

Life as a toy
Interrelations of fiction, narration and identity in Kaffka's works

In my dissertation I studied how Margit Kaffka's novels contribute to the modernisation of narrative. I had a twofold goal in selecting from her works: I chose the ones that appeared in the contemporary Hungarian journal *Nyugat* (West), and also, I looked for novels that best characterise the poetic features of modern text structure in her oeuvre. The first part of my dissertation deals with the changes in reception towards Kaffka's novels, while in the second part of my paper I analyse the novels. My analysis of the individual works is connected by the same set of criteria: the narration-poetic solutions and the identity-building of the characters.

The way Margit Kaffka's novels were received in *Nyugat* made me lead to the following conclusion: Although one of her major works, the *Colours and Years*, was not published in the journal, the novel was still excellently canonised in it. On the one hand it became a sort of etalon within Kaffka's oeuvre. On the other hand, the *Colours and Years* became part of the works that attempted to rejuvenate modern prose, and in relation to female novelists, Kaffka and her novel could be seen as an etalon or standard. The critics of *Colours and Years* highlighted the autobiographic touch and the authentic sociography of the novel and were also appreciative about the innovative description of the decay of the gentry's world through a woman's eyes. This latter achievement caused the critics to announce that in this respect she was equal to Zsigmond Móricz.

Kaffka's other novel, the *Years of Mária* was seen by *Nyugat* critics as outwardly rather reduced piece of work, with the utmost poetic emphasis on the sufferings of the heroine's soul. Consequently, they regarded the novel as a psychological fiction. Mária Laszlovszky, the central character of the novel, was seen as a socially determined figure that represents a new type of a woman in a transitory period, and as such, she cannot avoid her tragic fate. Kaffka's choice of words, their expressiveness plays an essential role in the style and the narrative of the novel, which was appreciated by critics. This was the start of a new, slowly evolving reception attitude, when her works were seen as descriptions of the contemporary woman's sociography. From then on, Kaffka's art was undoubtedly canonised as that of a novelist's.

Kaffka's next novel, the *Stations*, was not published in *Nyugat* either, but in a weekly paper called *Vasárnapi Újság* (Sunday Review). Critics approached this fiction from the authenticity of its sociography and the key novel point of view, and raised artistic and esthetical questions about it.

The *Two Summers* was a novel that the *Nyugat* critics were in doubt even about its genre: they alternately named it a novel, a short story or a narrative. Nevertheless, they highlighted its sensitive approach to social problems, its realistic description of the war ridden era. The *Stations* was undoubtedly seen as advancement in Kaffka's career; her innovative style and the realism of her characters were praised.

The *Lytic Notes on a Year* was not commented on by critics, although it was published in *Nyugat*. A reason for that might be that critics saw this piece as Kaffka's autobiographical testimony.

Kaffka's last novel, *The Ant Heap*, was also published in *Nyugat*. Apart from the novel's innovativeness, critics commented on its set – a nunnery – emphasising that it symbolised a whole microcosm.

As a fictive autobiography, the *Colours and Years* forms part of the canonical group of texts that rejuvenated the form of modern Hungarian prose. I studied the previously noted phenomena – narration, reminiscence, identity, fiction formation – in unity, as a complex, interrelated set of tools that make up the meaning of the whole text. As a new aspect I brought

in the analysis of the relation between play and identity. The gap between the temporarily perceived two selves, I think, is underlined by the radically different points of view on the concept of play. Moreover, in case of Magda Pórtelky the gap may even be created by this difference.

Analysing the title of the novel I came to the conclusion that the individual words of the title and their related meanings analogue to the semantics can be involved in the interpretation both semantically and textually. Then I looked into the character of Magda Pórtelky as the narrator-rememberer from the narrative identity point of view. I found that she is both the creator (author) and the receiver (reader) of her own narrative.

Finally, I focused on the problems of female identity by relating the narrative function to Magda's personal, cultural and social identity, concentrating on the identity creating nature of the historic narrative. Magda's turning to the past represents her strategy to create a whole new sense of the historic time. In her narrated story Magda first becomes alien to herself, and then reunites with her self as she comes to understand her own identity. This can be the explanation for the realisation of Magda's own self through the duality of the *Own* and the *Other* selves. It is through the historical understanding that the first alienated 'I' finally becomes 'mine'.

The narrative of the *Years of Mária* uses the genre of girls' story, plays on it, but turns it inside out regarding its ethos, code and certain poetic features. The modernity of the novel and Kaffka, I think, does not primarily lie with its topic or style, but how the writer handles the genre. In the novel different types of intertextuality can be found, which are mainly connected to the character of Mária Laszlovszky and influence her identity creation. Intertextuality in the novel is thematised in the opposition of reality and fiction. The language of the novel relies on the established literary traditions, and prefers textuality to focus on action. Mária relies on literary patterns and indirectness throughout the novel. Apart from the topic and intertextual references, I see the role of literature in the novel in the indirectness. Mária's role, self-definitions are characterised by alien patterns, unsteadiness, and the impossibility to stabilize them. This is underlined by use of free indirect speech in the novel.

The short story – novel duality of the *Two Summers* results in a surplus of meaning in terms of the perception of history and the interpretation of fate, an addition to the characteristic features of novels.

In *The Ant Heap*, the nunnery forms an inseparable unity of time and space, which I interpreted as an independent, Bakhtin's chronotopos. The nunnery's unique time-space dimension is defined by confinement, rigid Christian routine, and the opportunity to contact the transcendent. This singular chronotopos shapes the female identity, creates a symbolic identity, which is a linguistically and culturally constructed subject. The novel has a complex narration technique, which features free indirect speech, changes in points of view, and tries to raise doubts in the almighty narrator.

Kaffka's novel poetics shows several features that can be related to the movements of classical modernity to rejuvenate the conventional narrative. It is through studying the texts and addressing the arising poetical and narrative questions that the conclusion of my dissertation is reached: Margit Kaffka's works are dominated by innovative narrative style, although they retain some conventional elements, too. The analyses also prove that – apart from the so far singularly canonised *Colours and Years* – Kaffka's other novels, such as the *Years of Mária* and *The Ant Heap*, should also be incorporated into text corpus of loosely defined classical novels. All in all, Kaffka's novels can be seen as classical texts in Ricoeur's sense of the term. These novels can be read and re-read without the risk of annihilating the text; on the contrary: every reading gives a new life to the novels.