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**VARIANTS OF THE GENRE OF HISTORICAL NOVEL
AND QUESTIONS OF THE TRAGIC IN ZSIGMOND
KEMÉNY'S WORKS**

THESES

DEBRECEN 2003.

I. THE TASK OF THE RESEARCH

My Ph.D. thesis undertakes to answer some genre-theoretical questions, as well as to interpret a decisive part of Zsigmond Kemény's oeuvre. The centre of interest concerns mainly the latter, but the re-understanding of literary works of Zsigmond Kemény is guided by two genre-theoretical questions from the first to the last page of the dissertation. The investigation of the genre of the historical novel and the phenomenon of tragic has given an opportunity to rethink interpretations created by previous critics of Kemény and to reread his novels.

“The historical novel is, beyond question, a controversial kind of genre – Mihály Szegedy-Maszák wrote in one of his Kemény studies. For that very reason the inquiry into poetic structure and aesthetic effect mechanism of the historical novel was motivated by the intention to bring to the surface some contradictions of genre theory and, at the same time, to prepare the way for the interpretation of Kemény's works.

II. SCIENTIFIC METHODS AND RESULTS OF THE Ph. D. THESIS

1. The first introductory chapter of the Ph.D. thesis consists of four subchapters. In the first part of this essay I consider theoretical problems of the genre and make an effort to demolish or to question some common stereotypes about it. The comparison of historiography and historical novel has proved to be a useful method to identify the characteristic features of this literary genre – this is the particular subject of the second subchapter. The juxtaposition of two historical discourses demonstrates equally functional similarities and differences between studies produced by historians with the help of a scientific method and novels created by authors making use of fictional procedures. On the one hand, the historical novel appeared, on the basis of research, as alternative historiography which takes on the specific function of interpretation and transmission of the past. Yet, on the other hand, the comparison of the two discourses sheds light on the fact that in the case of the historical novel the representation of the past is guided by aesthetic purposes. The primary interest of the historical novel is not confined to represent the past or reveal its truth.

At the breaking point of epic and novel there appear some striking features of the historical novel with regard to representing the past and making meaning in particular texts. The source of aesthetic procedures in the historical novel is the unknown past as distinguished

from the present rather than familiarity of the past. At the second breaking point of the two genres, another strongly marked functional trait of the historical novel is revealed from the standpoint of a radical change in the world concept. Works classified as historical novels are more suitable for modelling various crisis situations than any other type of novel. The last (fourth) part of the first theoretical study investigates the means and the conceptual field of critical discourse about the historical novel in the essays of Kemény and his contemporaries.

2. The second major theoretical part of my study attempts to expound two closely connected problems. The reception of Kemény profoundly discusses both the effect mechanism of tragic and the dramatic character of his novels: Zsolt Beöthy, Jenő Péterfy and János Barta wrote excellent treatises about the phenomenon, and we hardly encounter an essay with no reference to this theme. Yet, over and above many clever thoughts the reception of Kemény often formulated schematic-like, unreasoned statements about the effect mechanism of the tragic in the writer's works. Furthermore, he left behind as many questions unanswered as answered. Can we support the assertion that some formative principles of the tragedy are transferred into the novel? If the answer is yes, what motivates the mixing in terms of poetic, genre theory and history of a period? What is the difference between the tragic created in a novel and the tragic in a tragedy? What are the hitherto unexploited possibilities that the aspects of genre-mixing and tragic allows in the rereading of Kemény's novels? The second theoretical chapter of my study strives to answer these questions.

3. The introductory chapters are followed by three interpretations of Kemény's works. The interpretation of *Özvegy és leánya* (*The Widow and her Daughter*) is closely connected with the train of thoughts of the second theoretical chapter, in which I practically set forth in detail the assumption of the Kemény-related genre theory and criticism that the historical novel had a great chance to exploit the possibilities involved in mixing the novel and the tragedy I try to make evident the dramatic features of the novel by means of interpretation of structure and characters, while, from the beginning to the end, I emphasize that dramatic elements are transformed and they take on specific functions in the novel.

4. Of all of Kemény's works it is *A rajongók* (*The Fanatics*) in which the existence-explanatory interest latent in the literary character of the genre of the historical novel is most perceivable. I interpret the novel with the help of three allegorical patterns. In one respect, the vagueness of social condition and collective moral principles turns the reader's attention to the

crisis of the individual of Kemény's period. In another respect, the conventions of the genre of the historical novel and structural principles of the realistic novel make perceivable in *The Fanatics* one of the intrinsic ideological aspects of the Romantic period, namely the tragic experience of alienation. Finally, a temporal extension of the reading and interpretation of the novel is made possible by the fact that beyond conclusions drawn from inquiry attached to a concrete historical situation and problems of an age, the novel can symbolize the crisis of the individual of the 17th century as a model of crisis of the individual of all times.

5. *Zord idő (Grim Time)* makes intelligible a poetical and functional similarities and differences of historical novel and historiography most of all from Kemény's novels. According to reviews of contemporary critics and studies in the history of literature *Grim Time* is, in the one hand, practically the same as historical work with regard to representation of the 16th century Hungary, and on the other hand, applies to a striking allegorical procedure. My interpretation of the novel is based on two propositions. In relation to the novel's representation of the past I accentuate that every single poetical element of the novel participates in the creation of a fictional past, therefore various aspects of the created world are not distinguishable as opposition of foreground and background or real and fictive. In a decisive part of my study I try to interpret the allegorical structure and effect mechanism of the novel, as well as to supplement statements written about this in the reception of Kemény, chiefly by attempting to point out the layered presence of irony.

III. PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC

1. *Attempt to Define the Conventions of the Genre of Historical Novel*

Studia Litteraria, 1999, Tomus XXXVII, 55–89.

2. „All our life is missed” [Zsigmond Kemény: *The Fanatics*]

It, 1999/3, 441–465.

3. *Attempt to Sustain National Teleology* [Mór Jókai: *The Baron's Sons*]

Alföld, 2002/3, 68–89.

4. *Dramatic Character of the Historical Novel* [Zsigmond Kemény: *The Widow and her Daughter*].

It, 2002/4, 533–560.

5. *Representation and Allegory* [Zsigmond Kemény: *Grim Time*]

Alföld, 2003/1, 60–78.