

THESES OF THE PHD DISSERTATION

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THE LIFE-WORK OF LÁZÁR ERVIN

ZOLTÁN POMPOR



THE UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN
FACULTY OF ARTS

2007

1. GOALS OF THE DISSERTATION

Though Lázár Ervin was one of the most famous children book writers, it is interesting that mostly the novels – and not his famous tales – were analyzed by literature critics. Lázár Ervin created a new narrative form in his texts from the 1960's which contained the elements of the traditional narrative forms, and – in some aspects – he transformed these forms both in structural and ethical points of view. I was interested in which texts could be found the stages of this new writing process, which led the writer from the realistic to the magical realistic literary mood.

In the first chapter of my thesis I examine the writer's early novels, the Illés Ézsaiás-texts and the novels of *Csillagmajor*. The early novels are about a special man with a special moral coming from a village community; he tries to find his place in the modern urban world, but this medium has a different moral, so he has no chance to assimilate. In the end, this special hero creates his own world, which is closer to fiction than to reality, and in this fictional world (Masoko Köztársaság) his special moral can be preserved.

The most acknowledged part of the Lázár life-work is the *Csillagmajor*, in my essay I construct a magical realistic reading to this novels, and put the texts into the context of the writer's childhood memories: how these memories can be recalled, how the memories change from realistic into fantastic.

In the second chapter I analyze the modern tales of Lázár Ervin. In this part I describe the structural and the moral characteristics of the texts. Lázár Ervin uses the elements of the traditional fairy tales, but sometimes he changes the characters (fairy with 7 heads, the smallest witch), and this act also changes the structure of the tales. The writer uses the moral of the folk tales, but he also puts his own moral into the tales, which is very similar to the Christian moral. He plants the Christian meaning of love into his tales, which is very different from the usual love concept.

2. METHODS APPLIED

In my thesis I try to find a unified viewpoint from where both the novels and the tales could be analyzed in the same way, with the same method. This viewpoint has two aspects: the narrative structures and the moral content. First of all I examine how the traditional narrative forms were transformed by the effect of the Hungarian folk tales, and how we can describe the structural characteristics of his modern tales.

To explore Lázár Ervin's complete literary world, I have tried to find such a text-analyzing strategy which helps us to read the texts (novels and tales) in unity. I have based my critical work on the following essays: Kemsei István *Menekülés a mesébe* (*Flee to the tales*), Nagy Gabriella *A szerző valódi és fiktív életrajza* (*The real and unreal biography of Lázár Ervin*), Németh Luca *A Csillagmajor mágikus realista olvasata* (*The magical realism in the novels of Csillagmajor*) and the essays of Tüskés Tibor. These seemed to be the only serious critical texts in the Lázár-reception that is why I have chosen to reflect on them.

Beyond the above mentioned essays I look for an own reading strategy with which the structural and contentional characteristics of the author's texts can be defined.

The empirical reader - depending on his cultural background - finds allegorical meanings in texts. I try to create a value-orientated reading which can help to understand the world concept of the Lázár Ervin-texts in a deeper way. If we read the writer's texts from the direction of the Bible, the casual meaning of love can be transformed to the Christian love concept.

3. RESULTS

Although Lázár Ervin wrought conventional narratives, a permanent transformation can be observed in his prose, which leads from the realistic novels of the 60's first to the magical realism, and later to the modern tales. In this new writing method the writer preserves the traditional narratives of the fairy tales – just to recall the original storytelling situation –, and above that he uses and transforms the ethics of the tales. The Lázár-novel and -tale is a mixture of fiction and realism, ancient and contemporary stories; the specific prototype of the Lázár-story is more than structure and traditional moral: it is about humanity.

I. THE RENEWAL OF THE NARRATIVE

- As a result of a form-finding procedure, Lázár Ervin explores the magical realism which is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected with the primeval or magical mentality, which exists in conjunction with rationality. Magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor on objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.
- This fictional world is similar to the magical thinking of the ancient peasant society (Alsó-Rácegrespuszta, the homeland of the writer is such a world), and also to the child's animistic way of thinking, the result: these two worlds become a core part of the narrative. The texts of *Csillagmajor* and the so called 'adult-child' novels are built on this traditional way of thinking; the writer uses the collective memories of the village people and his own memories to recall the childhood.
- The goal of evoking the childhood memories is to preserve them and make them immortal. This passion was so strong that when publishing the second edition, the writer put an appendix to the end of *Csillagmajor* to make it more authentic and the structure more coherent.

- The realistic world and the fictional world (which is created by the imagination) are not separated in the texts of Lázár Ervin that is why Alsó-Rácegrespuszta can be transformed into Rácpáces. This legendary place is so special that the stories, which are connected to the writer's childhood, are transformed into magical-realistic texts and modern tales.
- As a result of remembering, Lázár Ervin recalls the traditional oral tale-telling situation, but above this the writer puts his own narrative strategy, his own way of story-telling into the texts. The storyteller and the audience (they can also be characters of the story) are active members of the tale-telling process, and in this situation the reader should be also active, and need to have the lust for playing just to understand the deepness of these texts.

II. THE ETHICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LÁZÁR TEXTS

- The moral content in Lázár Ervin's texts is as important as the narrative structure; I studied how the ethical perspective of the folk tales (and also the ethics of the writer) could be explored in the texts and realized that the writer's own world concept transformed the moral structure of the ancient fairy tales and his childhood memories.
- The moral dimensions of the Lázár-tales have several origins. The first one is the traditional morality of the fairy tales (the good win, the bad die), but the writer replaces this ancient law by his own moral. The second one is the community of the childhood, and the third one (which is very close to the second) is the imagination and the world concept of the child, this last one can be the guide for the grown-up to find his own childhood and the magical world of the tales again.
- The moral basis of the Lázár-tales is fixed by the connection between the individual and the community. If the person integrates into a community, he always loses a bit of his own character, goals and longings, in exchange for filtering through the moral of the community, and gets those back in a transformed form. The result is: the individual defines himself by the values of the community.

- These texts are not only the monuments of the village life-ethos, but they also tell us a few things about the writer's mentality itself. The serenity of his texts originates in the writer's cheerful spirit. The heroes of the tales are different from the heroes of the folk tales, they have the opportunity to choose the wrong way, sometimes they are in bad mood, but fortunately the child can help the adult characters to erase these moody moments (for example Mikkamakka helps the narrator in *A Négyszögletű Kerek Erdő*).
- To reserve this serenity is vital for the heroes. The adults need to find the mentality of the child and the values which are connected to the childhood. The hero who lost the connection with his original community looks for a valuable community in the town (Illés Ézsaiás is one of these characters), but he can not find this communion with the adults, because they have lost their childlike spirit. At the end he realizes that he can only find company among the children and the childlike adults.
- In the Lázár-tales – just like in fairy tales – the hero faces many difficulties until he reaches the happy ending, while the fairy tale heroes always have companions to help them, in the modern tales the hero has to defeat the enemy on his own; and sometimes the enemy is the dark side of the hero's spirit. The heroes' goal is to reserve their childlike spirit, their enemies' to destroy it. The heroes are truly clear in spirit, they can't assimilate into the uniform mass of people, their enemies are dark and want to unify the world to rule it and make the special hero a casual person.
- The moral base of Lázár Ervin's world concept is love. This feeling determines the connection between the characters. In his novels and tales the writer tries to find a literary form of the Biblical morality: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13). To live this unselfish love, the hero must see his and his companion's life from a different aspect, but the lack of this real love leads to the fall.

4. PUBLICATIONS

ESSAY

- ***The Adult Becomes a Child*** (*A gyermekké vált felnőtt.*) In. Hítel 2004/4, 105-116.
- ***„I make a tale from everything...” An Introduction to Lázár Ervin’s Tale-transforming Method*** (*„Mindenből mesét csinállok...” Bevezetés Lázár Ervin meseátalakító módszerébe.*) In. Hítel 2005/3, 95-104.
- ***The Childhood Written into the Stars*** (*A csillagokba írt gyermekkor - Közelítések Lázár Ervin Csillagmajor című kötetéhez.*) In. Szakralitás – Közösség – Művészet, a KRE TFK 15 éves jubileumi évkönyve, 2005, 46-57.
- ***An Introduction to the World of Lázár Ervin’s Tales*** (*Bevezetés Lázár Ervin meséinek világába.*) In. Fordulópont 30. 33-40.
- ***Tale-telling in a Different Way – the Ethical Aspect of Lázár Ervin’s Tales*** (*Mesemondás másképpen – Lázár Ervin meséinek etikai vonatkozásai.*) In. Debreceni Disputa, 2006. január, 62-64.
- ***The Power of Memories*** (*Az emlékek ereje - Lázár Ervin: A fehér tigris; A Franka cirkusz.*) In. Hítel 2006/5, 24-38.
- ***The Poetry of Story-telling - the Hidden Language of the Lázár-tales*** (*A mesemondás költészete - Lázár Ervin meséinek titkos nyelve.*) In. Apáczai Napok 2005. Tanulmánykötet. Győr, 2006. 488-497.
- ***The Origins of the Moral in Lázár Ervin’s Tales*** (*A lázári mesemorál gyökerei.*) In. Somogy 2006/4-5. 243-248.

- *The Illés Ézsaiás-novels* (Lázár Ervin Illés Ézsaiás novelláinak világa). In. Hitel, 2007/3, 10-21.

REVIEW

- *The Historical Texts of Lázár Ervin* (Mendemonda Lázár-módra). In. Csodaceruza 24. 28-29.
- *The Childhood Written into the Stars – a Review on Csillagmajor* (A csillagokba írt gyermekkor – Gondolattöredékek Lázár Ervin kötetéről). In. Új Horizont, 2006/2. 175-177.

OTHER PUBLICATION

- *Csillagmajor is Closing – an Interview with Lázár Ervin* (A Csillagmajor bezárul – interjú Lázár Ervinnel). In. KönyvHét 2005/május, 201.
- *A Parable of Love* (Példázat a szeretetről – Közelítések Vacskamati virágjához). In. Magyartanítás, 2006/március-április, 6-9.