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### HIDDEN MEANINGS IN HUNGARIAN LITERARY TITLES

A literary title can be as intriguing as a proper name – as a matter of fact, grammatically speaking, it is a proper name. An intriguing title is not enough to make a great work of a mediocre one, but it certainly enhances the literary experience. Pun, paradox, irony, allusion and symbolism are some of the stylistic devices found in literary titles. Interestingly enough, Hungarian literary criticism has rarely considered this aspect of literature.

The genre in which titles are the least important is poetry. A poem speaks for itself, it does not need a sophisticated title. In fact, it may need no title at all – hence indices of poems the first lines of which serve as titles. Occasionally, certain mannerisms of poets catch the attention of the reading public. Notable is Endre Ady's consistency in using three-word titles. Even though this phenomenon is striking, no one has tried to interpret it. Perhaps there is no valid interpretation and the three-word titles are just a sign of Ady's poetic mannerism.

The more challenging are the titles of numerous Hungarian novels and plays. Few of these, if any, were written before the 1850s. While it is always risky to deem a literary occurrence as the first one of its kind, it seems that the belated but great Romantic novelist Mór Jókai was the first one to stimulate his readers' intellectual curiosity with intricate titles. Some of these are oxymorons (*Szegény gazdagok*, 'The poor rich' (1860), or *Gazdag szegények*, 'The rich poor' (1890), the latter also being a playful antithesis of the former). Other titles are paradoxical, such as *Öreg ember nem vén*

*ember* 'An old man is not old' (1900).<sup>1</sup> *Mire megvénülünk* 'By the time we get old' (1865) is an ironically misleading title for a novel in which one searches in vain for a representation of old age. Perhaps Jókai's polysemic titles are the most fascinating ones. Among these, *A kőszívű ember fiai* 'Sons of the stone-hearted man' (1869) makes reference to a Hungarian saying which sees rigid, cold-hearted people as stonehearted ones. Such a person is Kázmér Baradlay, the father of the three young Hungarians who are the "sons" of the title. The father dies in the first chapter of arteriosclerosis, a condition that makes the heart arteries brittle, that is (figuratively speaking) stony. The most sophisticated polysemy, which is combined with symbolism, can be found in the title *Fekete gyémántok* 'Black diamonds' (1870): a reference both to coal, the treasure of Hungarian mines that international investors greedily covet, and to the eyes of Éva (Evila), the hero's (Iván Berend's) secret love. The title of *Asszonyt kísér – Istent kísért* 'Escorting a woman, tempting God' (1889) is based on an untranslatable paronymy which functions as a pun, with the verbs *kísér* meaning 'accompanying' (or, more precisely, 'accompanies') or 'escorting' ('escorts'), and *kísért* 'tempting' ('tempts') in Hungarian.

While we find fewer interesting titles in Hungarian drama than in the novel, Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* 'The tragedy of man' (1862) is a philosophical enigma, and critics recognized it as such since its first printing. A whole series of interpretations unfolds from this title and its possible variations. The most familiar among these is János Erdélyi's view that a more appropriate title would have been 'The comedy of the devil'.<sup>2</sup> József Gulyás found that the 'Tragedy of Lucifer' (the devil) would have been an even better title.<sup>3</sup> Arguing about the title, Aladár Bodor thought that

<sup>1</sup> A more exact translation of the Hungarian original is impossible. As is well known, there are no perfectly interchangeable synonyms: a dog is not the same as a hound, a puppy is not the same as a whelp. The connotation of *öreg* in Hungarian is one who entered old age, whereas a *vén* person is one who is no longer in possession of his basic mental and physical faculties.

<sup>2</sup> JÁNOS ERDÉLYI: "Madách Imre". In *Pályák és pálmák* 1886: 465. Originally published in the periodical *Magyarország*, 1862.

<sup>3</sup> JÓZSEF GULYÁS: "Lucifer tragédiája". In *Sárospataki Református Lapok* 9, 1914: 76.

the play showed not mankind's but the individual's tragedy.<sup>4</sup> True enough, the title is somewhat vague, but philosophy has not been known for the clarity of its terms and axioms, and "a tragédia" or 'the tragedy' (as Hungarians call it) is very philosophical in its inspiration. Modern-day critics may even speculate whether 'man' refers only to Adam (as Géza Laczkó suggested<sup>5</sup>), or also includes Eve. The nebulousness of the title may have been intentional, however, and definitely enriches the drama's interpretability.

Using titles to convey hidden messages took the most fascinating forms at the turn of the twentieth century. While Jókai's novel titles are witty, even brilliant, they do not contribute significantly to an understanding of the complexity of plot, message, psychology or artistic quality. Their only function is to catch the reader's attention. Not so the literary titles of the next generation of writers, spearheaded by Kálmán Mikszáth, the great reviver of late nineteenth-century Hungarian prose.

Most critics regard *Beszterce ostroma* 'The siege of Beszterce' (1895) as Mikszáth's best novel. If so, the irony of the title greatly contributes to the overall effect of the novel. That is, the siege of Beszterce never took place – it remained a plan which was foiled by an astutely devised preventive measure, demonstrating the essential 'irony of fate', better known in modern literary terminology as 'classical irony': the conflict between intention and outcome. Besides other versions of irony, this one was a rewarding device used in titles. In 1930 Gyula Krúdy, Mikszáth's junior by thirty-three years, utilized a title and a narrative situation very similar to that of 'The siege of Beszterce' in his short novel *Etel király kincse* 'King Attila's treasure'. Somewhat like the outraged count Pongrácz, who set off to take the town of Beszterce, a group of middle-aged country gentlemen take the road to find Attila's legendary treasure. Their motivation is a mixture of belief and make-belief. One thing is certain: they are broke. They arrive in Budapest where they sojourn for some length of time, thanks to the patronage of a rich and eccentric aristocrat. By the end of the

<sup>4</sup> ALADÁR BODOR: *Az ember tragédiája mint az egyén tragédiája*. Budapest, 1905. p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> GÉZA LACZKÓ: "A XIX. századi férfi tragédiája". In *Nyugat* 3, 1923: 135-39.

novel they still have not got around to looking for the treasure, but at least they are having a good time in the capital and its environs.

Impressionism, art nouveau and symbolism were the first movements that consciously explored the potential of literary titles. In Margit Kaffka's *Színek és évek* 'Colours and years' (1912), the passing of time can be followed through most chapters. It would be a vain effort, however, to look for dominating or regularly recurring colours in the main character's life. It is questionable whether impressionist paintings can be interpreted analytically, because it is the total effect that counts. The same is true of Kaffka's novel. Light and colour give purpose to the heroine's life – when they disappear, she falls into an emotional abyss.

The allegorical title of Kaffka's short novel *Hangyaboly* 'The ant heap' [sic] (1917) refers to the small community of teachers (nuns) and pupils in a small town convent. Events which this community regards as decisive – such as the election of a new mother superior or two scandals rocking the foundations of the institution's quiet conservatism – are actually as unimportant for the wider society as the excited bustling of tiny insects in an ant hill.

More eclectic than Kaffka was her contemporary Gyula Krúdy, whose preference for symbolic titles is evident in two of his most famous works: the Sinbad cycle (a series of short stories published under the title *Szindbád*) and *A vörös postakocsi* 'The red stagecoach' (1914). The hero of the former is an aging turn-of-the-century idler with a vaguely middle-class background and strong inclination towards daydreaming and life's humble pleasures. Nobody questions his identity or inquires about his more plausible name. The character is indeed timeless, sailing the sea of memories. These obvious observations appear in most Hungarian interpretations of this unusual prose work.

The case is different with *A vörös postakocsi*, which is a more complex and ambiguous title than *Szindbád*. The colour red and its shades, turning into pink at one end of the scale and reddish brown at the other, dominate the novel. Colours that can be placed on this scale occur fifteen times in chapter 1, ten times in chapter 2, and twenty-one times in chapter 3. Although other colours,

too, appear in the novel and their number actually surpasses the variations of red, none of these colours appears more frequently than the pink to reddish-brown scale. The connotations of this group are as ambivalent as the traditional ones of the colour red: from life and passion to death, from the erotic to the grotesque. At least three women who play central roles as erotic symbols have hair with a touch of red: Klára (reddish brown), Clarence/Lotti (reddish gold) and Estella (red).

Another symbolic reference in the title to a stagecoach enhances the importance of the colour red. This coach is only one of the means of travel mentioned – we also find references to trains, ships and the exotic Russian *troika*. Passages of life, changes of fortune, escapism, and the expectation of new experiences are central themes of the novel, closely connected to the motif of traveling. Only one critic, Imre Bori, mentioned briefly the significance of the stagecoach in his monograph on Krúdy.<sup>6</sup> The symbolic meaning is much richer, however. Since stagecoaches were no longer used by the fictional time of the novel (about 1910), this anachronistic vehicle of the rich adventurer Alvinczy symbolizes, primarily, its owner's eccentricity. The six harnessed horses gallop like some classical symbols of Fate, possibly also recalling the image of the horses of the Apocalypse. The large wheels keep turning fast, like the wheels of Fortune. Inside the coach there is the smell of tobacco and toilet powder, creating a sensuous atmosphere. A great deal of the novel's rich message is hidden in the title.

A very different kind of novel is Zsigmond Móricz's *Az Isten háta mögött* 'Behind God's back' (1911). Móricz was much more critical of nostalgia, dreams and illusions than Kaffka, Krúdy and other contemporaries. His short novel has its own history, inasmuch as it illustrates how critical consensus can stop literary inquiry for a century or even longer. All critics of this novel started off with the banal Hungarian saying that constitutes the title, and found corroboration of the assumed message in the inner monologues of a lonely character whom Móricz featured with obvious irony.

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<sup>6</sup> IMRE BORI: *Krúdy Gyula*. Novi Sad: Fórum, 1978.

In Hungarian the phrase “behind God’s back” refers to the backwoods. By association it also points to a backward place. The novel’s character is a young deputy judge who has just taken up his duties in the small town situated between the Great Plain and the northern mountains. Being homesick and ill-adjusted, he watches the unfamiliar conditions with quiet scorn. Probably just out of law school, he is full of fashionable snobbish cosmopolitanism and hatred for ‘backward’ Hungary, save the capital. His opinion is so extreme, however, that it is really a parody of a certain outlook on the country. Generations of Hungarian critics missed this – or were reluctant to spell it out.

The rural town that serves as setting is called ‘Ilosva’ in the novel. We learn that it has electricity, paved streets, a district courthouse, a consumers’ co-op, both elementary and high school. Literary history recorded that the model for Ilosva was the northern Hungarian town Jolsva (now in Slovakia), which the author came to know through his marriage to a local teacher. The most authentic Hungarian encyclopedia to date, *Révai Nagy Lexikona*, describes Jolsva before World War I, when it still belonged to Hungary, as a place with 2,846 inhabitants, 482 residences, a railroad station, postal, telephone and telegraph offices, and its own savings union. It was the hub of several industries, such as magnesite processing, nail making, and blanket weaving; its grain market was also important. Travel books mention Jolsva’s picturesque character. Móricz’s image of the town and its encyclopedic description coincide: both show Ilosva / Jolsva as anything but a God-forsaken place – in fact, it appears to be very similar to thousands of small European towns.

Social criticism and national masochism lend no key to Móricz’s title. Maybe we should look to the individual characters. One label that sticks is ‘novel of development’, implying that *Az Isten háta mögött* is the story of a young and inexperienced boy who reaches maturity in two respects, more or less simultaneously: by graduating from high school (after taking an exam called ‘maturity exam’ in Hungarian), and by sleeping with a woman for the first time. In the course of the novel, within the frame of some forty hours, Laci Veres has to agonize over the frustrations of coming of age. He realizes that there is no one to go to for guidance.

While God is not specifically mentioned, it is obvious that He, too, is silent and has turned away from His creation. The existentialist undertone of the message is clear. Instead of offering a dated picture of a particular rural town to please cosmopolitans and their soul brothers, the communists, Móricz created a marvelous lasting image of the 'human condition'. At the same time, he assigned an entirely new meaning to a rhetorical cliché by exploiting its implied ambiguity, and by making the reader contemplate the unfamiliar dimensions of this meaning.

The titles that Móricz usually gave his novels are predictable. They are telling, often witty, but yield no substance for interpretation. One additional exception is *Tündérbkert* 'The fairy garden' (1922), the first volume of the amazing *Erdély trilógia* 'Transylvania trilogy', which differs greatly from the general mood of Móricz's writings. Like Mikszáth and Krúdy, Móricz utilizes irony in this title, referring to the dream of two rival rulers of 17th-century Transylvania to turn the principality into a country of peace, prosperity and independence – a dream that neither of them managed to fully realize. This is one ironic title that at least caught the interest of Móricz's critics.

Among the great writers of the 20th century, Dezső Kosztolányi is the next one who gave cryptic titles to some of his works. Notable among these is *Édes Anna* (1926), published in English translation both as 'Anna Édes' and 'The wonder-maid'. There is seemingly nothing special about the title: it is the name of the main character, a young, inexperienced country girl who serves a childless, loveless middle-class couple in the capital. Since *édes* means 'sweet' one may ponder whether Anna is a 'sweet girl': her appearance and manners are rather plain to suit this shallow qualifier used as often in Hungarian as in English. One cannot forget either that eventually she murders her master and mistress in the most grisly manner.

More important than Anna's physical characteristics is the intricate web of symbols that the author spins around the girl. As the stagecoach and the colour red did in Krúdy, sweetness acquires several variations with several meanings, depending on the context. Its antonym – bitterness – gains equal significance.

Sweetness as such has a primary, positive meaning that coincides with the traditional one. In the novel, this adjective is used only once to denote a pleasant experience with which the reader can empathize. Even in this one instance it appears figuratively, from the receiver's perspective. The first and only time that Anna experiences love in an encounter with her mistress' nephew, it turns out that she can give sweetness to others. At her side, her lover Jancsi sinks into pleasure as if it were a tubful of 'sugary milk'. On the other hand, whenever sweetness is used with an unpleasant connotation, the adjective is usually spelled out, especially with reference to Mr. Vizedy, the master of the house. His craving for revenge and his excitement about his prestigious ministerial position are qualified as being 'sweet'. A figurative occurrence with unpleasant connotation appears in the description of a dinner party when Mrs. Vizedy, obviously wanting to humiliate Anna, offers her a slice of cake, which she refuses, in a symbolic denial of her essence expressed by her name.

The true denial of her essence, however, resides in the bitterness of quinine, which her seducer gives her upon hearing that she is pregnant. One of the drugs used to induce abortion, quinine has side effects that include blindness and deafness – indeed, Anna goes temporarily blind and hallucinates. "Jesus, how bitter it was, Virgin Mary, Holy Virgin Mary, how bitter it was. She had never drunk anything this bitter in her life." Bitterness also seals her fate: she loses the fetus that may have grown into her child, the only person who could have given her love.

Perhaps the last great figure of the pre-communist novelists was László Németh. One is struck by the gloomy titles of at least four of his novels: *Gyász* 'Mourning' (1936), *Bűn* 'Crime' (1937), *Iszony* 'Repulsion' (1947) and *Irgalom* 'Mercy' (1965). Németh's critics also recognized this inclination, and devoted moderate attention to these titles. Among all his novels, *Iszony* is regarded as the most fascinating and complex one.

Repulsion – by what? Miklós Béládi mentions human existence as the main cause of the heroine Nelli Kárász's repugnance, but he adds society as another source.<sup>7</sup> István Varga's target is narrower:

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<sup>7</sup> MIKLÓS BÉLÁDI: "Németh László". In *A magyar irodalom története VI*, 1966: 520. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.



Nelli's marriage and village life.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, no one takes the reader's (the reader being the implied 'society') perspective on the enigmatic word. While it may be ultimately impossible to solve the secret of Nelli's strangeness, and while a certain degree of empathy is expected from readers, they will still feel the same repugnance toward the heroine as when listening to a pagan myth. Artemis scares us, no matter how much we respect her virginity and her search for solitude. It was she who turned her hunting dogs on Actaeon, the hapless Peeping Tom. Pneumonia and Nelli jointly finish off Sanyi Takaró, Nelli's husband, and there is something repulsive about his death. It is ambiguity that boosts the intellectual effect of Németh's title: we cannot tell who experiences more repulsion, the heroine or we who assess her.

We have pointed out the presence of oxymoron, paradox, symbol, allegory, irony and ambiguity in the scrutinized literary titles, not excluding the possibility of finding additional titles that are worthy of our critical attention. Still, we can assume that even a more exhaustive list would not be too long. Further investigation is needed to verify the hypothesis that mostly outstanding writers gave sophisticated, puzzling titles to their works. If this is indeed true, it proves that the interpretation of a great novel should start with its great title.

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<sup>8</sup> ISTVÁN CS. VARGA: "Az emberi értékkapcsolatok regénytragédiája". In *Alföld* 1, 1983: 61-73.