

Subject matter and metaphors of illness in the dramaturgy of Madis Kõiv

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Abstract

Summary. The aim of this article is to analyse the dramaturgy of Estonian writer, physicist and philosopher Madis Kõiv (1929–2015), including selected texts of his prose and essays. My approach derives from the autobiographical as well as socio-political point of view, set in the context of the Estonian transition period. Studying Kõiv's plays that were brought on stage mainly in the 1990s, the article explores the subject matter of illness (tuberculosis, neurosis) and associated motifs (corporeality, disability, trauma, fright) as well as metaphorical symptoms of illness (nausea etc) in his works. This research is based on the method of close-reading and studies of cultural semantics, including stereotypes and metaphors of illness (Sontag), as well as studies of autobiographical aspects in the depiction of illness/disability (Couser, Annuk).

Focusing on Kõiv's play "Tagasitulek isa juurde" ("Return to the Father") and his short story "Juhtum" ("An Incident"), corresponding and comparative examples are presented from his other works. Kõiv's individually masterful and aesthetically fresh approach, namely the use of motifs and metaphors of illness, has amplified the interpretation, and extended the connotations of Estonian national history and collective memory in drama and theatre. Following Couser, an autopathographical point of view – emphasizing the significance of autobiographical narratives of illness in the wider context of social and collective memory – has proved to be relevant in the study of Kõiv's plays. On the one hand, the metaphor of illness per se is emphasized in the context of the cataclysms of Estonian national history. On the other hand, Kõiv offers ways of healing through absurdity and even dark humour.

Keywords: Madis Kõiv, Estonian drama, transition period, national history, traumatic memory, illness, disability, corporeality