

# Chapter 7

## The Vision of Death in Romanian Culture

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### Introduction

#### *Romanian Mythology*

*To live with death* might be considered a platitude in many cultures. However, in Romania, this saying constitutes a starting point for reflection on death in society. Certainly throughout history, humans in all societies have been preoccupied with questions regarding death, loss, and immortality. These questions—and the answers derived, explored, and believed by various human cultures—affect the living in many ways. In Romania, death customs, folklore, gestures, and rituals based in ancient Romanian mythology are practised by people even today. According to this perspective, a human life undergoes three important stages, demarcated by events: birth, marriage, and death. After death, it is believed that the soul separates itself from the body and integrates into the universe, forming a whole with nature, a belief that originates in pagan times, perhaps traceable back to Thracian mythology. According to this view, then, the life after death is simply a continuation of the earthly one.

#### *Traditional Romanian Culture: Rituals, Customs, and Traditional Beliefs*

In Romanian culture, death is conceptualised as an old, ugly, and skinny woman, and its inevitability must be accepted. Romanians believe that a person's death is often preceded by a series of signs: the cracking of beams, the falling of religious

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icons off the wall, even the song of a hen. The ease (or lack thereof) with which the soul leaves the body depends on the degree of a dying person's morality. For example, a child is without sin, so he or she can easily see Paradise during the dying process. For a sinless child, passing over to the other world is easy. Once out of the body, it is believed that the soul sits near the doorway, by the eaves, by the window, walking in places where he or she lived. This is a period during which the soul is between the world of the dead and the world of the living, and it usually lasts for about 3 days, until the funeral, although in some cases, it is said that the soul can remain between worlds for up to 40 days.

Romanian funeral rituals, in some cases, derive from original Roman funerary traditions. The funeral tree is one of the classic forms under which some important vestigial elements in the life of a Romanian are present. In those older times, for example, a cypress, a tree which could no longer bud after it had been cut, was planted in front of a house with a dead person. When the Roman settlers from Dacia did not find this tree, the custom was slightly changed to use a fir tree, which came to be viewed as the tree of life. This is evidenced by the frequent appearance of the fir tree in many customs having to do with life transitions. There is, for example, a custom, followed by some midwives, of planting a *brother-fir* tree when a child is born, which represents the symbolic union of the two. This is also the reason why, at certain important transitions in the life of the individual, the fir tree appears again. For example, at a wedding a fir tree is decorated to celebrate the event.

When a young person dies, the brother-fir tree is cut and laid at the bedside of the deceased, and at the person's grave. The custom of confession by a fir tree also demonstrates the importance—deeply rooted, even before Roman times—of the fir tree in the Romanian imagination. To avoid the cutting of an entire tree, the custom is reduced to the taking of a branch, which is decorated with sweets and cakes that are shared at the burial feast. The fir tree is also used when the dying person is unmarried, and sometimes unmarried girls who die are dressed in a wedding dress, their funeral serving also as their wedding.

When a sick person is about to die, the family calls for a priest who performs an unction service, reads from the *Bible*, intended to facilitate the passing of the soul from the body. If the tears of family members run dry, if they have exhausted themselves of grief, they, like their Roman ancestors, may hire a mourner, although typically, the deceased is mourned by the spouse, the nieces, or the village women.

In Romanian tradition, the alms ritual of the dead was performed three times a year, a tradition now known as the Three Saturdays of the Dead. Death is perceived in Romanian culture simply as an aspect of the human condition from which no one can escape. After death, the body, still warm, is bathed and dressed in the finest clothes and laid in the coffin. A candle is lit, so that the light may help the deceased find his or her way in the darkness of the world beyond, a world that some Romanian folk tales call the white world. A person who dies suddenly, or who dies somewhere abroad, is considered dead without a candle, and the memorial services in such cases are different. The 21st of November, called *Ovidenie*, is dedicated to those who have died without a candle, those who have committed suicide or died in another country, far away, thinking that a light which is lit on this day will forever guide the soul in the world beyond.

Neighbours, friends, and relatives attend a wake, which usually lasts for about 3 days, during which the priest comes and reads the *posts*, that is, the four gospels. Then, at the cemetery, the priest splashes the coffin with wine and oil, and reads a special funeral service, while those present eat from the dead person's alms, prepared at home by the relatives, after which attendees gather at a home, where the priest blesses the burial feast. At this event, clothes and various objects considered useful in the world beyond are usually given to the poor.

A series of burial feasts is organised after a week, a month, 3 months, 6 months and a year, and at least once a year, during the following 7 years. The many gods are, according to pagan tradition, the souls of those dead in the family, transformed into spirits that may influence, for the better or for the worse, the living members of the family.

Marriage is considered the second stage of life, and if the deceased never married, then the tragedy of the death is perceived to be magnified. The same is true in the case of people too young to have married—seen as *not enlightened*—who die. In such cases, it is thought that the life cycle has not properly completed, and so these individuals will not find peace after death, but will exist in torment. In those cases, a ritual is performed during the funeral in which the wedding with nature and death is celebrated in an attempt to give eternal peace to the deceased.

### ***Regional Characteristics in Approaching Death***

The phenomenon of death has created different traditions and particular customs, specific to certain regions of the country. After accompanying him in his earthly existence, superstition has its well-established place fixed once with the passing of the Romanian to the world beyond. The entire funeral ritual is given special attention by the relatives of the dead person, and by the entire community as well. For example, in the Timoc area, as a sign of grieving, the men of the house wear their caps for 40 days, they do not cut their hair, do not shave; women take their skull-cup off, and the girls let their hair down.

In the Oltenia region, just like in other regions, important attention is given to alms, the food which is prepared for the deceased and shared with the living. Alms is made of clean wheat, washed in nine waters, boiled until it becomes a homogenous paste, mixed with sugar, nuts, and spices. The coils, which are shared, are round and in the middle there is a cross made from dough. The dead man's tree is made from a branch of a fruit tree, with three arms, each arm being loaded with fruits. At the bottom of the tree, a handkerchief is tied and it has a coin in one of its corners. After the funeral, the gifts are consecrated by the priest. Another custom for the dead is that from the Holy Thursday of the Holy Week. Villagers wake up at four in the morning and they commemorate their dead. They light fires in front of their houses, then they go to the cemetery. Each old lady keeps some cobs in her hands that they light in front of the dead people's graves, a bunch of tulips, and incense. The living start asking the dead to come back to this world and to see what has happened to their families. On their way back, the women bake coils and sponge cakes that they give as alms.

The most interesting example of the connection between ironic and happy epitaphs and the black death of the universe is the Happy Cemetery in Săpânța village in the Maramures region. This cemetery is famous for its brightly coloured crosses on the graves, the simple paintings representing scenes of the life and the occupation of the buried person. There are even lyrics on some of the crosses in which the people in question are often described in a humorous way. The novelty of this cemetery is the difference as compared to most cultures which consider death as a very serious event. In 1935, a Greek-Catholic priest, Grigore Risiu, who was also a Romanian and Latin teacher, suggested to Stan Ioan Patras that he make the vertical part of the crosses a little bit wider, with a place for the epitaph. The first epitaph dates back to 1935, and starting with the 1960s, the entire cemetery has been well appointed with almost 800 crosses, sculpted in oak, becoming an open-air museum of a unique nature and a tourist attraction. Some crosses are painted on both sides. On the one side, there is a description of the life of the buried one, and on the other, there is a description of the cause of death. In 1935, Stan Ioan Patras, an anonymous wood sculptor at the time, carved the first lyric of an epitaph on a cross in Săpânța. The Happy Cemetery is a sort of an archive which keeps a wood record of the life stories of the people in Săpânța. And to make it *happy*, it had to be a colour spectacle. Stan Ioan Patras did something that had not been done by then in Maramures: he added the colours of life to the wood and transformed a place which is generally sad into a happy one. One epitaph from Săpânța notes:

You look at me as well, as it was good for me in the world, as I liked having fun with my brothers. They sang and I danced. And we entertained them all. When I wanted to get married, death looked for me and took my life away. You, my lovely parents, comfort me with the others and I tell you all not to forget me as long as you live.

### ***The Spiritual and Religious Approach***

Belief in the immortality of the soul, in its survival after departing from the body, is a universal phenomenon. In most countries and religions of the world, there is the firm, general belief that human existence does not end in death, but the soul survives in a certain form even beyond the grave. What we call *the cult of the dead* is built upon this more or less explicit belief. That is, the responsibility that the living have to maintain the spiritual connection with their dead: to remember them; to honour their alms in different ways; and especially to look for and ease their situation in *the world beyond* through different rituals and ceremonies; by praying towards God for their undisturbed rest and the forgiveness of their sins.

In Christianity, the majority religion in Romania, the chief role given to the soul in religious life has transformed the care for the dead into one of the important elements of Christian piety, to be expressed in rich, varied, and religious ways. Thus, death represents the passing to a superior existence in which the soul of the believer finds rest and eternal happiness in the immediate vicinity of Christ. The firm belief that those who die are united with Christ, the conqueror of death, determines the

believers to reduce the distance or the impossible gap between life and death. The love which brings believers together in life is so strong that death cannot destroy it.

Another important religious aspect is the fact that we can get over the suffering if we are not alone. Those who suffer need people to be close to them, the pain must not be undergone on your own. There is a relevant example of this:

And they sat at Christ's cross, his mother and his mother's sister, Mary of Cleopa and Mary Magdalena. So, Jesus seeing His mother and the apprentice that he loved standing together, said to His mother: "Woman, there's your son!" Then the apprentice said: "There's your mother! And from that time on the apprentice took her with him" (John 19:25–27).

### ***The Current Caring Standard for Grieving Persons/Families***

The current state of social, medical, and emotional support to grieving individuals is quite limited. This kind of activity starts to become more visible due to the activities of some NGOs, which offer voluntary services to grieving people. It is too little as compared to the required necessity. There are projects, attempts, approaches which are meant to provide the introduction of psychotherapy/counselling services and support psychological assistance, in the category of the medical services, which are included in the health insurance package. There is also the desire to create more workplaces for psychologists/psychotherapists within hospitals. The presence of this specialist outside neuro-psychiatric hospitals is sporadic. There is not a very concise, well-organised approach yet, in the medical world, where there is generally a lack of personnel.

Support groups for those who go through grieving can be more easily found due to some voluntary activities within nonprofit associations and organisations. Despite this, grieving people turn more and more to psychotherapy services even in private practice. Psychotherapy is a process in which people believe more and more, and the benefits of psychotherapy have become better known, so that the people in question choose to try this way, also.

### ***The Psychological Perspective: Therapy for Pain***

Mourning is, from the social point of view, a time meant for living the pain. Traditionally, it lasts for about 1 year. From a psychological point of view, it is a process which implies the commitment of the person to the loss. This is why in psychotherapy, it is referred to as *mourning labour*. Its purpose is to confront the loss and all the feelings arising from it.

Mourning labour is the mental process that occurs after a loss through which we confront the loss. Then the pain gradually subsides. But life is in a state of permanent change, being full of mourning and losses, of letting go. Any change in our life implies a disruption, a separation, a choice that we make implies letting go of something.

Attachment lies at the basis of any connection. A person who does not know how to become attached, will never know how to separate either. If the relationship of attachment has been uncertain, then the separation phases are lived improperly and the mourning labour is not resolved. There are people who do not get attached at all, for fear of separation; there are also people who get too attached, they are very adhesive and they experience separation in a very difficult way. In any relationship, there are four phases: attachment, connection, separation, and mourning. If the mourning process is not accomplished, the person will not be able to get involved in another relationship and will not connect in an authentic manner; it will be just a substitute for the lost bonding. If mourning and grieving are not accomplished, the person will stay mentally blocked in the past. This shows the person's inability to integrate the loss and to move on, to adapt to a life without the deceased one. Research literature shows that surviving a loss depends on many factors: the individual's sensitivity to loss; the way the loss occurred; the intensity, importance, and the duration of the relationship with the person we lost; the complexity of emotions; and the social network. Personal sensitivity to losses becomes a part of our personality. If the attachment style is uncertain, then the sensitivity to losses is greater than that of a person with a safe attachment style. It also matters if the loss took place in a natural or unnatural, expected or unexpected way. The intensity and the duration of the relationship are important as well. In Romania, the loss of the partner or of a child can lead to pathological mourning. Anticipated losses are considered easier. If the person has a social network (family, friends, relatives), the loss can be better overcome than when such a social network is missing. It is not unusual to meet adults committed to a particular fight against death, evidenced by their careers as doctors, nurses, and pharmacists. When children are confronted at a very early age with the loss of someone they love, the effects of such experiences seem to linger. There are more principles which differentiate the pain of a child from that of an adult:

- Children experience grief physically.
- They express themselves more non-verbally.
- They express their anger in a more direct way.
- They live the mourning period discontinuously.
- They adapt their needs to the needs of their parents.

### ***Case Study from an Adlerian Perspective***

I will present the case of a patient I have worked with in psychotherapy from an Adlerian perspective, assisting her in grieving the loss of her son, offering therapy and psychological support to allow her to adapt to a life without her son. For ethical and professional reasons, the patient will be called *Victoria*. Victoria came to the office after being previously scheduled by phone by her best friend at the time. He asked me to see her, telling me that Victoria really needed to talk to a psychologist, since her son violently died in a traffic accident. The accident happened about a month before the meeting.

### *Socio-Cultural Aspects*

Victoria is a woman who raised her child alone since he was 6 years old. Her family of origin was modest, living in the countryside, where she became accustomed to nature and hardships. The family was Romanian, of Orthodox religion, and highly educated. Now, Victoria is living in a small town in the central part of Romania with an established business of her own. She is 44 years of age and is upper-middle socioeconomic class.

I met Victoria nervously. She came to me stricken with pain and grief. I was surprised by her appearance, the words she chose, and the way she held on to her son's photo. In an odd way, I felt, from her very first visit to my office, an extraordinary force was hidden beneath this tremendous suffering. There was so much passion, so much genuine feeling, that I knew that together, 1 day, we would be able to redirect this vital force to the path of rediscovery and personal reconstruction.

Victoria spoke about her son, her failed marriage, and the significance motherhood held for her. Dan was an amazing child: talented, athletic, poetic, and loved by many. His death left Victoria tormented by feelings of guilt, primarily around not having spent enough time with him. I asked her to tell me about Dan.

She proudly showed me some of his lyrics. Together, we explored questions like: Who contributed to Dan's character? How did he become a beautiful, responsible young man, with a social interest, generous, and upright, appreciated and loved by all the people he met? Who supported him in his educational pursuits? Who stood by him when he succeeded and when he failed? Slowly, Victoria began to see the love between her and Dan more clearly. For the first time she saw that without her maternal dedication, Dan could not have become what he was. For the first time she said the feeling of guilt was beginning to diminish. We discussed the difference between being guilty and feeling guilty.

Slowly, Victoria started to trust me and to reveal herself as we built the therapeutic alliance. From my chair, I gradually and deeply entered Victoria's life and her grief. It was a long and difficult road with many question marks, but we never gave up. I helped by honouring her fear, helping her manage her protest, and we walked together toward the rediscovery of self and new meaning in life.

We also talked in depth about her childhood. We explored her experiences of the family atmosphere, birth order, gender, and other dynamics she felt interfered with her growth. It is important to note that Victoria underwent a period during which she could not bring childhood memories into therapy. She experienced strong emotional resistance to this process. With the aid of therapeutic stories, psychodramatic methods, and dialogue with her inner child, she revealed that at the age of 12 she was abused by a family member. This experience with past trauma also influenced how she reacted to Dan's death. Victoria began to understand the pieces of her life's puzzle. She began to have meaningful dreams, all entrance gates providing deeper access toward knowledge and self-understanding.

The psychotherapeutic approach in Victoria's case was guided by these principles: (1) pain is an individual process, each individual deals with loss in an original and

unique way; (2) pain is an opportunity for inner development; (3) pain can be best faced when in a safe environment; and (4) pain cannot erase an unwritten natural law, that grief is a normal emotion. I also used the Adlerian lifestyle inventory, a working instrument that I used not only to collect data, but also as a tool for psychotherapeutic intervention. This measure includes lifestyle components dealing with self-esteem, self-image, and identity. It also deals with values and moral judgments as well as behaviours. As in the Cultural Building Block model,<sup>1</sup> the biopsychosocial environment is explored, culture and genetics, and family capital. We also deeply explored her as an individual, working together to challenge beliefs that may impede her ability to grow through this tremendous grief, as well as her strengths. For example, she noted her own bravery and tenacity, sense of humour, and flexibility.

Today she is studying psychology, now a second-year student. To commemorate her son, she organises and sponsors an athletic event. The champion receives an honorary cup bearing her son's name, and thus, every year, Dan is present among those children, who play in his memory. Of course, there are still moments of breakdown, sadness, and mourning, especially around important dates and during the winter holidays, but these are her sacred, intimate moments that she now approaches with trust and courage. Her choice is called *life and presence*.

My approach with Victoria, as in Adlerian psychotherapy, respected her individuality in a holistic way while considering the culture of her life in many layers. And the benefits to us both for this type of intimate partnership were immense.

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<sup>1</sup>See Fig. 1 of Introduction chapter.