

**Egyetemi doktori (PhD) értekezés tézisei**

**CASES OF PATRICIDE AND (SELF-)FATHERING IN  
SELECTED NOVELS OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH**

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## I. AREA AND OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH

This dissertation explores the problematics of father-son relationships, orphanage, and patricide in four selected Southern novels: Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), William Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* (1936), Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946), and Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). These novels share the critical assumption to be among the most influential Southern novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, they all have fathers, substitute fathers, and sons in their centers, engaged in a power game. The protagonists all want to become free of the paternal inheritance, break out of the shadow of the past and the ancestors. In doing so, they commit a series of patricide on the thematic, structural, textual or figurative levels of each text. The protagonists can be aptly described with Marthe Robert's words as "Bastards" who are never done with killing their fathers in order to take their place (30). In their quests to achieve this goal, they commit numerous attempts of real and symbolic father murders.

I have chosen to focus on Southern novels, as in my view, there is an obsessive concern with the question of the father/fatherhood in the Southern novel. The metaphor of the father is a key fantasy appearing in it. In my view, the father is a symbolic embodiment of the past in these novels. Thus, overcoming the father is one way of overcoming/coming to terms with the past.

Literary critic Richard H. King argues that the intellectuals and writers of the Southern Literary Renaissance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were attempting symbolically to define their relationship with the region's "fathers" (13). Iconic sons and strong fathers have been predominant images in modern southern literature (16). As I have been mostly educated on poststructuralist theory, the writers' attempts and intensions – in King's sense – are not subject to my investigations. Discussing the protagonists' attempts, however, drives me to the same conclusion: the heroes of these novels intend to define, or rather redefine their relationships with the father/fathers. They attempt to overwrite the traditional Southern patriarchal pattern. I claim that the protagonists of these novels are all self-willed orphans, who embrace orphanage and do not tolerate any attempts of

fathering coming from the outside. Moreover, they ensure their fatherless state by several father-murders, which take place on the thematic, structural, textual, and figurative levels of the narratives. In the dissertation, I focus on and analyse these orphan heroes' different attempts of overwriting the paternal pattern, overcoming the father and establishing their freedom from paternal authority to see what forms these attempts may take, whether they can become successful and what their success or failure mean and entail.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

I examine fatherhood, father-son clashes not only at the plot but the structural level of narratives as well, as, in my view, the presence of the father can be detected not only at the thematic, but at the structural level of narratives too. Claiming that, I follow in the footsteps of Robert Caserio, Peter Brooks, Patricia Tobin, Janet Beizer, and Robert Con Davis, who have all examined the possible connections of the figure of "the father" and Western narratives.

Marthe Robert's insights are of central significance to my argument, as she recognizes the roots of the novel as a genre in Sigmund Freud's childhood family romance. Freud differentiates between two stages of the romance, which Robert names as Foundling and Bastard. For the argument of the dissertation, the second, Bastard stage of the romance is the significant one. According to Freud, the child<sup>1</sup> fabricates a fabulous tale to overcome the first disappointment he suffers in his parents. In the Foundling stage of the romance, he assumes that his parents are not his true parents, but strangers who found him and took him in and in his imagination, he replaces them with ones of higher social standing. In the second stage of the romance, he strives to keep his mother by his side and get rid of the father, replacing him with an absent, imaginary, noble father. As the unconscious sees every absence as murder (27), it is not too difficult to notice the Oedipal theme in the background. The "Bastard" child is "never done with killing his father in order to take his place, imitate him or surpass him by 'going his own way'" (30). Not only does he rob the father of the mother, but of his phallic power, too, since, in his fantasy, he *rewrites* the story of his own conception as well as the family's genealogy. In

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<sup>1</sup> Both Freud and Marthe Robert focus their attention on the male child, so whenever I use the term "child," I also refer to sons.

my view, the heroes of these Southern novels follow in the footsteps of Marthe Robert's Bastard, doing everything to take their fathers' place and to overwrite the family's genealogy.

The main theoretical framework of the dissertation is provided by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. I have chosen this framework, as both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis are of crucial importance in the theory of the paternal-filial relationship and the role of the father in psychic development.

Concepts used as my own terminology, with definitions given, include fathering and freedom.

### **III. RESEARCH RESULTS**

I have found that the examined Southern novels abound in sons and paternal figures who strive for control and authority. The protagonists all attempt to outscribe themselves from the ancestral paternal plots or narratives that threaten their freedom or overwrite the paternal narrative to take the position of the father. In doing so, they commit a series of patricide on the thematic, structural, textual or figurative levels of each text. However, in three out of four chapters, there is no univocal solution to the problem of fathering in the end. What is more, the different solutions seem to be almost irreconcilable at first sight. We might say that they illustrate the Barthesian irreducible plurality of meaning (159). Having read the given novels with a special focus on father-son relationships, we have encountered, in each chapter, orphan heroes of different kinds, somewhat different cases of paternal-filial functioning and father son-relationships.

In "Reading, Writing, and Paternity in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," I have read Mark Twain's novel, going against the implied author's paternal notice, along the concepts of plot and plotting and have found that the two seem to be inseparable: the plot of the novel seems to be organized around different plots for the plot itself. The different father figures and representatives of the paternal (dis)order all try to achieve control, not only over Huck in an Oedipal manner, but over "his" plot as well. What is more, to achieve control they do not shrink from applying schemes and deceptions. All the scheming paternal figures seem to be in an intimate relationship with the scheme (rhetorical figure) of the chi, as we have seen all of them are twisted in one

way or another: pap, bearing the chi as his sign, is the representative of a paternal disorder rather than order; Tom Sawyer, also marked by the chi, pretends disorder while trying to keep the order intact; the (m)others, instead of being maternal, are rather paternal; and Jim acts rather maternal for a father. Moreover, being loyal to the figure of “deception and (dis)tors/(t)ion of (the presence of) meaning” (Kalmár, *Szöveg* 150), they play around with deception and the distortion of meaning: not only their comradeship, but also their paternal behavior turn out to have been deceptions implied in order that they achieve control over the plot. Thus, the novel stages the struggle between fathers and sons as one for meaning and stories: power here means the power to plot, whereas freedom often means freedom from others’ plots (in all senses of the word).

In “Family Romances in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” the hermeneutic quest for the truth (of the Sutpen family history) turns into a quest for narrative self-fathering through constructing the truth: a narrative that is true enough. In the novel, I have found that narration and storytelling are a family legacy and a family destiny that fall from the Grandfather (General Compson) to the father (Mr. Compson) and from the father to the son (Quentin), strengthening the Compson-patrilineage. The story functions like a ritual thread which binds the son to the father, and through the father to the grandfather. This way it strengthens paternal authority: the sons are subject to the story of the fathers’ and to the obligation of storytelling. However, as narrators they can overwrite or reconstruct/deconstruct the hereditary, paternal narrative and, through that, paternal authority itself.

In my reading of Faulkner’s novel, I have focused on the paternal, filial narratives. Examining Mr. Compson’s narrative, I have found that the main hallmarks of his narrative technique are circular narration and the major role assigned to love, romance and fate. He often constructs his narratives in a spiral, opening the story with the tragic outcome, going back only after that to relate the events leading up to it. Due to this, his narrative has a fatalistic overtone. He uses fatality and love in an attempt to cover the hermeneutic gaps remaining. Whatever he is not able to give a logical explanation to, he attributes to “love.”

Quentin and Shreve use a story pattern highly similar to that of the Freudian family romance to construct their history of the Sutpen family. Their family romances,

however, all fail on the thematic level and culminate in a tragedy. Still, the failure of the filial romances on the plot level would not necessarily mean the failure of Quentin's family romance, of his narrative self-fathering, if the family history constructed by him worked as a narrative and could accomplish a coherent formal pattern. But it fails to do so, as his plot falls into the reversible, circular abyss of a final palindrome, marring his quest for narrative authority and self-fathering.

In, "Fathering and Self-Fathering in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*," I have focused on the different attempts at filling in the father's lack and fulfilling his position. In the first part of the chapter, I have examined the effects the father's lack and his failure in fathering have on the "story." I have found that the lack of a/the father triggers the crisis of the paternal function on different levels of the story, such as the proliferation and endless substitution of potential father figures. I have also inspected the effects the father's lack and the malfunction of the paternal order has on the personal story of the son (his story) from a psychoanalytic perspective. I have found that the paternal malfunction brings about an "error" in the resolution of the child's Oedipus complex and thus Jack's psychic development got stuck. This crisis in his psychic development appears in a series of symptoms: his foetus fantasy, his periods of Great Sleep, the ideologies he comes up with (his being an Idealist and the Great Twitch), his preoccupation with history, and his actions as a character.

In the second part of the chapter, I have had a look at the two serious attempts at filling the gap the father left behind and at fulfilling the paternal function (at fathering) first from a psychoanalytical perspective. I have examined the two father candidates and their duel in detail. I have found that from a psychoanalytic point of view, the novel can be read as the story of Jack's successful Oedipalization and his entrance/birth (in)to the symbolic; thus, as the story of a successful act of fathering.

However, examining the story and the problem of fathering from a narratological perspective, has provided me with a totally different solution to the mystery of fathering: the novel reads as the story of Jack's attempt at taking over the paternal position and an endeavor at self-fathering. Moreover, the narrative can be interpreted as the story of, and also a tribute to, its success. However, since the narrative symptoms of his successful

subversion of the paternal order highly resemble those of the “orderly” working of the order, his “success” becomes questionable and “relative.”

In “Quest for the Son in Flannery O’Connor: *The Violent Bear It Away*,” I have found that O’Connor’s novel also follows the pattern of a quest narrative and, in a sense, has a very similar structure to *All the King’s Men*. The story in both cases starts with the lack of the father that calls for filling. In both novels, to the two candidates for the father’s place a third one is added very soon: the protagonist himself, who also sets out on a quest of (self-)fathering.

In the first part of the chapter, I have examined the two self-appointed fathers’ (Old Mason Tarwater, Rayber) quest, of which Old Mason Tarwater’s dominates his grandson’s fate. I have found that Old Mason Tarwater baptizing his grandson inscribes him not only into his “family,” his (patri)lineage, but that of God and the prophets’ as well. Raising the boy to be a prophet, the old man inscribes him not only into a storyline and a line of descent, but also into the linearity of a quest structure. Before he dies, he leaves him two tasks to perform: to bury him and mark his grave with a cross, and to baptize Bishop.

Tarwater attempts to achieve control over his own life and future. He strives to cross out his grandfather’s paternal master narrative (his speech and prophecy that sets him on a quest) through going against the old man’s will, through pursuing the anti-quest: doing the opposite of what the old man left him to do. However, his self-definition and self-fathering through “counter-actions” fail, since the anti-quest twists back into quest through a chiasmic inversion and Tarwater ends up fulfilling the paternal prophecy in spite of all his efforts at doing the opposite.

The protagonists are all self-willed orphans, who embrace orphanage and do not tolerate any attempts of fathering coming from the outside. Moreover, they ensure their fatherless state by several father-murders, which take place on the thematic, structural, textual, and figurative levels of the narratives.

In spite of the fact that there is only one direct patricide on the thematic level (Henry’s killing Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*), there are several indirect ones all through the four novels: Jack provides the inspiration for both the Judge’s suicide and Willy’s

murder. Huck Finn may also be responsible for pap being murdered, since he was probably shot for the ransom offered for Huck's murderer.

Besides, father murder may also take symbolic or figurative forms: Huck's symbolic suicide can be read as a symbolic patricide, since a hog is a recurring metaphor for the father. Tarwater's robbing the old man from his resurrection (rebirth) by not burying him properly can also be read as a figurative patricide. Moreover, since Bishop is a metaphorical substitute of the old man, and metonymically connected to Rayber, drowning him can be read as a metaphorical as well as a metonymical patricide. Destroying the image of the father (the image Adam and Ann Stanton have about their father, the image Judge Irwin has about himself and the image the world has about him) can also be read as a figurative (metaphorical) patricide.

When the son is not only a protagonist but a/the narrative agent as well (homodiegetic narrator), he is the one who inscribes all the father murders into the narrative, in other words, commits them on a textual level. Moreover, those sons who narrate tend to start their narratives with recounting the death of the father, as if it was the prerequisite of the son's narration: Jack Burden verbally slays all the father figures on the first couple of pages of *All the King's Men*, and Quentin and Shreve start their narrative by first symbolically castrating then killing Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Quentin's portrayal of old Sutpen before his death is, however, not the only example of the father's castration though portraying him as an impotent, miserable, incapable creature. Other examples include Jack's portrayal of Ellis Burden and Tarwater's portrayal of Rayber.

Crossing out and overwriting the paternal meta-narrative is also a frequently appearing form of textual patricide and self-fathering, which, in addition to having other implications, indicates that the meaning of "father" in these novels is often "the one responsible for the creation of meaning." Nonetheless, the paternal meta-narrative and its overwriting, as we have seen, take different forms in different novels. In the case of *Absalom, Absalom!* it is the Sutpen family history narrated by Mr. Compson. Its crossing out and overwriting would mean coming up with a narrative which can account for the historical facts better than his narrative did. In *All the King's Men*, the paternal narrative destined to be overwritten appears, at some points, as the story of a glorious, immaculate paternal past, as Judge Irwin's and Governor Stanton's histories. Its overwriting means



telling their stories with a tiny long-forgotten detail added (their only acts of dishonesty) that destroy/would destroy their images as true fathers/people. While in these two novels the paternal narrative memorializes the past, in *The Violent Bear It Away* and in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is connected to the future, or, more precisely, to the future of the son. In O'Connor's novel, the great-grandfather's narrative that Tarwater attempts to cross out is the old man's will (tasks/quests to be performed) and prophecy about the boy's future. Tarwater makes an attempt at canceling them out by going against them, doing the opposite, and thus making sure that the old man's words will not come true (in Austin's words: his speech acts will not become felicitous). In *Huckleberry Finn*, pap's and the (m)others' paternal narratives/plots (Oedipal threats on pap's part; the Moses allegory, instructions about how to pray and write on the [m]others) also aim to affect Huck's future.

Overwriting the paternal narrative or destroying the figure of the father one not only commits a patricide but also inscribes one-self into the paternal position, taking over the position of the father through (over-)writing. In other words, they are also acts of narrative self-fathering.

Naming/renaming, as a special form of (over-)writing, features frequently as an act of (self-)fathering<sup>2</sup> and displaying ownership<sup>3</sup> (the old man's naming Tarwater and Rayber's later attempt to rename him, Huck's renaming himself several times). Jack Burden's parodic renaming of all the father figures in *All the King's Men* may also be mentioned at this point: it also displays how an act of (self-)fathering coincides with an act of patricide.

Last but not least, there are several examples of parody/irony directed against paternal figures in all four novels. Running after Huck with a knife drunken, Pap is a grotesque parody of a castrating Oedipal father in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. With his inability to listen, understand, and focus, Rayber is a parody of a scientist and an analyst. He is convinced that he is "uniquely able to understand" (150) and "read" Tarwater "like a book" (174), which make him a perfect father for him. However, he can only become a parody (parodic re-writing) of the father. Through renaming the fathers,

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<sup>2</sup> An act of fathering is the birth of the father as such; therefore, every act of fathering is by nature an act of self-fathering, too.

<sup>3</sup> "[W]hat is at stake in the naming process is no less than an act of possession" (Ragussis 7).

Jack also assigns new ironic/parodic subject positions for them in *All the King's Men*. However, parody is also a “double-edged sword,” as Linda states: it has a “potential power both to bury the dead . . . and also to give it new life” (101).

I have come to the conclusion that the four novels investigated in the dissertation abound in different forms of literal and figurative, thematic and textual, father-murders, confirming that, in some sense, the orphan heroes of these novels are never done with killing their fathers in order to take their place. However, not only the acts of patricide and self-fathering seem to be inseparable from each other in almost all cases, as if they were two sides of the very same coin, but they also coincide with giving “the dead” (father) a new life, ensuring that there will always be a Father to overcome and, thus, a reason for telling stories.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Barthes reasons in *The Pleasure of the Text*, “[i]f there is no longer a Father, why tell stories?” (47).

#### **IV. PUBLICATIONS**

##### ***In the topic of the dissertation***

##### **Articles:**

1. "Instances of Patricide and Fathering in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*." *Trends in American Culture in the Post-1960s Period: Proceedings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*. Eger: Líceum, 2013. 73-83.
2. "Family Romances in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *The Anachronist* 17 (2012): 181-206.
3. "Barthelme's Twisted Fathering." *The Anachronist* 12 (2006): 198-219.
4. "Mágikus árvaság." *Alföld* 4 (2005): 62-78.

##### **Review:**

1. "Real and Imaginary Fathers." Rev. of *Real and Imaginary Fathers: Development, Transference, and Healing*, ed. Salman Akhtar and Henri Parens. *HJEAS* 14.1 (2008): 179-81.

***In different topics******Translations:***

1. Martha C. Nussbaum. "A szerelem és az egyén: romantikus összeállítás és platóni törekvések". Trans. Asztalos Márta. *Vulgo* 4 (2005): 28-52.
2. Slavoj Žižek. "A fantázia hét fátyla". Trans. Asztalos Márta. *Vulgo* 2 (2004): 103-33.

***Reviews:***

1. "Equus." Rev. of *Equus*. dir. Árkosi Árpád, Csokonai Színház, Debrecen, *Debreceni Disputa* 5 (2005): 55-58.
2. "Egy túlrendezett mese." Rev. of *A kis herceg*, dir. Quintus Konrád. Csokonai Színház, Debrecen, *Debreceni Disputa* 1 (2005): 51-53.
3. "Ősz az Alföldnél." Rev. of *Alföld* 10, 11 (2003) *Debreceni Disputa* 1 (2004): 49-50.
4. "Találkozások a színházban." Rev. of *Előhívás*, dir. Bessenyei Zoltán. KonzervArtaudrium, Debrecen, *Debreceni Disputa* 11-12 (2004): 99-101.