



Michał Jurkiewicz

PWSZ w Raciborzu

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS AN END – DEATH KIT BY SUSAN SONTAG

Abstract: The concept of endings suggests that the whole idea can be perceived not only in one way. The article concentrates on a theory that in the very beginning there was an end and it initiated everything. Furthermore, the moment when something ends is inseparably connected with the conception of something else. There is no clear definition of ending, because it may concern many different circumstances, and its consequences may be often various. The end is obviously strongly related to death and Diddy, the protagonist of *Death Kit* by Susan Sontag. The complexity of the main character is presented by his various nicknames. The man committed suicide, and this act, altogether with illness, is treated as a halfway to death. The way itself seems to be an important aspect in the plot due to dying hallucinations that Diddy experiences. The fatal attempt of the protagonist was successful, and the whole adventure in the novel is deceptive. Life is substituted with appearances of life, thus everything described never takes place, in fact.

Keywords: end, Sontag, *Death Kit*

NA POCZĄTKU BYŁ KONIEC – ZESTAW DO ŚMIERCI SUSAN SONTAG

Streszczenie: Idea końca sugeruje, że cała koncepcja może być postrzegana nie tylko w jeden sposób. Artykuł skupia się na teorii głoszącej, że na samym początku był koniec, który zainicjował wszystko inne. Ponadto chwila, kiedy coś się kończy, jest nierozzerwalnie związana z rozpoczęciem czegoś innego. Nie ma jasnej definicji kresu, ponieważ może on dotyczyć wielu różnych okoliczności oraz ich konsekwencje mogą być często zróżnicowane. Oczywiście koniec jest silnie związany z Dudusiem, głównym bohaterem *Zestawu do śmierci* Susan Sontag. Złożoność protagonisty została ukazana za pomocą rozmaitych przydomków. Mężczyzna popełnia samobójstwo, a czyn ten, razem z chorobą, jest traktowany jako półmetek śmierci. Droga ta sama w sobie wydaje się być ważnym aspektem w fabule ze względu na przedśmiertne omamy, których doświadcza Duduś. Fatalna próba głównego bohatera była udana, a historia ukazana w powieści jest pozorna. Życie zostało zastąpione własnymi pozorami, więc wszystko ukazane tak naprawdę nie ma miejsca.

Słowa kluczowe: koniec, Sontag, *Zestaw do śmierci*

Introduction

The article is a passage from Michał Jurkiewicz's diploma paper entitled *The Concept of Endings in "Death Kit" by Susan Sontag*, which concerns a widely understood concept of endings. The American writer and activist was one of the creators and theorists of post-

modernism, and the above-mentioned novel belongs to the most interesting experimental novels of the sixties. It is a book about death and dying which involves affairs of reciprocal relationships and conflicts between reality and fantasy. Dalton Harron, the main character, in his slow heading for death, experiences the nightmare of the modern world. He can be perceived as a typical everyman due to his existence and personality, and example of a person whom the strongest of all is the desire for death.

And what exactly could be defined as ending? Apparently, the answer for this question seems to be obvious. Nevertheless, the concept is strongly related to many aspects of life and to life itself. It quickly turns out that end cannot be separated from beginning, and one causes another interchangeably. Thus nobody knows which came first. As far as it goes, these two oppositions may be a great source of peculiar paradoxes or absurdities. The whole point is that something must be ended if beginning of something else could be possible. Notwithstanding, the idea is not such easy as it seems. Here occurs a theory which says that the end was first and it initiated every other affair. It is directly connected with death, and this is the idea which immediately comes to mind. Death is ubiquitous and in the same time essential for the proper functioning of the world. One unit is replaced by another and so on. This may sound very brutal, but in fact it is nothing more than nature which is full of cruelty.

What is associated with the end?

The end is inevitable. It determines the final ending, an epilogue of something what was lasting so uninterruptedly. What matters is not the length of existence or circumstances in which it occurred, but the very essence concerns its quietus. William Wharton in his book claims: “In the beginning there was an end and that’s the beginning” (Wharton, *Scumbler* 49). The sentence indicates the fact that, paradoxically, every ending of anything may be the beginning of something completely different, new, and frequently even better. It easily connects with another great antinomy of humanity which says that we live only to die. Whether we like it or not, a term is obvious and indubitable. Sometimes we are able to influence its averting by dint of medical science, albeit there is no way to escape. It announces the inchoation of further stage and the replacement of empty space with something else, original. From a purely biological point of view, it may be perceived as an inseparable element of life course, essential for efficient functioning of the environment. Following this train of thought, but also forgetting about the biology, the philosophical aspect of Emil Cioran’s words conform perfectly here: “Life is just a long, drawn out agony” (Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair* 42). The sentence formulates a particular negation of the sense of existence at all. Agony is definitively a dying state in which the point is the last moment of existence. Nevertheless, delving in the sense of the Romanian philosopher’s words, it may be easily realised that essentially the whole life is anxious waiting for death. Moreover, there is no possibility to predict what will happen and due to the frequent randomness of occurrences we do not know when one’s days would end. The ascertainment that life is a long-standing agonal state seems to confirm in reality.

It is worth to notice that the end, overfilled with ambiguity, may be perceived and understood differently by every single man. It is probably not easily to determine what would be the worst and most painful loss. Although a vast majority of people being asked a question: “Do you want to die?” will definitely answer: “I do not”, arguably, death of a close relative would be even worse than that.

In recent years, more and more often we can hear about constantly upcoming end of the world, being announced for a long time. In fact, it has to be coded in human’s mind for ages, yet just the last years constantly remind us about it. Unforgotten 21 December, 2012 did not cause any significant changes, although so many sources stated that the date is very peculiar. From a certain point of view it may be assumed that the end came. Came then, and even before, and is somehow present every day. However, it is not in the form of a one, global cataclysm, but infinitively many little tragedies. The definitive end of the world for an average man appears in the moment of his own death. The person has gone forever. This is why each loss of life may be definitively treated as a kind of “personal apocalypse”. No matter what was its reason, because there could be truly a lot of them. According to Cioran: “Death: loftiness possible for everybody” (Cioran, *Zmierzch myśli* 87)¹. Life difficulties may bother every being, and certainly the main character of Susan Sontag’s *Death Kit* has this sort of unfortunate opportunity. Analogously, life may be considered as a peculiar crusade. Very often it becomes a real battle. Frequently, one has to fight with themselves. Diddy during the whole novel earns subsequent, more and more new and elaborate, though suitable to the circumstances, nicknames. They surely characterise him in particular moments, but also appear as undoubted symptoms of the inner, personal conflict. The above-mentioned crusade has one lofty goal, just like the campaigns from hundreds of years before. The aim is so obvious on the one hand, but on the other, as we know from the history, it may take the second place.

It is exceedingly hard to disagree with the Romanian philosopher’s statement: “Death – the last simplification” (Cioran, *Zeszyty 1957-1972* 282)². Very unsentimental but so true calculation. Along with the end of life all problems become suddenly solved. Ours become solved, the other’s may just begin. However, it is not necessarily a rule, because according to Charles Baudelaire’s poem *The Death of the Poor*: “It is death that consoles and allows us to live” (Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* 277). Once more we deal here with a natural course of life. Something has to be done if something new is going to commence. The thesis seems to be proved from the beginning of the section. Nevertheless, what will be left after us are to be retained. Memory, reminiscence. Does the fact that we somehow sign ourselves in the pages of history mean anything? It definitively is for the people who still exist in our modern world. Yet does it make sense according to the past beings who are on the other side right now? Death simplifies everything, ergo nothing turns out to be significant anymore in any way. It seems weird, but also interesting in some respect, that the unceasingly living, overcrowded world is not able to snap out of all these matters which irre-

¹ [Translated by the author]: “Śmierć: wzniosłość na miarę każdego”.

² [Translated by the author]: “Ostatnie uproszczenie – Śmierć”.

trievably elapsed for the time being. It is an unfortunate absurdity, where everything we know has been built by dint of bygone ruins. And it is not about common building on rubble. It is the idea that people are not able to forget the foretime that will never come back. Obviously, it has its positive and negative aspects, as everything. Since so much life has been being cultivated by people, why they cannot break away from doom? Why one may claim that people often do not even try to flee from it in some way? Because there is no any manner. Death represents an inseparable part of life, as every ending is indelibly connected with its particular beginning.

Diddy the Soiled is Done-Done

Taking the example of Susan Sontag's *Death Kit*, a reader has to deal with a very elaborate measure done by the author. Namely, the unsuccessful suicide attempt of the main character – Diddy – described on the first pages of the novel turns out to be sufficiently effective at the end, and his death becomes a tragic fact. Paradoxically, this dramatic act originates the plotline of the book. Then the whole play takes place only in the man's mind. Moreover, the moment from taking lethal dose of hypnotics to the actual final cannot last for long. The captured time is just a flash of so many thoughts, imaginations and false creations of the brain. It is hard to characterise the protagonist if the whole described action, in fact, never happened in the reality he lived. As it is written in the article by Larry McCaffery: “The information we have about the moments just after Diddy's suicide attempt is hazy” (McCaffery, “*Death Kit*”: *Susan Sontag's Dream Narrative*, 490). One of the few depictions which may truly refer to Diddy concerns the time when he laid violent hands on himself:

Meaning, seriously, to kill himself, Diddy swallowed half a bottle of sleeping pills one evening; [...] It's twelve thirty; in his bedroom, door closed, Diddy lies back and shuts his eyes. Begins to float down, softly, peaceably. Followed by an interval of undetermined length: some dark time, in which it's hard to breathe. [...] Stomach hurts. He falls out of bed, head first. Onto something painfully hard. And on the hard floor, something wet that smells foul. Xan is barking, and his neighbour in the apartment opposite – a pretty, off-Broadway actress – is shouting into his face. He's being shovelled into the rear of a truck. Then a youngish trim-looking Negro in white jacket and pants, reeking of vomit, massaged his stiffened limbs and wheeled a stomach pump to Diddy's new bed [...] (Sontag, *Death Kit* 6).

Reading forward, we make an effort in attempt to ascertain that this suicide was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the end of the work indicates something completely different. The protagonist is no one special. He does not outstand: “[...] a mild fellow, gently reared in a middle-sized city in Pennsylvania and expensively educated. [...] a rather handsome man of thirty-three” (Sontag, *Death Kit* 2). It might be considered that Diddy shows traits of a typical everyman, in other words, every ordinary thirty-year-old man could identify with him, or at least find some mutual attributes. What may be conspicuous is some kind of resignation combined with a sense of deep sadness. Diddy is not a happy person. In spite of peculiar silence and tranquillity, he does not deal with life which becomes more and more difficult for him. By virtue of no will to live and very little interest in anything, the aspect that becomes clearly apparent is existentialism. Presumably, he suffers from anhedonia:

“Some people are their lives. Others, like Diddy, merely inhabit their lives” (Sontag, *Death Kit 2*). At one point, something cracks inside him. He has enough of everything. He does not want to wait longer on death and this is the reason of taking his life away.

The internal conflict of the character may be confirmed by a wide variety of nicknames that characterises him. He himself is the narrator of the described events and uses a lot of epithets, depending on the situation. It shows his weak personality and constant necessity to accommodate. Hence he becomes Diddy the Good, Done, Hated, Delicate, or, finally, the Soiled. The man decides on appropriate changes of identity and finally soils himself by leading to his own end. All the bynames also prove the complexity of the man. To all intents and purposes, his continuous inner struggle do not allow him to do anything. The ostensible business trip and relevant adventures and events may be treated as a personal examination of conscience. New-known places and persons are referents to these well-known from the past. Further arguments are Diddy’s retrospections to the childhood and other periods recurring from time to time.

Very symbolic seems to be the motif of Diddy’s act of burning his favourite doll to which he was strongly attached. According to McCaffery: “As a young boy, Diddy’s main object of affection was Andy, a small doll given to him by Mary [his nurse]” (McCaffery, “*Death Kit*”: *Susan Sontag’s Dream Narrative*, 489). There is no doubt that it sounds disturbingly. A little boy who, because of the circumstances at home, is forced to share emotions with a mere toy. Surely it had to influence the psyche of a child that as an adult sometimes seems to be completely deprived of feelings. All the more strange is that at some point he decides to gain his peer’s appreciation by throwing his companion to a campfire. Beforehand, the boy fabricates a story according to which the puppet was a property of his younger cousin, not him. Actually, the relative never existed. Evoking this memory after so many years, the protagonist acknowledges mentioned behaviour as “[...] his first suicide attempt” (Sontag, *Death Kit 60*). It is a specific suggestion that the will to end our lives is hidden deep in ourselves from an early age. From the very beginning, always and forever. Diddy maintains that after all: “One is dead. Therefore, one wants to die” (Sontag, *Death Kit 6*). Sándor Márai seems to sustain this thesis: “[...] death is inside us, purely inside us” (Márai, *Dziennik 406*)³. It means that in some way our death is a thing which may be affected purely and simply by ourselves only. Therefore, this leads to the question: do we wait for death, or does death wait for us? The discussion on the posed dilemma pretends to be pointless, because, anyhow, sooner or later our sad final will come true. Undoubtedly, we are able to decide on our further existence or its sudden termination by suicide attempt, in which Sontag’s main character succeeded. From this viewpoint, Sándor Márai’s words sound more sensibly. In this regard, one may boldly say that we have some impact on our fates, because: “Every man bears with him not only his life but also his death” (Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair 85*).

The end is definitely a result of death. Therefore, death is a result of what? There is no clear answer for the question concerning Diddy’s suicide in Sontag’s work. He just did

³ [Translated by the author]: “[...] śmierć jest w nas, całkowicie w nas”.

it. Although during the most part of the novel it is hard to believe, at some point the readers find out themselves that, according to McCaffery's remark, "Diddy [the nickname] is not only a pun for *did he?* (in regard to Incardona's murder), but, perhaps even more significantly it suggests *dead-he* [...]" (McCaffery, "Death Kit": *Susan Sontag's Dream Narrative*, 489). Since the end correlates with death of the protagonist, it may be assumed that he wants to run away from something. Escaping from life becomes an obvious idea. He is too scared to live longer in such thoroughly miserable existence where there are no chances of better tomorrow. It is also unavailing to look for any understanding with God, because He simply does not exist in Diddy's reality. Thereupon, it appears impossible to seek a consolation in religion. Prayers could be a sort of escape from reality, however, it is hard to assume for how long. Routine totally dominated the protagonist's life, thus probably even orison would lose its significance after some time. Surrounding world does not offer him anything special or interesting. By taking lethal dose of hypnotics, he begins his mad dash that lasts for the rest of the novel. Nonetheless, its place is taken only in the character's mind, and in fact everything ends in the moment of beginning. The man is the sole author of his own soiling: the final, solitary and effective way to so pathological escape from fear.

Illness and suicide attempt – halfway to death

Hardly ever death comes suddenly. It may appear unexpectedly, but is usually preceded by something. Some kind of herald of the end could be a serious illness. Obviously, modern medical science reached a very high level of efficiency and doctors try to do everything they can in order to help us. Nevertheless, they are not always able to save every single life, especially when a sick person does not want any support or service, neither they realise their health condition. Regardless of its form, "Primarily, a disorder is not a medical certificate that medicine assumes as a disorder, but an experience of an ailing one who tries to deal with it as with any other disability" (Gadamer, *Problem inteligencji* 72-73)⁴. It links directly to diverse pain, both physical and mental. It depends on the type of illness. Suffering is just a peculiar foretaste of death, which may occur as a result of mentioned affliction. Every common man would definitely avoid any pain at all costs.

Diddy is just the same. Admittedly, there is no information concerning his health problems, however, an attempt to diagnose him as having depression would definitely be a reasonable manoeuvre. This may be the reason of the protagonist's all miseries. In spite of a well-paid job, he does not achieve any spectacular successes and the easiest activities seem to be very tough. There is still a place in his memory for the previous relationship with Joan. The man has no idea how to find himself in the surrounding world and relate somehow to other people for a longer time. This pushed him into the situation which he could not handle in any way. Having no opportunities of getting pleasure or positives out of life, Diddy does not see any alternative for himself. The impact on his present condition

⁴ [Translated by the author]: "Choroba nie jest pierwotnie owym stwierdzonym orzeczeniem lekarskim, które medycyna uznaje za chorobę, lecz doświadczeniem cierpiącego, z którym on, jak z każdym innym zaburzeniem, próbuje się uporać".

has undoubtedly the whole life. From an early age he struggled with adversity. As a child, he was poorly attached to the parents, in direct contrast to the nanny who devoted much more attention towards the boy.

Most disturbing is the fact that Diddy bestowed the greatest affection on his doll named Andy. Of course, children perceive the world in a slightly different way, thus their behaviour, and above all a way of thinking, may be divergent or even ridiculous from time to time. However, the little boy's motives had to be ordered by some inner problems. Ostentatious act of burning the toy is a desperate attempt to find the role and position among the peers. The kid just wants to be accepted by the others. Relations with his brother Paul also seem unusual. The protagonist admits that he always lived in the shadow of the second Harron, even though the latter was younger. It is possible that Paul had above average skills and talents, and that is why he always seemed to be more capable than Dalton. Nevertheless, it does not explain such an early resignation from any sort of tries to surpass the younger brother. Competitive spirit is, after all, omnipresent, especially between siblings. And the older one is usually a determinant point towards which the younger should aspire. The circumstances in the novel are completely different, and Paul plays the lead role due to his general prosperity and well-being. Diddy is absolutely much more static and all the occurrences definitely had an influence on his psyche.

If a serious illness constitutes a step towards death, a suicide attempt should certainly be treated as another one as well. Regardless of what directs a person who decided to have such a dramatic try, this is not a typical behaviour for a common human. Just the suicidal thoughts themselves are a sort of turn towards the end. Nonetheless, the adoption of such final decision may be very difficult. Furthermore, between thinking and making assumptions there is also a long way. And during a suicide attempt there is just the time that sets one in the halfway to death and closes them in uncertain limbo. As mentioned earlier, any common person being sick would be after help in such a situation. Thus here you could be served with a medicine, and doctors would try as much as possible to find a solution to your problem. The long struggle for health would finally end with a success, which in this case means curing the sick person. If one compares a decision on suicide with a disease, there appears a similarity in those two, because in both situations a given person has to come a long way full of obstacles. However, they do not ask anyone for support, but they act on their own. Thus the only and obvious solution is to take the last step that not necessarily should be read as a success.

In addition, it would be sad if the only thing that prevents from taking one's own life is fear. This act definitely requires a lot of courage, but it should not be treated as something intended only for the chosen ones. Any elevation of suicide cannot take place. As Sándor Márai claims: "Whoever flees from fear into death is not necessarily a coward" (Márai, *Dziennik* 37)⁵. But is it really an evidence of courage? Maybe it is, in some way of course. On the other hand, the Hungarian writer suggests that life represents too big challenge to stand up to it. Then only truly brave persons are able to find themselves in this

⁵ [Translated by the author]: "Kto ucieka przed strachem w śmierć, niekoniecznie jest tchórzem".

reality. Dalton is not like that and he has a lot of difficulties in life. It is also hard to say whether bravery to do anything is a feature that fits him at all, despite a few odd or even crazy performances such as killing Incardona. Cioran's words depict the protagonist well: "Between the obsession with suicide and the consciousness about death there are not many common links – it is all [...] about the deep, continuous consciousness of the end itself" (Cioran, *Spotkania z samobójstwem* 272)⁶. And Diddy is endowed with such consciousness. He decides to take this desperate step and move forward into the last, short-lasting journey that is so much exciting for the reader.

Conclusion

The concept of endings turned out to be very complex. Many interesting points of view and theories were presented. Furthermore, the readers may spot some matters that they normally could never think of. This is because many people do not have much time to focus on deeper, instead of mundane, affairs. Grim and depressive themes dominate and remain the most absorbing and mysterious points of the work. Anxiety is also present, but all the aspects conceive a desire to familiarise with the considerations and reflections included in the analysis.

We have to remember that death is a natural phenomenon which is connected with every living being, including us. The article, by included motifs, exemplifies a peculiar reference and warning. It persuades the reader to reconsider all apparently banal and obvious affairs. We all can be fully conscious of life and use the knowledge in positive means as developing our skills and abilities. Furthermore, every man may differ somehow, but we are all equal in the face of death, and life just equals death in some way.

Bibliography

- Baudelaire, Charles. *The Flowers of Evil*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008.
- Cioran, Emil. *On the Heights of Despair*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Cioran, Emil. "Spotkania z samobójstwem (Fragmenty)". *Literatura na świecie* nr 11 (1990): 272.
- Cioran, Emil. *Zeszyty 1957-1972*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2004.
- Cioran, Emil. *Zmierzch myśli*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo KR, 2004.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Problem inteligencji". *O skrytości zdrowia*. Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2011.
- Márai, Sándor. *Dziennik*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 2009.
- McCaffery, Larry. "Death Kit: Susan Sontag's Dream Narrative". *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 484-499. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207905>>.
- Sontag, Susan. *Death Kit*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.
- Wharton, William. *Scumbler*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.

⁶ [Translated by the author]: "Pomiędzy obsesją samobójstwa a świadomością śmierci niewiele znajdziemy rysów wspólnych – chodzi [...] o tę głęboką, nieustającą świadomość końca samego w sobie".