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THE MOTIF OF THE HORSE IN “LETHAL WHITE” BY ROBERT GALBRAITH: WHY HAS THE AUTHOR MADE IT SO UNAVOIDABLE?

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Motifs function as recurring narrative elements, growing in impact as the story unfolds. The motif of the horse is central to the narrative of *Lethal White*, the fourth book in the crime series by Robert Galbraith (J. K. Rowling). This study aims at examining the contribution of the motif of the horse to the plot structure of the novel and to the development of its themes.

In the article, the linguistic/figurative items that realize the motif of the horse in *Lethal White* are categorized in accordance with the system of text-world elements suggested by Text World Theory. As for the plot structure of the novel, the motif discussed is plot-intensive since it highlights all the nuclear action sequences. Moreover, when the three main plot lines (investigations of different yet connected crimes by a private detective duo, Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott) intersect, the motif centered on the horse recurs at the points of intersections. Cognitively, this motif underscores the themes of *Lethal White* that are related to some basic elements of British culture: historical heritage of the nation, social ranking, ethics of human-horse relationship, aesthetic and commercial aspects of art, horse racing as a popular equestrian activity, a pastime, and a sports betting business. The motif of the horse is most ingeniously (through the use of paratextual/intertextual/rhetorical devices, specific terms, factual descriptions) employed by the author to bring to the fore the theme of death, which is ubiquitous in all novels by Robert Galbraith / J. K. Rowling. In *Lethal White*, the death of animals equals to the death of humans. Overall, it can be claimed that, setting aside the issue of crime, the author addresses both universal and culture-specific problems, and presents a realistic picture of contemporary British society.

МОТИВ КОНЕЙ У РОМАНІ “LETHAL WHITE” РОБЕРТА ГЕЛБРЕЙТА: ФЕНОМЕН НЕУНИКНОСТІ

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Мотиви функціонують як повторювані наративні елементи, вплив яких зростає по мірі розвитку сюжету. Мотив коней є одним із провідних у детективі «*Lethal White*», четвертому романі кримінальної серії Роберта Гелбрейта (Дж. К. Роулінг). Метою нашої розвідки є дослідження ролі означеного мотиву у розгортанні сюжету роману та розвитку його тем.

Лінгвістичні одиниці та стилістичні прийоми, які реалізують мотив коней у романі «*Lethal White*», класифікуються у статті за системою елементів, розробленою у парадигмі теорії світу тексту. З точки зору структури сюжету мотив, що аналізується, є одним із ключових елементів наративу. Крім того, коли три основні сюжетні лінії роману (розслідування різних, але пов'язаних між собою справ приватними детективами Кормораном Страйком і Робін Еллакотт) перетинаються, мотив коней неминуче з'являється у точці перетину. З когнітивної точки зору досліджуваний мотив висвітлює теми роману, що пов'язані з деякими базовими елементами британської культури, такими як національна історична спадщина, соціальна структура суспільства, етика відносин між людиною і твариною, естетичний і комерційний аспекти мистецтва, кінські перегони як спорт, що демонструє здатності тварини, як дозвілля людини і бізнес. Автор майстерно застосовує мотив коней (використовуючи паратекстуальні, інтертекстуальні та риторичні прийоми, специфічну термінологію, описи) для розкриття теми смерті, однієї із провідних тем усіх романів Роберта Гелбрейта / Дж. К. Роулінг. У романі «*Lethal White*» смерть тварини зіставляється зі смертю людини. Отже, залишаючи поза дужками питання злочину як невід'ємного атрибуту детективного жанру, можемо стверджувати, що автор звертається до загальнолюдських і специфічно національних проблем та представляє реалістичну картину сучасного британського суспільства.

Introduction. Motifs function as recurring narrative elements, growing in impact and meaning as the story unfolds; they enhance the cognitive and emotive aspects of narratives, as well as their plot structure (Morgan, 2015). While there is scholarly consensus about the recurrent nature of the literary motif, some sources present it as partly synonymous to the notion of the theme; for instance, motif is “a usually recurring salient thematic element (as in the arts) / *especially*: a dominant idea or central theme” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025); “Motif is more commonly used in literary and film studies as a synonym for leitmotif: a recurrent theme or idea in a text or oeuvre” (Wales, 2011: 277);

“A motif is a recurring theme, verbal pattern, or narrative unit in a single text or a number of different texts” (Nordquist, 2024).

This study shares the view of H. Porter Abbott, who draws a distinction between the notions of the motif and the theme: the motif is “[a] discrete thing, image, or phrase that is repeated in a narrative. Theme, by contrast, is a more generalized or abstract concept that is suggested by, among other things, motifs”; the theme is “[a] subject (issue, question) that recurs in a narrative through implicit or explicit reference. [...] Where motifs tend to be concrete, themes are abstract” (Abbott, 2008: 237, 242 respectively). Likewise, James M. Morgan states that

motifs, recurrent elements in a literary work, are typically concrete (for instance, repeated objects or expressions), while themes are abstract (for example, concepts, main ideas); also, motifs can have symbolic value (Morgan, 2015). William Freedman argues that a motif derives from a structured set of related expressions such as “a family or associational cluster of literal or figurative references to a given class of concepts or objects, whether it be animals, machines, circles, music, or whatever” (Freedman, 1971: 128).

The motif of the horse is central to the narrative of *Lethal White*, the fourth book in the crime series by Robert Galbraith (J. K. Rowling). In the novel, the horse is discussed from many perspectives: as a saddle animal, a racing animal, an animal for breeding purposes, an animal that needs medical care, a companion, a sign of belonging to the upper classes, a prehistoric hill figure, a popular pub name, a subject of painting, a carpenter’s trademark, the biblical pale horse.

The horse as a part of human life is the subject of many studies. Here are some of the many examples:

- the references to the Trojan horse in the text of the *Odyssey* aim to “to inflate the heroic reputation of the protagonist, Odysseus” (Murphy, 2017: 19);
- the horse evolved into a status symbol in medieval Western Europe (Boniface, 2014);
- Cervantes’s animals are portrayed as individuals, Rocinante is a reflection or even a double of his master, Don Quijote (Martín, 2017);
- *Gulliver’s Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* suggests that “the Houyhnhnms, far from being a model of perfection, are intended to show the inadequacy of the life of reason” (Williams, 1951: 277);
- the horse plays a dual role as a functional being and a bearer of cultural identity in early-modern culture (Edwards et al., 2012);
- the polysemous nature of the horse as a symbol explains the popularity of the horse image in the context of Finnish historical fiction (Seitsonen et al., 2023).

The aim of this article is twofold: (i) to examine the contribution the motif of the horse to the plot structure of *Lethal White* by Robert Galbraith and to the development of the novel’s themes (ii) to discuss whether it was the author’s intention to depict (some aspects of) contemporary British culture as it really is.

Material and methods. In *Lethal White*, Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott, two private detectives featured in all books of Galbraith’s series, investigate the case of blackmail and murder of Jasper Chiswell, a Member of Parliament and Minister for Culture. Yet, Robert Galbraith’s novels are more than detective fiction. Leaving aside the question of crime (an indispensable feature of the genre), it can

be said that they present a panorama of contemporary British society.

The horse, which has always been and remains an important element of British culture (Crane, n.d.; Goldstein, 2015; Goode, 2024; Huggins, 2003; Johnson, n.d.; Munkwitz, 2023; Santoleri, 2015; Watson et al., 2025), keeps emerging in different aspects of the discourse of *Lethal White* (descriptions, action, dialogues) – in the form of a living or dead animal, the name of pubs, the prehistoric cultural monument, an artistic image; in the context of horse racing events, veterinary services; as a paratextual element, etc. Consequently, it becomes a motif.

This article adopts Morgan’s definition of the motif, which is in line with Freedman’s conception of the phenomenon: the motif is “a recurring element in a single literary work, which might be an unchanging element (phrase, object, etc.) or a group of literal and figurative expressions from a particular semantic domain (a family or associational cluster) whose collective function is to act symbolically, revealing progressively to the reader – with cumulative effect – ‘subtly what the incidents perhaps tell him bluntly’ ” (Morgan, 2015: 199; Freedman, 1971: 124).

Analysis of the motif of the horse in *Lethal White* involves the following steps:

- categorizing linguistic/figurative items that express the above motif in accordance with the elements of Text World Theory;
- considering the role of the motif in the progression of the plot;
- examining its contribution to the thematic content in the novel.

Results and discussion. There is a whole network of linguistic and figurative items pertaining to the semantic domain of the horse in the novel under discussion. Some of them are repetition of a word or a phrase, others belong to this or that “associational cluster that permits placing various expressions together” (Morgan, 2015: 202).

According to Text World Theory (Werth, 1999; Gavins, 2007), the basic elements that help to create and process the text are world-builders, relational processes, and function-advancing propositions. In the current study, this framework is used to categorize linguistic/figurative items that highlight the motif of the horse in *Lethal White*; a minor addition to the category of world-builders is the element of animals. The reference for all the citations in this section of the article is (Galbraith, 2018); the page number for each citation is given in the parenthesis. These are but few of the many examples of verbalization of the motif of the horse in the novel:

World-builders

animals, e.g., horse, mare, filly, stallion, foal, pony, miniature horse, thoroughbred, racehorse, bachelor herds;

characters, e.g., owners and trainers, jockeys, “stable girls and lads” (657);

objects, e.g., “The White Horse of Hanover” (a heraldic symbol) (117), “chalk figure” (409), “a large tub of horse feed” (411), “jodhpurs” (411), “printed lists of runners” (652), “the saddle and bridle” (664);

entities, e.g., “Queens Own Hussars” (107), “Cavalry or Guards regiments” (113–114);

places, e.g., stables, paddock, racecourse, the jockeys’ changing room, the outdoor school; “up by the horse” (48–49, 593), “the White Horse” (pub and inn) (77, 445), “the Bay Horse” (pub) (446), “the Crafty Filly” (bar) (650), “White Horse Road” (78), “a mews flat in London” (294), “the Vale of the White Horse” (672, 678), “Newbury Racecourse” (650).

Relational processes

characteristics of animals, e.g., brown, bay, grey, white, spotted, jet, black, piebald, chestnut, “a hairy creature the colour of jet” (410), “splashy brown and white” and “starkly white” (413) (coat colour); “Bloody, uncontrollable, bad-mannered, hot-blooded horses” (203), “Top dressage stallion” (503), “the nervy creatures with their silken flanks and their prancing strides” (657);

characteristics of persons, e.g., “horse-mad” (203), “Awful hands and a horrible seat, but she thinks she’s Charlotte Dujardin” (about Kinvara, one of the characters) (329); “jockeys in their silks perched atop them like monkeys” (657);

characteristics of objects, e.g., “A gigantic prehistoric white chalk figure” (409); “A pale horse” (in the context of *Lethal White*, a pale horse – unlike its rider, Death (Revelation 6:8 KJV) – can be considered as a symbolic object) (451).

Function-advancing propositions

actions, e.g., “put one of her mares in foal to Totilas” (the name of a stallion) (503), “put down a beloved mare” (565), “schooling Brandy” and “untack Brandy” (the name of a horse) (663, 664), “euthanise horses” (691), “losing a fiver on the nose on the favourite” (651), “Brown Panther came in second” (the name of a horse) (677), “breed this beautiful Grand Prix horse” (738);

states, e.g., “lethal white syndrome”, “laminitis” (equine diseases) (422, 423);

events, e.g., “the Epsom Derby” (651), “race” (675).

The diversity of the forms of expression reflects the complexity of the subject and allows to suggest that the author wants to take readers beyond the boundaries of a detective story.

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The repeated presence of the motif contributes to development of the novels’ plot structure. It should be noted that the notion of plot “cannot

be reduced to the notion of conflict, change, story, or story structure. [Rather, it is] the progressive exploration of a work’s central questions [...], namely, a cognitive and affective encounter with the unfolding description of real and imaginary situations and questions” (Morgan, 2015: 207–208). There is a correlation between the plot structure and the motif: the latter “usually builds around a nuclear action sequence which can take different forms and cover more than a single event. Plot-intensive motifs stand at the centre of the logic of action [...]” (Würzbach, 2005: 322).

It can be justly said that in *Lethal White*, the motif of the horse is plot-intensive. There are three main plot lines in the novel: the investigations of a strangled child’s case, the case of blackmailing Chiswell, and the case of his death. The motif of the horse helps to develop all the nuclear action sequences:

A mentally ill young man by the name of Billy Knight visits Strike’s office. Billy claims that years ago he witnessed a child being strangled “up by the horse” and buried “in the dell” (Galbraith, 2018: 49). Later, it turns out that he meant the Uffington White Horse, the prehistoric hill figure on the slopes of White Horse Hill in Oxfordshire, and a dell on the premises of the Chiswell estate in the same county.

Strike is hired by Jasper Chiswell, the Minister for Culture, who is being blackmailed by his political opponent and another person, Jimmy Knight (Billy’s brother), a radical left-wing activist. Coming originally from an affluent upper-class background, Chiswell experiences serious financial hardship and has very strained relations with his second wife, Kinvara, who is fond of horses and has stables at Chiswell’s dilapidated Oxfordshire estate.

One day Chiswell is found dead in his London house. His daughter Izzy hires Strike and Robin again to investigate, and an unpalatable truth comes out. Before the European Union prohibited the export of torture and execution devices, Chiswell and his carpenter, Jimmy and Billy’s father, used to manufacture gallows for international sale. The gallows can be traced back to Chiswell as they carry the carpenter’s “trademark” – the image of the Uffington White Horse.

Strike remembers his promise to Billy to establish the truth about the child that might have been strangled on White Horse Hill. The detectives dig up the dell on the Chiswells’ property and find the skull of a miniature horse.

In the Chiswell country house, Strike and Robin pay attention to a painting of a mare mourning a foal who died of lethal white syndrome. “Mare Mourning” might be a lost artwork by the famous George Stubbs, and if so, it would be worth a fortune. Strike understands that it was the real

motive behind the murder: Chiswell was killed by his illegitimate son Raphael, who planned to lay his hands on “Mare Mourning”, seduced his step-mother, Kinvara, and made her his accomplice in staging Chiswell’s murder as suicide. The murderer replaces a probable Stubbs with a much cheaper painting on the same subject, but the mares in the two pictures have different coat colours.

Strike finds out that Chiswell’s daughter Izzy can unravel the mystery of the “strangled child”. Many years ago Billy, who was young and sick, misinterpreted two separate acts of cruelty. Chiswell’s elder son Freddie, who “always had a terrible temper” (Galbraith, 2018: 769), choked Raphael, his and Izzy’s little half-brother; the boy lost consciousness. Another manifestation of Freddie’s sadistic inclinations was putting three bullets through the head of a miniature horse. The animal was secretly buried in the dell.

The following example of the link between the motif and the novel’s plot structure is especially illustrative. Robin is abducted by Raphael, he holds her at gunpoint: “he raised the gun a fraction to point directly at Robin’s forehead (and she thought of [...] the one clean shot that the horse in the dell had been denied)” (Galbraith, 2018: 735).

The three main plot lines – the cases of the “strangled child”, blackmailing and murdering Chiswell – intersect, the motif of the horse appearing at the points of intersections. The following examples can illustrate this thesis:

Billy, obsessed with the hallucination that a child was strangled “up by the horse”, is taken from the street to the house of Chiswell’s political opponent and blackmailer, where he carves the white horse on the bathroom door in one of his tantrums (Galbraith, 2018: 466, 600–601). Strike and Robin are asked to investigate Chiswell’s death and invited to his Oxfordshire house; they understand the meaning of Billy’s phrase “up by the horse” only when they see White Horse Hill in Uffington, Oxfordshire (Galbraith, 2018: 409). The detectives find the skull of a horse in the dell on the grounds of the Chiswell estate. That same evening, they see that “Mare mourning” is missing from its place in the drawing room of the Chiswell House, but Kinvara does not seem to notice its absence. Strike realizes that the murderer, Raphael, wants to steal a probable Stubbs from Kinvara, his lover and accomplice (Galbraith, 2018: 692, 699–700).

Thus, the motif of the horse appears in revealing and climatic points of the story, binding together the whole of the novel.

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The motif discussed definitely facilitates the narrative progression; but it may appear to recur in the novel with somewhat excessive frequency.

For example, at first glance, Kinvara’s everyday activities and talks related to tending her horses are not exactly necessary (Galbraith, 2018: 411, 414, 418, 420, 425, 428). The same goes for the Trojan horse mentioned by Flick, an “anti-poverty campaigner”; the proper names, such as the White Horse (pub), the Bay Horse (pub), White Horse Road, the White Horse inn; the portrayal of Chiswell’s dead body, with the coarse hair obscuring his eyes like a forelock of a horse; a painting in Drummond’s art gallery featuring a pair of “unrealistic horses”; a description of Newbury Racecourse, where the detectives just interviewed a witness and whiled away their time before their digging expedition aimed at resolving the mystery of the “strangled child”; the image of the Uffington White Horse on wooden trinkets for tourists made by Billy Knight (Galbraith, 2018: 76, 77, 83–85, 337, 445, 500, 650–677, 671 respectively). In these and some other cases, the motif does not seem to add much to the story. Yet, one cannot but agree with the following thesis: the motif must “recur often enough and be used beyond cases of mere coincidence or necessity” (Morgan, 2015: 202).

Robert Galbraith makes the motif of the horse unavoidable because “[n]arratives [...] seek to provide an encounter for readers, not only to supply information” (Morgan, 2015: 195). It can be claimed that it is Galbraith’s intention to give readers more than a whodunit story and that, setting aside the problem of crime, *Lethal White*, as well as the whole Strike series (Kulchytska & Erlikhman, 2024: 92), presents a realistic picture of contemporary British society.

Motifs can contribute to the cognitive aspect of a literary work, for example, to its *themes* (Morgan, 2015: 200). In *Lethal White*, the motif of the horse underscores the themes related to some basic elements of British culture: historical heritage of the nation, social stratification, human-animal relationship, aesthetic and commercial aspects of art, horse racing as a sport and a gambling industry (the list is by no means exhaustive). Consider the examples below.

The Uffington White Horse, whose image keeps recurring in *Lethal White*, is located at the National Trust’s White Horse Hill in Oxfordshire. The origins of the hill figure are traced “in medieval documents written 700 to 100 years ago, but scientific dating confirmed that it was originally carved in prehistory” (Oxford Archaeology, n.d.).

Social stratification is one of the leading themes in the novel: Charlotte (Strike’s ex-girlfriend) and Izzy have a highly illuminating upper-class chat about owning horses and riding as a leisure activity; for Charlotte’s aristocratic family, whose “gentlemen enter Cavalry or Guards regiments”, Strike’s

service in the Military Police was a sign of “plebeian unfitness” (Galbraith, 2018: 328–329, 113–114 respectively).

Galbraith shows bonds that can develop between people and horses: Robin says, “There is an old saying, [...] the horse is your mirror”; Kinvara, who lost a baby, is “excessively attached to her horses”; Izzy describes the miniature horse that was killed by her sadist brother, Freddy, as “awfully sweet. [...] She’d follow you around like a dog” (Galbraith, 2018: 436, 738, 769 respectively).

The very name of the 18th century British painter George Stubbs, who is celebrated for his mastery of equestrian and animal portraits (Jebb, 2024), and the discussion of aesthetic, historical, and monetary value of his picture in the context of the novel indicate the importance of this trend in art in British culture: if “Mare Mourning” is genuine, its price might be over twenty million pounds because it is “a unique subject. Stubbs was an anatomist, as much a scientist as artist”, his lethal white foal “might be the first recorded instance” (Galbraith, 2018: 725–726).

Last but not least is the theme of the popularity of horse racing events in Britain: see a detailed description of Newbury Racecourse and betting at the Epsom Derby (Galbraith, 2018: 650–677).

Alongside the above culture-related themes, Robert Galbraith explores the universal theme of death (parenthetically, it is also traced in the *Harry Potter* series and *The Casual Vacancy* by J. K. Rowling). It is developed throughout the whole narrative, but two cases attract special attention – the title and two epigraphs. The title, *Lethal White*, clearly has what Hanna Pułaczewska (2009: 273) calls a “connotative value”. Also, the theme is particularly reinforced in the epigraph to chapter 35: “... the White Horse! In broad daylight! / Henrik Ibsen. *Rosmersholm*” (Galbraith, 2018: 337). The epigraph is a paratextual and intertextual phenomenon (Ekman & Taylor, 2021; Mintsys & Kryshstopa, 2024); its mood foregrounds the theme, “bring[ing] out dominant or central aspects of the [fictional] world’s universe” (Ekman & Taylor, 2021: 245). Discussing Chiswell’s case, Strike and Robin mention a play that features white horses as a death omen and the image of death riding a pale horse in Revelations (Galbraith, 2018: 450–451). Here the motif of the white horse acquires “symbolic correlation” (Morgan, 2015: 203).

Thus, the motif of the horse truly “pervade[s] the atmosphere” (Freedman, 1971: 126) of Robert Galbraith’s novel.

Conclusions. The literary motif centered on the horse runs consistently through the narrative of *Lethal White*. It is a part of the total perspective of Robert Galbraith’s novel and communicates its core concerns.

The expressions chosen by the author to represent the domain of “horse” go beyond the unchanging key element and convey a deep and nuanced understanding of the subject and the motif’s contribution to the structural and cognitive dimensions of the work. The motif of the horse is plot-intensive: it is an essential rhetorical device that underpins the entire composition of the novel and enhances the progression of the story. Cognitively, this motif helps, among other things, to develop some essential literary and social themes. In addition to highlighting the universal theme of death, it underscores several culture-specific themes. It allows readers to look into some aspects of the social fabric of Britain – the nation’s historical legacy, class stratification, relationship between humans and animals, the aesthetic and commercial sides of art, horse racing as an equestrian performance sport and business.

In this study, the problem of the motif’s contribution to the affective side of the novel, to its emotive content remains undiscussed, which opens new perspectives for further analysis of Robert Galbraith’s narratives.

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