

## Aufsatz

### Tragedy and the Novel

About the Tragic in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Novel\*

Péter Bényei

Institute of Cultural Studies and Hungarian Literature  
University of Debrecen  
Egyetem tér 1.  
H-4032 Debrecen  
benyei.peter@arts.unideb.hu

#### **Abstract**

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the discourse about tragedy and the tragic changes: gradually the focus shifts from the genre's classical, Aristotelian grounds to a new concept of the tragic. According to the aesthetic texts of A. W. Schlegel, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw profound changes in the possibilities and the experience of the tragic, which revolves around the relativized world order, the fleeting nature of life, or the way human relations and deeds immanently interact with each other to form dramatic-tragic situations. However to communicate the tragic experience adequate to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new procedures were needed: this is why the period's leading genre, the novel could provide adequate ways to represent the tragic experience suitable for a changed world. Thus the main strategies of the tragedy and the tragic are altered to function effectively in certain forms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. The essay traces this process and concludes in a short description of the dramatically structured novels of Zsigmond Kemény, a significant figure in the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian novel.

*Keywords:* tragedy, tragic, 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, Zsigmond Kemény

---

\* The publication was supported by the SROP-4.2.2.B-15/1/KONV-2015-0001 project. The project has been supported by the European Union, co-financed by the European Social Fund.

## 1 The Concept of Tragedy

### 1.1 *The Ironic Nature of the Tragic*

The concept of the tragic seems as hard to define<sup>1</sup> as irony, even if these aesthetic principles seem incompatible. Tragic – as it is formulated in 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics – is integrative, it carries stable existential forms; whereas irony is destructive, and can be perceived as a mesh of unstable meanings.

Still, is there any more “ironical” aesthetic figure than the tragic? The tragic effect is predicated precisely on interlocking incommensurate tendencies to structure the effect the genre has on the reader.<sup>2</sup> The *tragic hero* most often embodies virtue or human greatness in tragedy, whereas – due to the tragic mistake that they are bound to commit – their fate is to be destroyed. The *aim of tragedy* is precisely, as Schopenhauer writes, “the portrayal of the terrible aspect of life” (Schopenhauer 2010: 280) even though most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts of tragedy name its most important effect as voicing the original affirmation of life.<sup>3</sup> Tragedy appeases us, we make peace with life, as Kierkegaard would have it, because “in the tragic there is implicit a sadness and a healing. [...] Intrinsically, the tragic is infinitely gentle; esthetically it is to human life what divine grace and compassion are; it is even more benign, and therefore I say that it is a motherly love that lulls the troubled one” (Kierkegaard 1987: 145).

The paradox involved in *the effect of tragedy* was probably best formulated by György Lukács: “Every real drama involves the dread felt because of the inevitable downfall of the greatest people in society, yet even within the aimless self-mortification we find an affirmation of life”<sup>4</sup> (Lukács 1977: 166). The pensiveness felt by the *spectator of tragedy* is nothing other than “a kind of relief and resolution, in which pain and pleasure are peculiarly mixed,” as through empathy (misery) and fear (dread), tragedy “effects a total liberation of the constrained heart” (Gadamer 1989: 127). This means that the reception of the tragic text involves an ironic position: the horror of tragedy can be felt and worked through only if the spectators position themselves amidst the events, yet keep their distance from them at the same time.

---

<sup>1</sup> “The semantic field of the noun tragedy and of the adjective tragic remains as indeterminate as its origin.” (Steiner 2004: 1)

<sup>2</sup> “In literature, irony is not restricted to the realm of the comic, but it is essential to tragedy as well. Irony becomes manifest in tragedy when the protagonist, misjudging reality, makes in his hybris self-assured statements which affect the discerning audience ironically.” (Behler 1988: 46)

<sup>3</sup> According to Hegel, the dramatist “must acquire the most profound insight into the essence of human action and Divine Providence, as well as clearly and vividly revealing this eternal substance of all human characters, passions, and fates” (Hegel 1975: 1179).

<sup>4</sup> All translations of the Hungarian studies are mine.

It is no wonder that in 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts of tragedy and the tragic we often encounter the description of tragic irony, which basically represents the double, paradoxical nature of tragedy. In his Sophocles study published in 1830, one of the main proponents of the theory, Connop Thirlwall sums up the essence of the phenomenon in the following way:

What makes the contrast interesting is, that the right and the truth lie on neither side exclusively : that there is no fraudulent purpose, no gross imbecility of intellect, on either: but both have plausible claims and specious reasons to allege, though each is too much blinded by prejudice or passion to do justice to the views of his adversary. For here the irony lies not in the demeanour of the judge, but is deeply seated in the case itself, which seems to favour each of the litigants, but really eludes them both. [...] But the liveliest interest arises when by inevitable circumstances characters, motives, and principles are brought into hostile collision, in which good and evil are so inextricably blended on each side, that we are compelled to give an equal share of our sympathy to each, while we perceive that no earthly power can reconcile them (Thirlwall 1880: 8).

## ***1.2 Anthropological Aspects of Tragedy***

Virtue and vice, destruction and appeasement, dread and an affirmation of life, chaos and homeliness, sadness and healing: the duplicities that structure the tragic suggest that the nature of tragedy stages the main anthropological features through experience.<sup>5</sup> Humans are a nexus of opposing intentions and determinations: a wish for happiness and death, infinite and limited, spiritual and material is fused in indivisible unity. The tragic heroes of classical ages are placed in the crossroads of these tendencies, making them general symbols of human existence.

Another important anthropological suggestion of tragedy and the tragic is that man itself is born in vice: birth predestines us for a depraved existence. “The true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight that the hero does not atone for his particular sins, but for original sin instead, i.e. the guilt of existence itself: ‘Because the greatest offence of man / Is that he was born’ – as Calderon says with perfect frankness” (Schopenhauer 2010: 281). Why does human existence become a tragic existence burdened with vice? Primarily because no one with the best intentions is really able to control their own actions, and to calculate the results of their deeds. Tragedy “becomes visible in human suffering,” writes Schopenhauer in his aesthetic texts, especially because “the clashes between the strivings of individual wills” have incalculable consequences (Schopenhauer 2010: 280): good and evil, ethical and wicked, the deeds of the self and others create a web that the tragic heroes enter. They inevitably end up in a maze of tragic con-

---

<sup>5</sup> As Steiner claims, “the human condition is tragic. It is ontologically tragic, which is to say in essence. Fallen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth” (Steiner 2004: 2).

flicts, their free will and fate become subordinated to various aspects of necessity.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the tragic catastrophe can never be simplified to a backlash triggered by an offence (punishment), or to the deterministic nature of fate: there can be no such case that the hero would not be responsible to a certain degree (as they, actively or passively, act), just like there can be no tragic situation which was created solely by the deeds of the tragic hero.<sup>7</sup> The best example for this could be the fate of Oedipus, who is the symbol of a man who makes the most of the opportunities of being: a hero who overcomes many foes at the crossroads; a wise man who solves the Sphinx's riddle; an exquisite king who is esteemed by his people. This very same Oedipus, however, is the bearer of the most terrible sins that human being can commit, and these deeds made him a king, the very best among humans: without his knowledge and will, he murders his father, and enters into an incestuous relationship with his mother. At the same time, this ignorance unveils the uncontrollability of human actions.

### ***1.3 Metaphysical Aspects in the Effects of Tragedy***

The ritual roots of tragedy are well known: Greek tragedy originated from the Dionysus cult: antique theatre performances were cultic-ritual events, in which the community's myths and even gods were evoked. Originally tragedy (and its main source of effect, the tragic) aims to introduce the spectator and the reader to the components that determine human being's metaphysical existence. Yet we end up in a paradox again concerning the staging of the transcendent. A recurring feature of the theories is that the limits of the world created by tragedy could only be near the immanent sphere of human existence, because it attempts to unveil the rules of this mundane world, and demonstrates the (tragic) consequences of the incalculable constellations of human deeds. At the same time, the presupposition (acceptance or denial) of transcendence invoked by the encounter with life's fleeting nature, is one of the basic principles of human existence.

In the conflicts structuring the background of Greek tragedies we find a superior will reaching beyond human intentions, however vague this will

---

<sup>6</sup> "The opposition of worldviews on action crystallizes so far in the incompatibility of directions and bases. Autonomous action on the one side is contested by already given factors of necessity on the other. It needs to be stressed that the tragic plot presents a world in which a pre-established situation transforms the whole of action into reaction. [...] Reactions in tragedy stem from an ontologically specific and unique basis. This latter testifies to the overwhelming presence of constraining factors that delimit the scope of exercising choice." (Nyusztay 2002: 136)

<sup>7</sup> "But in considering all these tragic conflicts we must above reject the false idea that they have anything to do with guilt or innocence. The tragic heroes are just as much innocent as guilty." (Hegel 1975: 1214)

might be. The mundane and the transcendent world are connected by an intensive and very real relationship fraught with contradictions and uncertainties. The godly sphere speaks through the mysterious rhetoric of prophecies and curses, and hard as humans may try, they are completely unable to understand and follow these suggestions: that is why the catastrophe – often referred to as “fate” – is inevitable, and why the gods seem indifferent, or even cruel to humans in Greek tragedies.

If we pay attention to the changes in the role of the transcendent in European tragedy, we can even sketch up an overarching narrative: after the decline of the antique world, the Christian notion of providence serves as the mythological background to tragedy, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is the loss of religious principles and the lack of metaphysics that comes to structure the tragic effect.

#### ***1.4 Initiatory Function***

By constantly evoking the anthropological bases of human existence, tragedy fulfils an initiatory function: it unveils the limits to man's/woman's will and his/her fallibility, while trying to maintain a faith in life's meaningful nature. “What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering” writes Gadamer, “is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate” (Gadamer 1989: 128). The initiatory function emerges through the ironic movement of the tragic effect: tragedy stages the fallibility and meaningfulness of existence, as well as the individual's exposure to change and its stability.

This basic function remains intact despite the historical changes. It is what Kierkegaard refers to when he is writing about the differences between antique and modern tragedy: “it can scarcely have escaped the attention of any observer that there is an essential difference between the tragic, ancient and modern. [...] But if, in turn, someone were to affirm the distinction absolutely and, on the basis of it, [...] press this distinction between the tragic in ancient and in modern drama, his behavior would be no less unreasonable than the first person's, since he would [forget] that the foothold so indispensable to him was the tragic itself. This in turn would be so far from distinguishing between the tragic ancient and modern that, contrariwise, it would combine them” (Kierkegaard 1987: 139).

#### ***1.5 Tragedy and the Novel***

The history of tragedy is a history of changes, the most important effect of which, the tragic, always comes to life again, while retaining its main character. But are there routes leading to the novel from tragedy? The description of the tragic effect always entailed determined poetical requisites in

19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics. Schopenhauer, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche regarded tragedy as the most elevated aesthetic constellation, whose closed form, stylized world, its characters embodying certain behavior, and its staging serves an initiatory function.

Can we even talk about the tragic in connection with the novel, whose poetical constitution is so different from tragedy? Is it possible that the most important effect of tragedy was inherited by the novel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? That is what we are going to find out in the next chapters.

## 2 Routes to a Modernized, Novelized Tragic

### 2.1 19<sup>th</sup> Century Crisis of Tragedy: Changes in World View

The changes in the world view during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which make up the existential basis of tragedy, is best summed up by Søren Kierkegaard's study about the theory of the tragic. Kierkegaard regards the *experience of isolation* and *skepticism* the most important factors of the "modern age." On the one hand, "existence is undermined by the subjects' doubt; isolation continually gains the upper hand more and more," and as a result of the apparent individualization "these associations bear the stamp of arbitrariness and most often are formed for some accidental purpose [...]. These numerous associations, therefore, demonstrate the disintegration of the age". On the other hand, "the power in religion that insisted upon the invisible" was destroyed or weakened, thus the concepts assuring the common identity are no longer valid (Kierkegaard 1987: 141). The common sets of values and the view of reality predicated on a transcendent plenitude are lost, thus the conditions of the tragic have been made much narrower.

Looking back from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the theories of the tragic paint an even darker picture. When writing about the genres of the age, Georg Steiner talks about the death of tragedy in his monograph,<sup>8</sup> a view shared by György Lukács in the *History of the Modern Drama*. The collapse of the community frames, the rise of "individualism as a problem of life," the uniformization of everyday existence, the "relativization of the ideologies structuring our lives" and many other things (Cf. Lukács 1978: 102–107, 120, 132–133) contributed to the questioning of the grounds of tragedy:

---

<sup>8</sup> Steiner sees the decisive turn leading to the decline of tragedy in empirism and scientific theories of the world gaining ground. In his opinion literature is excluded from the discourses transmitting knowledge about the world, thus the role of tragedy and acting is diminished to a significant degree. The religious basis of tragedy disappears, the concepts of mercy, damnation, catharsis, etc. lose their meaning; experience draws the limits of the world and reality, and everything that would go beyond empirical reality is ruled out (See Steiner 1974: 186–198).

“Tragedy itself became problematic. There were no absolute, undisputed and obvious criteria for stating what tragic fate certain people could have. *The tragic becomes a point of view*, an inner, psychological problem. [...] The audiences no longer have a sense of what kind of fates could be regarded as tragic” (Lukács 1978: 127 – emphasis added). In *The Metaphysics of Tragedy* Lukács writes about the inevitable silence of god’s judgment in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century tragedies, which inspired Lucien Goldmann to trace a “deep crisis in the relationship between man and his social and spiritual world” (Goldmann 2013: 41) as the most important characteristic of the new sensibility of the rational world, and to sum up the essence of the tragic in the Pascalian paraphrase of the hidden god.<sup>9</sup>

On the whole, the dull everyday life became unsuited to writing and reading tragedies in the traditional sense. The relevance of tragedy and the tragic, however, is still high, but its appreciation has changed: all the theories referred to above regard the essentially different perspective of the new age as tragic, and that is what could contribute to the reinvigoration of drama.

“A feature in which our age certainly excels that age in Greece is that our age is more depressed and therefore deeper in despair”, says Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, 1987: 142). This train of thought could be continued with Nietzsche’s diagnosis about the decline of 19<sup>th</sup> century tragedy. Nietzsche opposed the optimism of the science of the age and argued for the renewal of tragedy, which lets us peek into the “terrors of individual existence” but also gives us “metaphysical solace.” “This insight marks the beginning of a culture which I now dare to describe as a tragic culture. Its most important feature lies in putting wisdom in place of science as the highest goal. This wisdom is not deceived by the seductive distractions of the sciences; instead it turns its unmoved gaze on the total image of the world, and in this image it seeks to embrace eternal suffering with sympathetic feelings of love, acknowledging that suffering to be its own” (Nietzsche 1999: 87–88).

Lukács claims that the basic experience of modern tragedy springs from the negative consequences of god’s disappearance on human existence: “God needs to leave the stage, yet he remains as a spectator: this is the historical opportunity of tragic periods. And because nature and fate has never been so quietly and fearfully devoid of soul as they are today, and because the human soul has never been so lonely on his road, we can hope for tragedy again” (Lukács 1976: 494).

Due to individualization, the lack of consensual sets of values, the decline of the transcendental, etc. our existence becomes not only small-time

---

<sup>9</sup> “God’s voice no longer speaks directly to man. This is one of the fundamental points of tragic thought. ‘Vere tu es Deus absconditus,’ quotes Pascal. The hidden God.” (Goldmann 2013: 36)

and everyday, but unfathomable and threatening as well, and necessity is foregrounded as a source of the tragic. The new period itself becomes “tragic” in a certain sense, thus it requires an approach that answers the challenges of the new situation. After a series of attempts, the theatres of Ibsen and Tchekhov create the adequate forms of tragedy (See Newton 2008: 21–62). If we examine the novel before the turn of the century in the context of these attempts, I think that the genre of “transcendental homelessness”<sup>10</sup> was appropriate to create and transmit this new kind of tragic sensibility.

## 2.2 *The Rise of a New Tragic Sensibility*

As we have seen, the theoretical works conclude that the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw profound changes in the possibilities and the experience of the tragic. Writing about modern drama, György Lukács claims that due to the decline of the transcendental perspective, the source of this new experience of the tragic is the *problematic nature of existence* itself.

Heroes in 19<sup>th</sup> century dramas aim to develop their identities, but the points of reference in this process have become unstable, they lack set roles and patterns of behavior, which dooms their fulfillment to failure. The downfall of the tragic hero is brought about not by some act of transgression (as there is no order in the traditional sense), it is enough to have an evident sense of fulfillment. “That is why drama starts to focus on the sustenance of individual existence as such and the integrity of the individual” – writes Lukács. “Even more so, *existence as such is starting to become tragic*. With the pressure of external circumstances becoming stronger, even a little sense of nonconformity could create an irreconcilable dissonance” (Lukács 1978: 107 – emphasis added).

We can identify two consequences of tragedy becoming immanent to existence from György Lukács’s text, both of which are palpable in novels using the tragic: what leads to tragedy is the “world order” becoming relativized, and a sense of the fleeting nature of life.

---

<sup>10</sup> “for the novel form is, like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness.” (Lukács 1971: 41)

### 3 New Concepts of Tragedy and the Tragic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Lukács's theory of modern tragedy has its predecessors: from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the discourse about tragedy and the tragic changes: gradually the focus shifts from the genre's classical, Aristotelian grounds to a new concept of the tragic.

#### 3.1 *The Interconnection of Actions as the Basis of the Tragic Case: Schopenhauer*

The first noteworthy concept in the aesthetic commentaries can be found in Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical treatise. The German philosopher differentiates between two main types of tragic inevitability: "What emerges horribly is the conflict of the will with itself, displaying itself most fully here, at the highest level of its objecthood. It becomes visible in human suffering, which is brought about *in part through chance and error*, which step forward as rulers of the world and through their treachery (which goes so far as to appear intentional) are personified as fate; and *in part* it is brought about by humanity itself, *through the clashes between the strivings of individual wills*, through the wickedness and perversity of the majority" (Schopenhauer 2010: 280 – emphasis added).

Schopenhauer does not locate the final cause of the conflict and the catastrophe in the unique, transgressive actions (faults) of tragic heroes, but in the intervention of external pressures. While in the first case the tragic events unfold because of a realm beyond human understanding ("chance", "fate"), in the second case the tragic complications arise from everyday events and petty actions of the characters. The second of these receives much more profound description, most likely because in these lines we can find the concept of tragedy that harmonizes with the world view of the author's age:

the misfortune can also be introduced simply *by means of people's positioning with respect to each other, through their relationships*, so that there is no need for a terrible mistake or unheard of accident or even for a character whose evilness extends to the limits of human possibility; instead, morally *ordinary characters in everyday circumstances are positioned* with respect to each other in such a way that their situation forces them knowingly and clear-sightedly to cause each other the greatest harm without the injustice falling on one side or the other (Schopenhauer 2010: 281–282 – emphasis added).

Everyday cases; common circumstances; the interactions between the actions of ordinary characters: the tragic complications and the catastrophe is relocated from the sphere of heroic person's great deeds to the everyday realm, while tragedy's initiatory function remains intact, because the last kind of tragedy "shows us the sort of powers that destroy life and happiness and that can at any moment make their way towards us as well" (Schopen-

hauer 2010: 282). The tragic causes that Schopenhauer identifies can most likely be represented through the aesthetic-poetic arsenal of the novel. Even though Schopenhauer never poses the question about the novel becoming tragic, his examples speak for themselves: he cites such texts as examples which are formally far removed from the ideals of tragedy, and could even be regarded as novelized dramas.<sup>11</sup>

### **3.2 *Fleeting Life as a Contributing Factor: Schlegel, Hegel***

A. W. Schlegel's theoretical treatise defines drama as an aesthetic work, which creates a "counter-world" full of the intensity and the essence of existence as a counterpoint to our world that became boring and estranged in the sphere of everyday experience. The dramatic poet "gives us a renovated picture of life; a compendium of whatever is moving and progressive in human existence" (Schlegel 1809–1811). Parallel with the valorization of life, the necessity of death becomes the primary contributing factor of the tragic: the source of tragedy resides in the duplicity of man's infinite potential and the finite nature of existence. "We come at last to the highest end of our existence: and here that longing for the infinite which is inherent in our being, is baffled by the limits of our finite existence. All that we do, all that we effect, is vain and perishable; death stands everywhere in the background, and to it every well or ill-spent moment brings us nearer and closer" (Schlegel 1809–1811).

From Romanticism onwards a radical shift happens in the evaluation of tragedy and the tragic, which is best exemplified by Hegel's *Aesthetics*, which sees a similar feature as one of the most significant aspects of tragedy in modern drama. He perceives the unique aspects of this new kind of tragedy in that "the tragic denouement is also displayed as purely the effect of unfortunate circumstances and external accidents", and "the modern individual with the non-universal nature of his character, his circumstances, and the complications in which he is involved, is necessarily surrendered to the fragility of all that is mundane and *must endure the fate of finitude*" (Hegel 1975: 1231 – emphasis added).

### **3.3 *The New Concept of Tragedy in Hungarian Theoretical Works: Jenő Péterfy, György Lukács***

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, similar expectations arise and become dominant in Hungarian treatises about the tragic. The new tragic experience first appears in Hungarian critical thinking in the theoretical

---

<sup>11</sup> Goethe: *Clavigo*; Schiller: *Wallenstein*; Goethe: *Faust*; Corneille: *Cid* (cf. Schopenhauer 2010: 282).

works of Jenő Péterfy. Much like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Péterfy proceeds from the radical critique of the moralizing concept of the tragic: he relativizes the basis of the flaw-concept, the concept of the world order when he describes it as the immanent, constantly changing complexity of existence. He claims that tragedy stages “a stretch of life,” because “in the peculiar mixture of good and evil, the undeserving suffering of innocence, the ill-proportioned punishment, in that seeming blindness, which buries innocent and guilty in the same grave: it only repeats life, which eludes all our attempts to neatly proportion or order it” (Péterfy 1903: 45).

Because the tragic hero’s desperate position originates from the relativized state of the world and the finite nature of human existence, the *fleeting nature of life* becomes the most significant factor contributing to tragedy. Not death in a biological sense, because “finitude, mortality and death by themselves are not tragic” (Péterfy 1983: 16). The tragic appears when – due to the transcendental background to existence becoming silent – only this mundane world seems to be meaningful, and great ideas, deeds and values go to waste:

Man is finite: this is what the tragic sensibility communicates with exceptional strength, as it employs exceptional examples. Tragedies in every age are in fact about the finite nature of human strength and effort. [...] The more limitless our imagination visualizes the hero, the more tragic and moving it is when our common fates are sealed, the more staggering death’s charade becomes. The tragic sensibility requires us to feel the limits of human existence and effort in the deeds and fates of great men (Péterfy 1983: 17, 23).

Instead of the tragic flaw theory, “finitude” articulated through the inevitability of mortality becomes the most important factor contributing to the tragic effect in Péterfy’s works.

How do the tragic situations leading to the downfall of the hero come into existence? What remains if the world order becomes illusory in the new period, and it becomes synonymous with the ever-changing state of the world? Péterfy’s response seems analogous to how Schopenhauer conceptualized the answer.

“The hero starts to act, irrevocably risking his whole existence, and comes into conflict with – not the metaphysically universal, but the world surrounding him; his nature, interests, desires, passions face a host of opposing interests, passions, and the tragedy lasts as long as the balance is restored amidst the different aspirations, on the ruins of the individual.” (Péterfy 1983: 24) The tragic flaw loses its importance: the hero’s deeds become interwoven into the fabric of human relations, and that is where the dramatic situation and the tragic downfall originates from. “What the aesthetes call tragic flaw does not weigh down solely on the shoulders of the protagonist, the tragic end is not his fault alone, but an unfortunate outcome, the factors of which include the hero’s character as well as the pressure that his antagonists apply on him. The great personality alone does

not make a tragedy, it needs two participants, him and life” (Péterfy 1983: 24, 29).

*The pressure of human relationships* as an analogy for fate also appears in Lukács’s dramatic theories. He claims that fate is let loose upon humans by the gods in Greek tragedies, but in modern tragedies “one person’s psychological facts and deeds become objective fate for another,” “people become fate for each other” (Lukács 1978: 46, 137). The necessity leading to the tragic situation is created by the interwoven, immanent deeds and actions of the characters. Lukács argues that “modern fate” amounts to “the close and ruthless logical connection between things (institutions, the lack of knowledge of life and each other, living conditions, inheritance, etc.) that by themselves would be relative and accidental” (Lukács 1978: 283–284).

### ***3.4 The Potential of the Novel in Creating Modern Tragedy***

To communicate the tragic experience adequate to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we need procedures that mostly break with the formal-poetical processes of classical tragedy. This possibility has many ramifications, and the novel becoming infused with tragedy can be seen as one of them. György Lukács has already commented on how the novel excels at using the various components of modern tragedy, “because that external force [that is, fate] can be represented in its own million colors of triviality” (Lukács 1978: 130). The English parallels to this process was uncovered by Ken M. Newton’s monograph, which – focusing mostly on Thomas Hardy’s novels – gives a detailed analysis of the significant role of the tragic in certain forms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. According to Newton, “the emergence of a cultural context in latter half of the nineteenth century which provided the basis for a new conception of the tragic that is grounded in pessimism about life and the nature of the world; and arguably the novel is a particularly appropriate form for the tragic in that cultural context” (Newton 2008: 64).

We can discover similar tendencies in the context of Hungarian literature as well. Probably the most important insight of the Hungarian critics working in the 1850s and 1860s is that the changes in the literary and cultural perspective of the age brought about the fall of Aristotelian tragedy, and the emergence of the novel. The novel, which, on the one hand, destroys traditional structures of canonical genres, for example, the structure of tragedy; on the other hand, it frequently borrows components from dramas,<sup>12</sup> and in this way it could provide adequate ways to represent the tragic experience suitable for a changed world. A new version of the tragic is created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: its basic mechanisms are relocated into

---

<sup>12</sup> See Bakhtin 1981: 5–7.

the novel, and those functions I referred to above are altered to function effectively in certain forms of the novel.

The relativized world order, or the fleeting nature of life, or the way human relations and deeds immanently interact with each other to form dramatic-tragic situations, could be adequately represented within the realm of fiction. From within the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian novels, Zsigmond Kemény's texts could be cited as prime examples. The most important pieces of Kemény's oeuvre are comprised of historical novels (*Pál Gyulai* – 1847; *Widow and Daughter* – 1855-1857; *The Fanatics* – 1858-1859; *Forbidding Times* – 1862), yet these novels that take place in the by-gone times of Hungarian history – mostly in Transylvania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, these texts “were characterized by numerous critics as the first psychological novels in Hungarian” (Cooper 2003: 99), on the other hand, all of them rely on the phenomenon of the tragic in their structure and effect. The new dimensions of the tragic cause and necessity are constructed in Kemény's novels in a way similar to the theories of the tragic referred to above. As a conclusion to my paper, I would like to consider some universal structuring principles of these novels, without delving deep into a close reading of the texts.

## 4 The Tragic in Kemény's Novels

### 4.1 *A Relativized World Order*

The most important characteristic of the worlds created in these texts is that they conjure up the illusion of a stable social and cultural milieu, but in fact they also disclose the threatening relativity of behavior patterns and the concept order. The prime example for this could be *The Fanatics*. The social customs, the ethical codex and the power relations of 17<sup>th</sup> century Transylvania give the impression of an ordered world, still, the most important frames of reference – the concept of sin, the basic categories of morals and religion, the behavior patterns to follow, etc. – become a question of perspective through the course of the novel. One of the protagonists of *The Fanatics*, István Kassai often transgresses social, moral and religious laws, but the norm-following Elemér Kassai becomes the tragic hero in the novel. István Kassai relativizes the concepts of sin and providence, and legitimizes his revenge against Simon Pécsi through bending the law to his will. Kassai is also a figure of power, a legislator and a guardian of the law, thus his deeds, flaws and intrigue show the deformities of the world order, just like the chancellor's depravity, his devilish, demonic nature does. All these factors contribute to the tragic situation, which echoes the claims enumerated earlier in the theoretical treatises.

#### **4.2 *The Dramatic-Tragic Outcomes of the Immanent Interactions between the Characters' Actions***

In Kemény's novels the tragic situation is entangled in the complicated fabric of human relationships: anyone could end up in a tragic situation because of the hostile intentions, inaccurate decisions, flawed self-image of others and the peculiar way the relationships develop during the novel. Seemingly valuable and insignificant aims and deeds, conditions showing the intensive nature of existence, forms of behavior (love, youth, faith, etc.) and petty characteristics (thirst for revenge and power, etc.) are mingled in the characters whose relationships make up the plots of the novel. However, we can no longer tell what is right or wrong, petty or noble in this world: it is not the expressed separation of right or wrong deeds that leads to the downfall of certain tragic heroes.

After the protagonist unwittingly or voluntarily ends up in the maze of events, he commits an offence against the pressure of the circumstances – and not against moral-social norms. For example, he makes a wrong decision in a certain situation (Elemér Komjáthy – *Forbidding Times*), or has to question his own system of beliefs (János Mikes – *Widow and Daughter*; István Laczkó – *The Fanatics*), but it is enough if he does not take a firm stand in a certain issue (Elemér Kassai – *The Fanatics*). That is where the essence and relevance of Lukács and Péterfy's new tragic sensibility can be shown in Kemény's texts. Existence itself becomes tragic in the worlds conjured up by the novels, as the hero does not end up in a tragic situation due to his deviant behavior, but because of the threatening relativity of the circumstances, the spontaneous interactions between the character's deeds.

The tragic complications that arise in *Widow and Daughter* are not the result of the heroes' transgressive behavior: János Mikes's cooperation in the kidnapping, Sára's innocent amorous desires enter into the opaque mess created by Madame Tarnóczi's compulsive thirst for revenge, Kelemen Mikes and Péter Haller's aim to marry, Mihály Mikes and Madame Naprádi's daydreaming, the changes in state politics, or the logic of Transylvania's laws. Words uttered and deeds done irreversibly lead the character's fates towards their existential downfall. Right and wrong, logical and illogical, expected and unexpected situations entangle the two protagonists – Sára and János – in a tragic situation that concludes with their deaths.

#### **4.3 *The Experience of Mortality***

The relativity of stable frames of reference, the fading of the transcendent perspectives of existence can be grasped in the experience of mortality – echoing Schlegel, Hegel, Péterfy, and Lukács. The sense of finitude and the limited nature of human aspiration permeate every level of Kemény's texts,

from certain elements of the structure to how the tragic plot unfolds. The death of the two lovers in *Widow and Daughter*, Elemér Kassai's assassination in *The Fanatics* gets central significance in the compositions of the two novels. The dénouement of *Forbidding Times* almost ends up in a bloodshed, with the death of Elemér, Barnabás, Dorka, the Deák brothers and Werbőczy, not to mention the horrors of the Turkish conquest and the catastrophe of the fall of Buda. Death itself is not tragic in Kemény either: it conveys not the horror felt over the biological devastation inscribed into the laws of nature. The heroes do not die of old age, accidents, or illnesses, their demise is always the – not necessarily immediate – result of the interactions between certain deeds, systems of belief and aims, which lead up to a tragic situation.

Existential destruction retains its most basic poetical function: it acts as a point of reference against which we can get to know existence as a whole, the state of the world, the relevance of systems of belief and certain kinds of knowledge about the world; against which we can test the validity or invalidity of certain sets of values.

## References

- Bakhtin, M.: "Epic and Novel". Trans. Emerson, C. and Holquist, M. In: Bakhtin, M.: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 3-40.
- Behler, E.: "The Theory of Irony in German Romanticism". In: Garber, Fredrick (ed.): *Romantic Irony*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1988, 43-81.
- Cooper, Th.: "Mimesis of Consciousness in the Fiction of Zsigmond Kemény". *Hungarian Studies* 1 (2003), 97-155.
- Gadamer, H-G.: *Truth and Method*. [1960] Trans. Weinsheimer, J. and Marshall, D.G. London: Continuum, 1989.
- Goldmann, L.: *The Hidden God*. [1964] Trans. Thody, P. London & New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Hegel, G.W.F.: *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. [1835] Vol. II. Trans. Knox, T.M. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Kierkegaard, S.: "The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama". In: Kierkegaard, S.: *Either / Or*. [1843] Trans. Hong, H.V. and Hong, E.H. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987, 137-164.
- Lukács, Gy.: *The Theory of the Novel*. [1906] Trans. Bostock, A. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.

- Lukács, Gy.: “A tragédia metafizikája” [The Metaphysics of Tragedy] [1911]  
 In: Lukács, Gy.: *Ifjúkori művek* [Early Writings] (1902–1918). Budapest:  
 Magvető, 1976, 492–518.
- Lukács, Gy.: *A történelmi regény*. [The Historical Novel] [1947]. Budapest:  
 Magvető, 1977.
- Lukács, Gy.: *A modern dráma fejlődésének története*. [History of the  
 Modern Drama] [1912]. Budapest: Magvető, 1978.
- Newton, K.M.: *Modern Literature and the Tragic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh  
 University Press, 2008.
- Nietzsche, F.: *The Birth of Tragedy*. [1872] Trans. Speirs, R. Cambridge:  
 Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Nyusztay, I.: *Myth, Telos, Identity: The Tragic Schema in Greek and  
 Shakespearean Drama*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.
- Péterfy, J.: “A költői igazságszolgáltatás a tragédiában” [Poetic Justice in  
 Tragedy] [1891]. In: Péterfy, J.: *Összegyűjtött munkái*. 3. kötet [Collected  
 Works, Volume 3]. Budapest: Kisfaludy Társaság, 1903, 43–65.
- Péterfy, J.: “A tragikum” [The Tragic] [1885]. In: Péterfy, J.: *Válogatott  
 művei*. [Collected Works] Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1983, 7–33.
- Schlegel, A. W.: *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* [1809–1811]. trans.  
 Black, J. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7148/pg7148.html>.
- Schopenhauer, A.: *The World as Will and Representation*. [1819] trans.  
 Norman, J., Welchman, A. & Janaway, C. Cambridge & New York: Cam-  
 bridge University Press, 2010.
- Steiner, G.: *The Death of Tragedy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1974.
- Steiner, G.: “Tragedy, Reconsidered”. *New Literary History* 1 (2004), 1–15.
- Thirlwall, C.: “On the Irony of Sophocles”. [1830] In: Thirlwall, C.: *Essays,  
 Speeches and Sermons*. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1880, 1–57.