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**Yulia Lysanets
Olena Bieliaieva
Inesa Rozhenko**

THE MOTIFS OF EPIDEMIC AND PANDEMIC IN THE LITERARY AND MEDICAL DISCOURSE OF THE U.S. PROSE

Анотація

Метою дослідження є вивчення наративної репрезентації мотивів епідемії та пандемії у літературі США ХХ століття із застосуванням методів наратологічного аналізу та рецептивної естетики. Дослідження спирається на корпус американської художньої літератури ХХ століття: «Scarlet Plague» (1912) Джека Лондона, «Earth Abides» (1949) Джорджа Р. Стюарта, «I am Legend» (1954) Річарда Метисона, «The Stand» (1978) Стівена Кінга, «Contagion» (1996) Робіна Кука та «Darwin's Radio» (1999) Грега Беара. Мотив епідемії сягає романтичної літератури ХІХ століття (Е.А. По), набуваючи подальшого розвитку в жанрах наукової фантастики ХХ століття, антиутопії та медичного трилера. У ході дослідження виявлено, що епідемічний наратив будується за допомогою усталених і повторюваних шаблонів репрезентації. Аналізовані твори базуються на традиційному літературному мотиві епідемії з метою розкриття морально-етичного профілю суспільства, адже епідемії та пандемії чітко відображають, як саме воно справляється зі спалахами смертельної хвороби та розвиває свою унікальну реакцію на цей маргінальний стан. У другій половині ХХ століття, використовуючи мотиви епідемії та пандемії, письменники розмірковують над проблемами науки, її можливостей, обмежень та потенційних небезпек. У рамках розглянутих романів топос пандемії служить інструментом

«перезавантаження» людства, нагадуванням про небезпеку недбалості та зловживання результатами досліджень. Таким чином автори застерігають читачів від потенційної небезпеки певних тенденцій ХХ століття. У світлі пандемії COVID-19 дослідження літературного зображення зазначеного мотиву в національних літературах та різних історичних періодах набуває особливої актуальності, оскільки дозволяє переосмислити це явище і таким чином спробувати допомогти людству уникнути подібних пандемій у майбутньому.

Ключові слова: літературно-медичний дискурс, епідемія, пандемія, топос, література США

Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the narrative representation of epidemics in the 20th century U.S. literature, using the methods of narratological analysis and receptive aesthetics. The study relies on the corpus of the 20th century U.S. novels: *Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London, *Earth Abides* (1949) by George R. Stewart, *I am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, *Contagion* (1996) by Robin Cook, and *Darwin's Radio* (1999) by Greg Bear. The aspects of epidemic representation in fiction have been studied using modern literary criticism research in the areas of narratology and receptive aesthetics, which determines the relevance of the present paper. The motif is rooted in the 19th-century Romantic literature (E.A. Poe's fiction); it acquires further extensive development in the 20th century science fiction, horror, post-apocalyptic (dystopian) and contemporary medical thriller genres. In the second half of the 20th century, by using the motifs of epidemic and pandemic, the writers contemplate upon the issues of science, its capacities, limitations and potential hazards. In the frame of examined novels, the pandemic topos serves as a tool for «reloading» the human population on earth, «resetting» humanity and bringing it back *ad fonts*. It also acts as a reminder about the dangers of negligence

and misuse of research advances. In such a manner, the authors caution the readers against the potential dangers of the 20th-century advances. In the light of COVID-19 pandemic, the study of the literary depiction of this motif in national literatures and different historical periods becomes especially relevant, because it allows us to re-consider this phenomenon and thus to try to help the mankind to learn one's lesson and perhaps avoid similar calamities in the future.

Keywords: literary and medical discourse, epidemic, pandemic, topos, U.S. literature.

Introduction

Literary representations of medical issues in fiction have been and remain within the focus of researchers' interest, for example, in the works "The Doctor in Literature" cycle (1958-1993) by Solomon Posen, "Literature and medicine: Narratives of physical illness" (1997) by Faith McLellan, "Autopathography: the patient's tale?" (2000) by Jeffrey Aronson, "The demonisation of psychiatrists in fiction" (2014) by Jacqueline Hopson and others. Constant interest in medical topics, depicted in literary writings, is due to the fact that the study of a medical vector in fiction provides an in-depth understanding of the cultural and historical context and the unique worldview model in specific national literatures (Lysanets, 2018; Lysanets, 2019a; Lysanets, 2019b), which renders this research direction relevant.

In particular, the motif of an epidemic is a recurrent phenomenon in the 20th-century literature, since it «reminds us that human beings will not so easily escape the immanence of evil and the anxiety of indeterminacy» (Rosenberg, 1989: 14). Writers use this motif extensively because «epidemics constitute an extraordinarily useful sampling device, capable of illuminating fundamental patterns of social value and institutional practice» (Rosenberg, 1989: 2). These disasters provide a cross-sectional perspective of a particular society, reflecting how exactly it copes with outbreaks of a deadly

disease and develops its unique response to this marginal state. Indeed, «pandemics can bring forth deeply rooted fears and modify human behavior greatly» (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014: 1753). In other words, an epidemic is a «litmus paper» for the society's values and level of moral development, and therefore writers frequently address this issue. The 20th-century literature displays an increased fascination for epidemical phenomenon and epidemic-related narratives form a corpus of writings. In this context, C.S. Vidruțiu (2011) defines this literary period as the «plague literature». In the 21st century, these motifs are especially relevant in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology and research methods

The aim of this research is to examine the narrative representation of epidemics in the 20th century U.S. literature, using the methods of narratological analysis and receptive aesthetics. The study relies on the corpus of the 20th century U.S. novels: *Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London, *Earth Abides* (1949) by George R. Stewart, *I am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, *The Stand* (1978) by Stephen King, *Contagion* (1996) by Robin Cook, and *Darwin's Radio* (1999) by Greg Bear. The aspects of epidemic representation in fiction have been studied using modern literary criticism research in the areas of narratology and receptive aesthetics, which determines the relevance of the present paper. The theoretical significance of the research consists in the study of narrative techniques applied for representing the epidemic topos in the 20th-century U.S. prose. The study of the artistic representation of epidemics in the literary and medical discourse of US prose will improve the content of courses on world literature and form a methodological framework for the development of special courses, thematic seminars and training programs.

Results and discussions

In the ancient world, plagues and epidemics were commonplace, and ordinary people probably saw or heard vivid and terrifying reports of their devastating effects. When the plague spread, no medicine could help and no one could stop it from spreading. The only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected people and contaminated objects. The Bible describes the plague as a punishment from God, so descriptions of its spread were seen as a warning to the Israelites. This correlation between plague and sin is also seen in Greek literary texts such as Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014). Later medieval writings such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1313–1375) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1343–1400) emphasized human behavior: which leads to mental and physical death. The human response to plague is also central to historical publications such as Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1659–1731), a long-detailed account of events, anecdotes and statistics relating to the Great Plague of London in 1665. Incidentally, *The Betrothed* and *History of the Column of Infamy* by the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) contained unusual descriptions of the plague that struck Milan around 1630 (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014).

In English-language literature, this topos is further developed by Mary Shelley in *The Last Man* (1826) – a novel about a future world where a plague has destroyed most of humanity. A few people seem to be immune, and they live solitary lives away from other people. The book discusses the concept of immunization and how the author, best known for the novel *Frankenstein*, understood contemporary theories about contagion. In the U.S. fiction, we can trace the U.S. authors' interest in this topos back to E.A. Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), which formed the foundations for the literary tradition of the plague narrative: «through the personification of the plague, represented by a mysterious figure disguised as a Red Death victim, the author meditates on the inevitability of death; the issue is

not that people die from the plague, but that people are plagued by death» (Steel, 1981: p. 89). E.A. Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* is unique in the literary tradition of the plague by focusing on the metaphorical element of the topos. Through the personification of the plague, the author reflects on the inevitability of death.

The Scarlet Plague, published by Jack London in 1912, was one of the first examples of a postapocalyptic fiction novel in modern literature and a «part of a long literary tradition, inviting the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases» (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014: p. 1753). *The Scarlet Plague* is a classic example of a postapocalyptic fiction story. In a future America plagued by a deadly epidemic, a young couple struggles to survive in a world that's been turned upside down. James Howard Smith, alias «Granser», tells his incredulous and near-savage grandsons about the pandemic and the reactions of the people to it. Although it was published more than a century ago, *The Scarlet Plague* still rings true to today's readers because it allows them to explore the worldwide fear of pandemics in a new way. The novel provides the author's contemplations on the contemporary achievements in vaccination and human inherent fear of pandemic diseases. Jack London also discusses the issues of globalization, as trade, business and travel have promoted the spread of the disease in *The Scarlet Plague*. As one can easily observe, the novel foregrounds the idea that travelling promotes the spread of the disease, which has become especially relevant nowadays. In fact, this idea stems from Ancient Greek literature in the works of Thucydides (c. 460 – c. 400 BC) who wrote about Athenian Plague. In general, the plague is a well-known motif in literature, and London's novel is part of a long literary tradition that invites readers to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014).

In *The Scarlet Plague*, London explored many traditional themes of the literary topos of the plague, from reflections on morality and justice to infection and the clinical features of the disease. The

author focuses on behavioural responses to the pandemic, showing how fear, irrationality and selfishness originated in a previously civilized and modern society. This novel differed from earlier works on the plague in that it deeply reflected modern scientific discoveries about pathogenic microorganisms, such as those made by Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch. By the early twentieth century, epidemics were no longer considered divine curses or supernatural phenomena. In the 19th century, bacteriologists proved that they were caused by microbes that affected humans, and epidemiologists and health workers shed light on disease transmission, including recommendations for widespread pandemic prevention. Despite these scientific advances, at that time the general public's fear of the invisible world of microorganisms remained high.

People in the novel do not seem to be intimidated by the outbreak of the Red Death because they are accustomed to it: they «were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past» (London, 1915: 72-73). In the 21st century society described by London, public confidence in science was high. Citizens, on the other hand, were quickly «the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and [by] the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered. <...> From the moment of the first signs of it, a man would be dead in an hour. Some lasted for several hours. Many died within ten or fifteen minutes of the appearance of the first signs» (London, 1915: 73). London made the plague brighter and scarier by giving details of how the disease progressed: «The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heart-beat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. <...> The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died» (London, 1915: 75).

London is talking about the rapid decomposition of corpses, which quickly led to the emergence of billions of microorganisms, which accelerated the spread of infection and created some problems for researchers who could not quickly track specific treatments. When the plague serum was found, it became impossible to stop the epidemic. Medicine and logical achievements were crushed by the plague, as evidenced by the valiant care of bacteriologists, who «were killed in their laboratories even as they studied the germ of the Scarlet Death. <...> As fast as they perished, others stepped forth and took their places» (London, 1915: 76). The loss of society's faith in science and medicine has caused widespread fear. London provides a detailed report on the human response to the spread of the disease. The infection spread quickly and uncontrollably. The world was in a state of extreme panic, never experienced before: «In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well» (London, 1915: 105).

After the pandemic, civilization fell, and some survivors were forced to live in the primitive world. The cruelty of the plague in the novel is much greater than in previous works. The apocalyptic scenario illustrates the general fear of epidemics. In Jack London's novel, scientists were aware of the danger of outbreaks of uncontrolled pandemics, as they are today. The novel foresaw the first-ever pandemic of the Spanish flu of 1918-1920, which began to spread six years after its publication. It has killed 20 million people worldwide. In the novel, as in reality, human reactions to the plague can vary greatly, but all are united by a common fear: the fear of death – as the end of life, and as the end of civilization.

It is obvious that any piece of literature is a direct reflection of a writer's personal experience. For instance, *Earth Abides* (1949) is an apocalyptic science fiction novel by George R. Stewart, which also extensively relies on the author's contemplations upon a global

pandemic of the Spanish Flu (1918-1920), which killed nearly 50 million people. This devastating pandemic made a profound impact on humanity's world perception and heralded the end of the 19th-century world order along with the beginning of a new era. In this context, George R. Stewart asks the reader: What if a far more deadly pandemic were to strike humanity? It is necessary to bear in mind that the novel was written several years after the end of World War II and just when the Cold War started. Hence, the author's profound anxiety, disquiet and uncertainty are quite understandable, and they found an artistic embodiment in the literary topos of a pandemic.

The protagonist of the novel is an anthropologist named Isherwood («Ish») Williams, who is the only survivor in the world due to his preceding isolation in the mountains: «the United States from coast to coast was overwhelmed by the attack of some new and unknown disease of unparalleled rapidity of spread and fatality ... No one was sure in what part of the world it had originated; aided by airplane travel, it had sprung up almost simultaneously in every centre of civilization, outrunning all attempts at quarantine» (Stewart, 1999: 13). Hence, the writer also foregrounds the idea of travelling as a trigger for the spread of the disease. Eventually, Ish finds other survivors and they establish a tribe, which becomes a playground for the author's reconsideration of the issues of the society, such as social inequalities, attitudes and moral principles. Ish is a mouthpiece for the author's ideas, who asks himself: «What was going to happen to all that man had built up over the centuries and now had left behind him?» (Stewart, 1999: 23). Stewart describes the regression and gradual decline of the surviving tribe in terms of justice and law, religion and superstition, technology and science, art and education, etc. He desperately aspires to rebuild and restore the «previous» civilization, but eventually stops fighting the inevitable.

It is necessary to point out that *Earth Abides* shares similar features with *Scarlet Plague* by Jack London: both of the

protagonists are academics, i.e., the carriers of the signs and virtues of civilization as we know it now, and both of them «fail» in their enlightenment mission at the end of the novels as the pandemics result in the emergence of primitive societies. However, while London's conclusion as to the future is pessimistic (the members of the newly established society are savage and cruel), Stewart's vision of a simpler and less sophisticated «tribe» is quite opposite. Indeed, the author suggests accepting without regret this new reality, which replaced the previous one, as a normal course of events: «disruption to the progress of civilization but the chance to completely start anew: 'The Tribe was not going to restore civilization. It did not want civilization» (Stewart, 1999: 268). Thus, the Earth, the planet can easily go on without human civilization (i.e., it is the only thing that actually «abides»).

I Am Legend (1954) is a post-apocalyptic horror dystopian novel by Richard Matheson which develops this motif further. A pandemic has killed most of the population on the planet and those who remained into vampires, and Robert Neville – the protagonist, – is the only survivor, unaffected by the virus. The author extensively develops the vampirical topos, which allows him to re-consider some crucial issues of human existence. The narrative follows Neville as he tries to understand, research, and maybe cure the sickness in the months and years following the outbreak: «He sat in the kitchen staring into a steaming cup of coffee. Germs. Bacteria. Viruses. Vampires» (Matheson, 2011: 44). Neville ultimately realizes that the vampires' origins, actions, and aversions must have scientific explanations, so he sets out to find out more: «It wasn't a virus, then. You couldn't see a virus. And there, fluttering delicately on the slide, was a germ» (Matheson, 2011: 47). Neville's newfound expertise has enabled him to kill many vampires in his daily hunts.

The literacy and medical discourse of the novel strongly relies on the protagonist's thoughts and explanations for potential causes of the pandemic: «The bacteria passes into the blood stream, where... the white corpuscles playing a vital part in our defense against

bacteria attack. Strong sunlight kills many germs rapidly and... Many bacterial diseases of man can be disseminated by the mechanical agency of flies, mosquitoes... where, under the stimulus of bacterial attack, the phagocytic factories rush extra cells into the blood stream» (Matheson, 2011: 44); «Bacteriophages are inanimate proteins that are also created when the system gets no blood. Unlike the spores, though, in this case abnormal metabolism destroys the cells. Quickly he told her about the imperfect waste disposal of the lymphatic system, the garlic as an allergen causing anaphylaxis, and the various vectors of the disease. “Then why are we immune?” she asked» (Matheson, 2011: 79). Sometimes Neville’s contemplations build up an intricate network of medical terminological: «The thin walls of the blood capillaries permitted blood plasma to escape into the tissue spaces along with the red and colourless cells. These escaped materials eventually returned to the blood system through the lymphatic vessels, carried back by the thin fluid called lymph. During this return flow, the lymph trickled through lymph nodes, which interrupted the flow and filtered out the solid particles of body waste, thus preventing them from entering the blood system» (Matheson, 2011: 73).

Eventually, he finds out that vampires have gradually undergone an evolution in terms of their uncontrolled violence and they are seeking to establish a new society. The new ‘race’ of people ultimately imprisons and executes Neville, because he has murdered so many of their tribe. Within the last minutes of his life, Neville looks out his prison window and sees the infected staring back at him with the same hatred and terror that he previously felt for them, he knows that he, a relic of ancient humanity, has become a legend to the infection’s new race. He understands that their desire to kill him is not something he can criticize after he has killed so many of their loved ones. As the pills take effect, he is amused by the prospect of becoming their new superstition and legend, just like vampires were formerly to humans: «Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces – awe, fear, shrinking horror

– and he knew that they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with. He was an invisible spectre who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones (...) He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed» (Matheson, 2011: 48). As one can easily observe, the novel suggests some profound ideas and invites the reader to re-consider what is normal and what is pathology, what is health and what is a disease.

It is necessary to observe an interesting fact of similar perception of a pandemic in terms of symbolic colour representation: one can notice the axis of **Red** masque (Poe) – **Scarlet** plague (Jack London) – Vampires as **blood**-drinking creatures (Matheson). Hence, the hues of red symbolize critical danger, alarm, as well as the authors' intention to catch the readers' attention and express a warning for the humanity.

The Stand (1978) by Stephen King is a post-apocalyptic dark fantasy novel, which features another deadly pandemic of influenza and its consequences, in which a few remaining humans gather into groups and confront each other. The author narrates of a highly contagious and deadly strain of bio-engineered influenza (about 99.4% fatal), developed in a secret U.S. Department of Defense laboratory in northern California and released due to the security breach: «99.4% communicability, he thought. It played insanely over and over in his mind. And that meant 99.4% excess mortality, because the human body couldn't produce the antibodies necessary to stop a constantly shifting antigen virus. Every time the body did produce the right antibody, the virus simply shifted to a slightly new form. For the same reason a vaccine was going to be almost impossible to create. 99.4%» (King, 2008: 12).

Contagion (1996) by Robin Cook narrates of a deadly epidemic, spread not simply by microbes, but also through deliberate sabotage. The health care industry is coming together in a power struggle, and this is a warning for the new millennium. After losing his

ophthalmology practice and his family in a commuter airline tragedy, John Stapleton's life is turned upside down. He struggles to adjust to his new life, which includes working as a doctor in a small town. He retrained in forensic pathology and relocated to a city that better fit his new perspective: the cold, indifferent concrete labyrinth of New York. A pandemic is causing a variety of illnesses to strike people of all ages. When it turns out that the apparent epicentres of these outbreaks are hospitals and clinics that are under the same commercial giant's control, Stapleton realizes that there is a conspiracy of catastrophic proportions. As one can observe, in the frame of medical thriller genre, physicians are skillful experts, endowed with qualities of a detective: they are depicted as observant, curious, shrewd, intelligent, attentive to details, fearless and diligently seeking for truth and justice. Injustice, wrongdoings and conspiracies in the contemporary society are represented by opposing them to the heroic and all-round developed image of the physician.

Gregory Bear's *Darwin's Radio* (1999) is a science fiction novel with the symbolic slogan «The next great war will be inside us» (Bear, 2000). A new form of endogenous retrovirus, SHEVA, has emerged in the novel. He controls the evolution of man, rapidly developing the next generation while it is in the womb, which leads to speciation. The novel tells the story of several characters in the detection of the "plague", as well as the panic reaction of the public and the US government to the disease. Non-coding DNA sequences called introns are embedded in the human genome. Certain parts of these "nonsensical" sequences, remnants of prehistoric retroviruses, have been activated and broadcast numerous LPCs (large protein complexes). It has been suggested that SHEVA activation and, consequently, its sudden speciation are controlled by a complex genetic network that perceives the need for modification or is a human adaptive response to overpopulation. The disease, more precisely, the activation of genes, is transmitted from man to woman like STDs. In the case of fertilization, a woman in the first trimester

with a recurrence of SHEVA may give birth to a deformed female fetus. This «first stage fruit» leaves behind a fertilized egg with 52 chromosomes instead of the typical 46 inherent in *Homo sapiens*.

Conclusions

In the course of the study, we found that the analysed writings recur to the traditional literary plague motif that functions to disclose the moral impoverishment of humanity. The motifs of epidemic and pandemic are rooted in the 19th-century Romantic literature (E.A. Poe's fiction); it acquires further extensive development in the 20th century science fiction, horror, post-apocalyptic (dystopian) and contemporary medical thriller genres. In the second half of the 20th century, by using the motifs of epidemic and pandemic, the writers contemplate upon the issues of science, its capacities, limitations and potential hazards. In the frame of the material under consideration, the epidemic narrative is constructed by means of well-established and repeated patterns of representation. First of all, the origin of the deadly diseases is either unknown or is of conspiracy nature. Next, reaction and actions of population is very similar in each novel under consideration: they range from carelessness to bouts of panic. Further, the narratives are permeated with the issues of immunity and immunization, which often act as the plot triggers. In the examined novels, the pandemic topos serves as a tool for «reloading» the human population on earth, «resetting» humanity and bringing it back *ad fonts*. It also acts as a reminder about the dangers of negligence and misuse of research advances. In each case, the writers widely apply medical terminology and provide detailed descriptions of pathological phenomena and processes to render the narrative credible and influence the reader's perception appropriately. In such a manner, the authors caution the readers against the potential dangers of the 20th-century advances. In the light of COVID-19 pandemic, the study of the literary depiction of this motif in national literatures and different historical periods becomes especially relevant, because it allows us to re-consider this

phenomenon and thus to try to help the mankind to learn one's lesson and perhaps avoid similar calamities in the future.

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Інформація про авторів

Лисанець Юлія Валеріївна – кандидат філологічних наук, доцент, доцент кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет; вул. Шевченка, 23, м. Полтава, 36011; e-mail: julian.rivage@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0421-6362>.

Lysanets Yulia, candidate of philological sciences, associate professor, associate professor of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University; 23, Shevchenko Str., Poltava, 36011; e-mail: julian.rivage@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0421-6362>.

Беляєва Олена Миколаївна – кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент, завідувачка кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет; вул. Шевченка, 23, м. Полтава, 36011; e-mail: inlatmetod@ukr.net; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9060-4753>.

Belyaeva Olena, Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University; 23, Shevchenko Str., Poltava, 36011; e-mail: inlatmetod@ukr.net; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9060-4753>.

Роженко Інеса Віталіївна – викладач кафедри іноземних мов з латинською мовою та медичною термінологією, Полтавський державний медичний університет; вул. Шевченка, 23, м. Полтава, 36011; e-mail: inviro@ukr.net; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8334-5087>.

Rozhenko Inesa, teacher of the Department of Foreign Languages with Latin and Medical Terminology, Poltava State Medical University; 23, Shevchenko Str., Poltava, 36011; e-mail: inviro@ukr.net; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8334-5087>.