The point of the game is that whoever wins is going to be the next Emperor and will gain all the power over the Empire.⁶¹

The main character Gurgeh, a skilled player from the Culture, is blackmailed to travel to the Empire to play this game. However, he finds himself in a very dangerous situation when the current Emperor Nicosar starts to feel threatened by Gurgeh's presence and even more by his skill. After two failed assassination attempts on Gurgeh, that I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, it seems that Nicosar's desire for power turns into insanity.

Charles D. Tarlton points out that the desire for an object, in this case it is power, is accompanied by certain amount of anxiety and irritation even when one just thinks about it, and they do not even have to obtain the object in question.⁶² Even though

⁶¹ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 76.

⁶² Charles D. Tarlton, "Political Desire and the Idea of Murder in Machiavelli's "The Prince",", *Philosophy*, Vol. 77, No. 299 January 2002, 39.

Tarlton's focus is Machiavelli's *The Prince*, his point about murder is applicable to *The Player of Games* as well. He discusses that the act of murder is considered to be a tool used to achieve one's desires in *The Prince*,⁶³ and looking at Nicosar's action, he also uses murder as a tool to fulfill his desire – to maintain power.

During the final round of the game, Nicosar draws his sword and while smiling, he orders his guards to go around the castle to kill anyone they come across.⁶⁴ Nicosar's anxiety and irritation over the fact that there is a possibility that he would not maintain his power may be an explanation of his attitude that seems to be a lot like an extreme version of "if I cannot, no one can." In the end, Nicosar is killed and his death results in him having no power and the Empire having no Emperor. It is then observable that one's death may not only result into the gain of power, but also in the loss.

6.2. Assassination attempts

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this section is concerned with two assassination attempts on Gurgeh initiated by Nicosar. The role of death in both of those cases is obvious – Gurgeh's death would grant Nicosar the power he wants. Even though he does not die in the end, the possibility of his death still plays a role in this novel.

The first attempt happens when Gurgeh has already gained some attention from the citizens of Azad, mostly unwanted and unpleasant. He is walking to a car when a group of people starts approaching him. He senses that he is in danger, so he tries to avoid the situation. He is being shot at, but his attacker fails and Gurgeh survives. Instead, another man is shot and later dies due to his injuries.⁶⁵ This type of assassination where the target is supposed to be killed with a gun seems to be the best known in the real world.

The second time Nicosar orders Gurgeh's assassination results in the death of someone else as in the first attempt. Gurgeh is asked to go hunting with a group of Azad citizens. There is also a man named Yomonul who lost a bet with Nicosar and as a result, he is put into an exoskeleton. It functions as a portable prison that makes the man only partially free because he can still fulfill his duties in the Empire, but he cannot move freely.⁶⁶ At one point during the hunting, Yomonul starts to shoot at Gurgeh who tries to escape. A guard kills Yomonul, but the exoskeleton continues to move even though the

⁶³ Tarlton, "Political Desire and the Idea of Murder in Machiavelli's "The Prince",” 40.

⁶⁴ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 289.

⁶⁵ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 181.

⁶⁶ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 236.

man who is supposed to control it is dead. It is apparent that the man lost control over the exoskeleton which is then controlled by someone else. This clearly shows Nicosar's dedication to kill Gurgeh.

In his essay, Oscar Jászsi discusses different types of assassinations based on the dominant motive for the act. One of those types is "assassination for power" that is connected with eliminating opponents who are either dangerous or hated.⁶⁷ In the case of *The Player of Games*, it is possible to observe that Gurgeh is both dangerous for and hated by Nicosar. His death would thus be convenient not only for Nicosar's regain of power but also for his peace of mind.

6.3. Racially motivated murders

In his essay, Gregory E. Rutledge points out an idea of Robert Scholes who says that race is not that important in sci-fi because its main focus is the future and new scientific discoveries.⁶⁸ Rutledge opposes to this idea by saying that it seems great as a vision for the future, but it could also give a rise to "a White future."⁶⁹ The idea of one ruling race is also present in *The Player of Games*, so in this section, I am going to discuss how this ideology results in death.

The Azad Empire is problematic in many aspects, and one of them is their attitude towards dark-skinned people. On one occasion, Gurgeh is taken by his drone to another part of town. There they come across, among other disturbing sightings, a crowd beating a man almost to death. The drone stops Gurgeh from helping him so no one can see Gurgeh's dark skin color. They try to get rid of the dark skin genes, but sometimes they come back which then results in the babies being taken, killed, and further studied.⁷⁰ Raising this child is punished by death so it is extremely dangerous for Gurgeh to walking around with his skin visible.

This incident shows that Scholes's idea that race is not important in sci-fi is in this case not accurate. In comparison to *Consider Phlebas*, race is not a problem, but here, the differences in color result in people being beaten and killed.

⁶⁷ Oscar Jászsi, "The Stream of Political Murder," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 3, No. 3 April 1944, 339.

⁶⁸ Gregory E. Rutledge, "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The "Racial" Establishment," *Callaloo*, Vol. 24, No. 1 2001, 239.

⁶⁹ Rutledge, "Futurist Fiction & Fantasy: The "Racial" Establishment," 239.

⁷⁰ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 205

6.4. Social death

Death is more often than not understood as a state in which one is not a living being anymore. However, in *The Player of Games*, there is mentioned another “type” of death, a social death.

The Culture does not function based on written laws, but rather on an agreed behavior. Since everyone in the Culture has enough of everything, there is no need to steal and thus the worst crime one can commit is a murder. As a result, one is punished, but not by being sent to prison. They, as Banks calls it, get a treatment in a form of a slap-drone that follows the murderer around and slaps them when they want to commit the crime again.⁷¹

In the novel, they talk about the social death and its results. Since everyone who is punished is followed by the drone, no one wants to speak to them, and no one invites them to any events.⁷² As a result, they stop living, like they were actually dead.

6.5. Musical Instruments

Music in literature may symbolize positive connotations with the objects in question, like joy or excitement, but also negative ones, like anger or even death. That musical instruments may be associated with death in literature can be observable for example in Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*. In the play, a death caused by a car crash is implied by a high note played on cello, or a flute on which a dead character played is then used to communicate with him.⁷³

Death in connection with music in *The Player of Games* is not directly accompanied by sound effects like playing on the cello in *Death of a Salesman*, but it is symbolized by various kinds of musical instruments. Their presence shows not only Banks’s personal interest in music, but also how citizens of Azad perceive death.

At one event, Gurgeh meets a man named Hamin and together they watch and listen to a local band. Hamin explains that they can produce such beautiful sounds because their instruments are special. They are made from human parts, mainly bones and skin, and strings from string instruments were used for murders before they were made into an

⁷¹ Banks, “A Few Notes on the Culture.”

⁷² Banks, *The Player of Games*, 225.

⁷³ Ian Thomson, “The Flute in Death of a Salesman,” *The Arthur Miller Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1 2017, 15-16.

instrument.⁷⁴ Hamin seems to be proud of it, he says “can you understand now why that music sounds so ... precious to those of us who know what has gone into the making of it?”⁷⁵ His appreciative comments towards the band and their music represents the whole Empire’s attitude towards death. Since they witness musicians playing instruments made out of human parts and enjoy it, it is safe to say that they think of death as something to be admired and as something to be proud of when it results in the creation of something beautiful like music.

⁷⁴ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 222.

⁷⁵ Banks, *The Player of Games*, 222.

7. Use of Weapons

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the role and portrayal of death in the third novel from the Culture series, *Use of Weapons*. The first subchapter is concerned with the murder of Darckense, sister of the main character Zakalwe in which I am discussing the importance and significance of her death. The other chapters are focused on suicide resulting in identity theft, long-term storage, and thoughts about impending death.

7.1. Darckense's death

So far, I have discussed various ways in which death is portrayed in the first two novels from the Culture series. One of them is death as a result of war which is also the case in *Use of Weapons*. However, in the case of Darckense, it is different because, as opposed to other characters, she is not a fighter, so she is not willingly risking her life.

Additionally, the reader is reminded of her death throughout the whole novel. It contains two story lines – one that moves chronologically forwards, following Zakalwe's current actions, and the second one moves backwards, uncovering his dark past. They both head towards Darckense's death. The first story line is focused on Elethiomel's remorse, but the latter might be more important for this thesis because it focuses on how and why Darckense's dies.

What leads to Darckense's death is a conflict between her brother Zakalwe and their stepbrother Elethiomel. Their bitter relationship is caused by Zakalwe's father and his unfair treatment of the two young boys who hated each other since their childhood because of it. Their rivalry results in them eventually standing on opposite sides during civil war. Neither of them is willing to surrender, not even after Darckense is taken hostage by Elethiomel. Zakalwe is thinking about giving up his power and position to save his sister, but he is reassured that she would survive.⁷⁶ However, he thinks about it for too long and Darckense is eventually killed.

She is thus a victim of years of culminated injustice and hostile feelings between two stepbrothers even though she treated them both with love while she was still alive. Johana Porcu-Adams discusses that the motivation behind the murder of a family member in literature is usually, among other reasons, revenge,⁷⁷ which is also a case in *Use of*

⁷⁶ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 377.

⁷⁷ Adriana Teodorescu, *Death Representations in Literature: Forms and Theories* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 84.

Weapons. Elethiomel wants not only revenge, but also dominance which he manages to assert by murdering someone his enemy loves.

As previously stated, Darckense's death forms the background of the novel. While this section deals with what lead to her murder and the motivation of her murderer behind his actions, the following section is concerned with the most important item that symbolizes her death, which is the Chair.

7.1.1. The Chair

Throughout the novel, Elethiomel refers to the Chair, or the Chairmaker, many times and it is not immediately clear what this obsession with chairs means.

As the story progresses, it is uncovered that the first significant incident involving the chair happens when Zakalwe catches Darckense and Elethiomel during a sexual act performed on the chair while she is crying, Elethiomel is smiling and Zakalwe leaves the room.⁷⁸ This incident may function as foreshadowing to something else, specifically to Elethiomel having power over Darckense's body and taking power from Zakalwe who is left to just observe the situation in both cases – during their intercourse and before Darckense's last moments during the war.

The Chair in question is made out of her skin and bones after Elethiomel kills her during the war, and it is then delivered to Zakalwe.⁷⁹ It is apparent that it symbolizes the previously discussed Elethiomel's dominance over Zakalwe, but more importantly, it symbolizes their sister's death. Elethiomel is haunted by her death, and he becomes so frustrated that he cannot stand being in a room with any chair⁸⁰ because it reminds him of his actions and Darckense's death.

There is a similarity between the Chair and musical instruments used in *The Player of Games* because all of the items are made out of human parts. However, there is a difference in what kind of feelings connect them with death. While the instruments, even though disturbing for the main character, portray death as something beautiful and admirable, the Chair connects death with pain and suffering.

⁷⁸ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 201.

⁷⁹ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 379.

⁸⁰ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 275.

7.2. Zakalwe's suicide

Darckense's death is not the only one that forms the background of the novel and that is important for the whole story. The second important death is that of Zakalwe. It is not directly said that he dies, but it is indicated that he barricades himself in a room and shoots himself. Banks then compares the battle between the two brothers and the attempt of surgeons to save Zakalwe's life by saying "It was a good battle, and they nearly won."⁸¹

According to Freud and his philosophy, one's subconscious motivation to commit suicide is based on one's desire to return to the mother and to be born again.⁸² However, nothing indicates that this idea can be applied to *Use of Weapons* since it does not seem that Zakalwe's relationship with his mother is significant for the story. His motivation is rather based on the overwhelming guilt he feels because his indecisiveness caused the death of his sister.

Considering the war and its effects on people fighting, one may choose to take their own life rather than be captured by the enemy.⁸³ It suggests the possibility that he at least partially chooses to die because he wants to save at least his own pride after he loses Darckense, the support of his other sister, and the battle itself.

7.2.1. Identity theft

Zakalwe's death leads to his identity being stolen by Elethiomel. Towards the end of the novel, it is thus revealed that while it seems that the story of Zakalwe is being followed in both story lines, the one moving forward is actually focused on Elethiomel. It follows his attempt to relieve his consciousness by getting to Livuetta, their second sister, and beg her for forgiveness.

One incident in which death results in identity theft has already been discussed in this thesis in the chapter on *Consider Phlebas*. The motivation behind both thefts is different – one man follows orders and the other wants to ease his mind. However, in both cases, deaths and the lives of those who died are taken advantage of.

⁸¹ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 380.

⁸² Harry Slochower, "Suicides in Literature: Their Ego Function," *American Imago*, Vol. 32, No. 4 1975, 390.

⁸³ Wang, Jernigan and Murphy, *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature*, 85.

7.3. Long-term storage

The concept of Sleeping Ship in *Use of Weapons* is similar to the long-term storage discussed in the chapter on *Consider Phlebas*. As opposed to long-term storages that are used to either postpone death or as an attempt to avoid it completely, The Sleeping ship is used for sleeping on long journeys. However, in both cases, an individual is connected to a device that not only monitors their bodily and brain functions, but also keeps them alive. One of those ships is presented in the story through Elethiomel's curiosity about how people who sleep there "live" and look like.

Their "beds" are referred to as "coffin-drawers"⁸⁴ which on its own suggests that death might be involved in the process since coffins generally symbolize death. After opening one of those "coffins," Elethiomel sees a woman that is described as "nearly completely dead" with "deathly pale face."⁸⁵ This description of a sleeping woman seems too close to one of a corpse. This may suggest that there is more death in places that preserve life than there is of an actual life.

The name of the ship itself may also suggest the presence of death. That is because of the usual use of "sleep" as a euphemism for dying.⁸⁶ This can be supported by the fact that in the novel it is mentioned that in order to "wake up from the sleep," the individual is revived, or in other words, brought back to life.⁸⁷

While inspecting the woman's body and her living conditions, Elethiomel takes into his hands a small blue cube that contains her brain patterns. He reflects on "how remarkable and at the same time how oddly sad"⁸⁸ it is to be able to put human life in a small cube. He considers killing the woman by "turning off" her life.⁸⁹ Elethiomel's thoughts on "turning off" someone's life shows not only his twisted character, but it also shows how fragile human life is and how death is always close.

7.4. Thinking about impending death

Similarly to *Consider Phlebas*, death in *Use of Weapons* is often referred to in characters' minds. They either reflect on their fear and uncertainty that come with

⁸⁴ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 352.

⁸⁵ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 353.

⁸⁶ Louise Pound, "American Euphemisms for Dying, Death, and Burial: An Anthology," *American Speech*, Vol. 11, No. 3 October 1936, 195.

⁸⁷ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 357.

⁸⁸ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 353.

⁸⁹ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 353.

possible near death, or they seemingly express reconciliation with their own passing. This section looks closer into some of those moments with the main focus on Elethiomel.

Elethiomel's attitude towards death is interesting because when his thoughts concerning his possible death are expressed in the story, he is not fearful or anxious. He seems rather reconciled or even unconcerned. At one point, he describes his life as dangerous and admits that he knows his death would probably be a violent one.⁹⁰ His attitude may be caused by traumatic events he experienced during his life so death and what comes after are not something that apparently concerns him.

There is another instance of Elethiomel thinking about his death that also shows how unbothered he feels about it. He says he has a "really nasty feeling" that he is dying, but right after that he adds that he is fine with it because all of his feelings are "pretty nasty."⁹¹ This shows that being reconciled with one's own death does not need to involve fear, loneliness, or shame, as the example with dying Idiran shows in the chapter on *Consider Phlebas*.

While discussing death in *Consider Phlebas*, specifically in the chapter on Grief and mourning, I am also discussing the importance of snow or ice that are often symbols of death in literature. Cold weather is present in *Use of Weapons* in connection with death as well. Elethiomel is lying in the snow only in light clothes while a blizzard is raging around him. His thoughts go back to Darckense and the other siblings, and while he is slowly dying, he calls out their names.⁹² He acknowledges the fact that he is about to die and that he is in pain, but mentally, he is focused on his step-siblings, specifically on Darckense whom he killed and Livuetta from whom he wants forgiveness. This instance shows that he does not care if he dies, but he certainly cares that if he actually died, he would not be able to meet Livuetta ever again.

⁹⁰ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 144.

⁹¹ Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 183.

⁹² Banks, *Use of Weapons*, 317-318.

8. Conclusion

The introductory part of this thesis firstly introduced the author of the Culture series himself, Iain M. Banks. He was a positive person who liked music, games, and who enjoyed life. However, his positivity is not so much reflected in his works. Considering the first three novels from the Culture series, he includes fun activities like playing games or making music, but with a twist. He adds violence, pain and even death to such activities. The portrayal of death suggests that it may have an interesting and also significant role in Banks's works.

Banks's life was then followed by introducing the Culture series to provide the background for the three novels that are discussed in this thesis. It was specified that the whole series is written in the genre of science fiction. That is important because some aspects of sci-fi, namely meeting new species, cryogenics and weapons, that are used in the series support the theme of death. The fact that the series is set during the war is also significant because war is either directly or indirectly the reason why the characters from the series die.

After introducing the author and the series, I discussed death in literature in general and then death in science fiction. However, during the writing of this thesis, I came to the realization that to discuss all of the important aspects of death in literature is not entirely possible. I therefore opted for focusing on writers' fascination with death and their motivation to write about it. They seem to be inspired mainly by the fear of the unknown and by desire to understand their own feelings about death. I also highlighted the Victorian era because their fascination with death is not only apparent in their literature, but also in paintings and photos in which families are portrayed with their deceased relatives.

While discussing death in science fiction, it was important to also focus on the technologies that the genre offers additionally to the usual feelings of sadness and pain. Apart from technologies that can cause death, like laser guns or battle ships, there is cryogenics that allows people to postpone death which is important especially in *Consider Phlebas*.

I started the analysis with the first novel of the series, *Consider Phlebas*. One of the things I focused on the most, not only in this novel but also in the others, is how characters come in contact with death and how they deal with it. The fact that they find themselves in the middle of war is important here because there is a high possibility that

they will lose their life. The characters tend to reflect on their possible death or even suicide when they feel like there is no other way out of their situation. Apart from feeling sad and lonely, they also feel disappointed that their end is near after all of the hard work they put in.

Some of the characters also reflect on their immortality and afterlife which was discussed in connection with the Idirans and their god-like nature. Even though they are considered to be immortal, there is a scene with dying Idiran who describes his final moments as being surrounded by darkness. He then reflects on afterlife by wondering if he was about to continue somewhere else after he dies. With connection to afterlife and immortality, I also discussed long-term storages which use the technology of cryogenics. Here, it was interesting to see how technology allows people to experience partial immortality.

I discussed that all of the characters show their fearless attitude towards death by risking their own lives for others. One of the incidents that I discussed in the text and that I would like to point out here is their arrival to The Planet of the Dead. Ignoring all of the warnings and following Horza's orders, the characters discover dead bodies covered in snow, which also symbolizes death, and most of them eventually die there.

Another death caused by following orders is that of Kraiklyn. After he dies, his identity is stolen by Horza who is blinded by his loyalty to Idirans. I discussed that Kraiklyn's death functions here as Horza's tool to persuade other crew members to help him obey Idirans.

Kraiklyn's character is also tied to the game Damage. Banks's personal interest in creating games is expressed here, but it contains the above-mentioned twist because death accompanies something fun like games. I discussed how the players use other people as Lives in the game without taking into consideration that those Lives are living human beings.

While analyzing the second novel, *The Player of Games*, I noticed that it portrays death differently than the other two novels. For instance, the characters do not die directly fighting in the war. Death is rather seen as a way to power. I discussed the correlation between death and power by looking closely at two characters, Nicosar and Gurgeh, who are playing the game of Azad. This is also another instance, where one can observe Banks's personal interest in creating games. I discussed how Gurgeh's death is important for Nicosar by looking closely at two unsuccessful assassination attempts followed by

Nicosar ordering every person in the empire to be killed which brings more deaths to the novel.

While in *Consider Phlebas* or *Use of Weapons* race does not seem to be an issue, in *The Player of Games* it does. In the chapter on Racially motivated murders, it was discussed that fusion of all races in science fiction works can be both positive and negative. However, having dark skin in this novel is not taken well and it often results in death. I discussed this problem by pointing out the incident where Gurgeh has to cover his body in order to not lose his life.

Death is also portrayed in connection with music in *The Player of Games*. This portrayal was discussed by looking at one event where the main character Gurgeh observes and listens to the musicians playing the instruments made out of human parts. He is told that they are proud of the origin of those instruments, which suggests that even though death is usually not considered to be a pleasant experience, the citizens of Azad think of it as something beautiful and admirable.

The third novel of the Culture series and the last one that I focused on in this thesis is *Use of Weapons*. Just like with the previous two novels, I looked into how death is portrayed by focusing on the characters and their interactions and experiences with death.

There are two characters whose death form the background of the whole novel. The first one is Darckense whose death is symbolized by the Chair that is made out of her skin and bones. The Chair is referred to from the beginning of the story as something terrifying, and just towards the end is it revealed what the significance of it is. It is apparent that Elethiomel, the man who killed Darckense and who also ordered the Chair to be made, is haunted by her death and he thus cannot stand being around any chair.

The second important death is that of Zakalwe. He commits suicide and his death allows Elethiomel to steal his identity. This identity theft is similar to the one in *Consider Phlebas*. Even though both identities are stolen for different reasons, they are both possible because of someone's death.

Considering technologies that alter one's life, apart from weapons, there is a kind of long-term storage called Sleeping Ship. I discussed one incident involving Elethiomel visiting this ship out of curiosity. He is thinking about how easy it would be to turn off the life of a woman lying in one of the beds. This moment is important because he then reflects on how fragile life is which may suggest that death is closer than one might expect.

Another similarity between *Use of Weapons* and the other two novels is that in this novel, characters also tend to think about their impending deaths. Especially Elethiomel whose approach to death is quite interesting. I discussed a few moments in which he almost died and in all of them, it seems that he is fine with it. By further inspection, it is possible to say that his calmness is probably the result of his traumatic and dangerous life that prepared him for whatever death brings.

Death in the three selected novels is portrayed differently, but there are some similarities, for example inclusion of games and music, the use of technologies, identity thefts, but also common feelings of the characters like loneliness or pain. Even though this thesis is focused only on the first three novels because of the restriction of space, there seems to be a pattern of the above-mentioned similarities. It would thus be interesting to extend the research to other novels either from the Culture series, or other Banks's novels since death appears in his works outside the series as well.

Resumé

Bakalářská práce s názvem *Téma smrti ve vybraných románech Iaina M. Bankse* je uvedena otázkou, proč je smrt v literatuře diskutována a jakým způsobem tuto diskuzi obohacuje žánr sci-fi. Práce se věnuje konkrétním sci-fi románům, jmenovitě *Pomysli na Fléba*, *Hráč* a *K čemu jsou zbraně*. Cílem této práce je zjistit, jakým způsobem je smrt zobrazena právě v těchto románech. Důraz je kladen na postavy, které se se smrtí nějakým způsobem setkávají a jak se s tím vypořádávají.

První úvodní kapitola se zabývá životem autora. Zaměřuje se na jeho dětství, začátky psaní a to, jakým byl člověkem, jelikož se často tyto skutečnosti promítají do samotné tvorby autorů. Banks byl veselý a hravý člověk, jehož život nebyl nijak zvlášť poskvřen traumatickými zážitky. Zajímal se mimo jiné o hudbu a o vytváření her. Právě tyto většinou radostné aktivity však ve své tvorbě doplňuje o bolest a násilí, které vyúsťují ve smrt.

Následně je uvedena samotná knižní série *Kultura*. Kapitola o *Kultuře* se zabývá tím, jak spolu romány souvisí a jaké jsou mezi nimi podobnosti. Je uveden historický kontext, ve kterém je nejdůležitější událostí *Studená válka* a následný strach z nukleární války. Spojitost mezi těmito událostmi je možná, není však potvrzená. Válka hraje roli i v samotných dílech a pro tuto práci je důležitá, jelikož právě válka je hlavní příčinou smrti. Další dopady války však v této práci diskutovány nejsou. V úvodu do *Kultury* je tato série také zařazena do žánru sci-fi, a tím pádem oddělena od podobného žánru *fantasy*.

Před tím, než jsou analyzovány jednotlivé knihy se práce zabývá také smrtí v literatuře obecně. Zde je důraz kladen na motivaci autorů se tomuto tématu věnovat. Tato motivace pravděpodobně pramení ze strachu z neznáma a ze zájmu o to, co se děje po smrti. V této části je vyzdvihnuto *Viktoriánské období*, jelikož v této době byla smrt bodem zájmu jak v literatuře, tak v běžném životě. Žánr *science fiction* poté obohacuje literaturu o technologie, kromě zbraní je to hlavně *kryogenika*.

Zbývající části práce se zabývají jednotlivými romány. Důraz je kladen na to, jakým způsobem se postavy se smrtí setkávají a jak se s ní v takovém případě vyrovnávají.

Prvním románem, kterým se práce zabývá je *Pomysli na Fléba*. Postavy často myslí na blížící se smrt v situacích, kdy je jisté nebo velmi pravděpodobné, že zemřou, nebo uvažují o sebevraždě. V jejich myšlenkách se objevují nejen pocity samoty, ale také

pocity zklamání. Některé postavy také přemýšlí o tom, jestli je po smrti něco čeká. Jejich posmrtný život však zmíněn není. Vlivem války se v tomto románu postavy se smrtí setkávají takzvaně na každém rohu. Postavy jsou často nuceny riskovat svůj vlastní život, a tím pádem riskovat smrt, aby zachránily buď sebe, nebo někoho dalšího. Riskování života je podrobněji diskutováno ve spojitosti s návštěvou Planety smrti.

V *Pomysli na Fléba* je zakomponována také hra *Damage*, jejíž podstatou je nasazení nevinných lidských životů, které fungují jako životy ve videohrách. Zde však každý ztracený život znamená smrt člověka. Smrt v tomto románu také umožňuje krádež identity, která je zakomponována také v *K čemu jsou zbraně*.

Druhou rozebíranou knihou je román s názvem *Hráč*. V tomto případě se práce nejprve zabývá hrou *Azad*, která poukazuje na spojitost mezi smrtí a mocí. Tato spojitost je zkoumána pomocí dvou hlavních hrdinů, Gurgeho a Nicosara, kteří se o moc utkají na život a na smrt. Součástí jejich soupeření jsou také dva pokusy o atentát na Gurgeho, které nařídí Nicosar, jelikož Gurgeho smrt by mu přinesla vytouženou moc.

Práce dále rozebírá, jak je v tomto románu vnímána rasa, a jak rasové problémy vedou ke smrti. Tato problematika je zkoumána pomocí situace, ve které Gurgeh musí skrývat barvu své pleti, aby přežil. Skrze Gurgehův pohled jsou dále probírány hudební nástroje, a to, jakým způsobem symbolizují smrt. V neposlední řadě se tato práce v této části zaměřuje na takzvanou sociální smrt, kdy je jedinec po spáchání zločinu doprovázen dronem, který hlídá, aby nespáchal další zločin, a tím pádem je dotýčný pro společnost „mrtvý“.

Posledním zkoumaným románem je *K čemu jsou zbraně*. Jako první se práce zabývá smrtí dvou postav, které jsou podstatné pro celý příběh. První postavou je Darckense, sestra hlavního hrdiny, jejíž smrt je symbolizována židlí. Tento symbol je zmiňován již od samotného začátku knihy a poukazuje na to, jak traumatická byla smrt Darckense pro hlavní postavu Elethiomela. Zakalwe je druhou postavou, jejíž smrt je důležitá pro tento román. Zkoumána je jeho sebevraždou a následným ukradením jeho identity, které je podobné tomu v *Pomysli na Fléba*.

Postava Elethiomela v tomto románu nabízí pohled jak na smrt, tak i na život. Tato práce se nejdříve zabývá jeho pohledem na život, který je spojen s technologiemi. Elethiomel sleduje spící ženu v kryogenické komoře připojenou k počítači a uvažuje o tom, jak křehký a snadno zničitelný je lidský život. Smrt je z jeho pohledu poté vnímána jako něco, s čím je již dávno smířený, jelikož jeho život byl natolik traumatický a nebezpečný, že smrt už nebere jako něco, čeho by se měl bát.

Anotace

Bakalářská práce se zabývá smrtí ve vybraných románech Iaina M. Bankse. Jmenovitě jsou to *Pomysli na Fléba*, *Hráč* a *Použití zbraní*. Práce se zaměřuje na to, za jakých okolností se postavy se smrtí setkávají, a jak se s ní následně vyrovnávají. Romány jsou rozebírány postupně s ohledem na to, jakým způsobem a do jaké míry je v nich smrt vyobrazena.

Klíčová slova

Iain M. Banks, smrt, posmrtný život, sci-fi, technologie, válka, strach

Annotation

Bachelor thesis deals with death in selected novels by Iain M. Banks, namely *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons*. The thesis focuses on circumstances under which characters encounter death and how they deal with it. The novels are analyzed one by one with the respect to how and to what extent death is portrayed in them.

Key Words

Iain M. Banks, death, afterlife, sci-fi, technology, war, fear

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