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**The Characteristics of the Narrative Techniques in Magda  
Szabó's Early Novels**

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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## 1. Preludes of the research and the identification of the problem

Magda Szabó's prose is not one of the well-researched themes—only a few studies examine expansively the narrative and poetic characteristics of her literary works. It is especially true in the case of her early novels that published in the 1960s, which are still in a marginalized position within the reception. It has caused by the fact that the reception considers her first two novels (*Fresco*, 1958; *The Fawn*, 1959) as masterpieces, while the 1960s novels considered lesser valuable and because of that, the researchers examine(d) them very rarely if at all.

My choice of subject based on my conviction that —among other things— because of their narrative complexity, these novels are worth examining. As I examined a very productive author period, it was necessary to work out a selection point, so I decided to analyse those novels that the reception considers —in the regard of their narrative techniques— as the copies of Magda Szabó's first two novels, and have different characteristics in form. Therefore I chose *The Night of the Pigkilling*, *The Danaide*, *Moses One*, *Twenty-two* and *Katalin Street*. I also examined *Fresco* and *The Fawn* as well, as they are also among of the author's early novels and they require further narrative analysis.

I chose the narrative approach, because I am concerned that the study of the narrative techniques of the chosen novels is essential to the future examination of Magda Szabó's novels, because the narrative text is the base of every interpretation and because the Hungarian reception is imperfect from this aspect.

The purposes of my dissertation were: (1) to point out that the contemporary reception based on rather ideological than aesthetical points, and how the critics' opinions became fixed points in the reception and affect the current judgement of the author's novels, and (2) to prove the narrative complexity of the author's early novels.

## **2. Structure and Methods**

My dissertation is divided into two parts. In part one, I wrote the reception of Magda Szabó's early novels, because according to my hypothesis, the contemporary critics dealt with the narrative and poetic characteristics of these novels according to the expectations of the Marxist aesthetic and they narrowed the field of interpretation of these works, and dealt superficially with the narrative methods of these novels.

I gave a short introduction to the points of the Marxist aesthetic, which determined the literary context at this time. During the presentation of the Magda Szabó reception, I did not simply endeavour to give the summary of the critics, reviews or essays of the chosen novels, but I pointed out their incompleteness, errors and superficial interpretations.

Because it is impossible to understand the reception of Magda Szabó's early novels without knowing the reception of her first two novels, I expanded the examination with the critical articles of these novels as well.

In part two, I analysed the texts of the author's early novels. During the examination of the narrative characteristics of the chosen novels, my main analysing points were (1) the question of the voice, (2) focalization and (3) order of time. The most important base of my examinations was Gérard Genette's narrative theory, in which he divided the three categories (time, mode, voice) of the narrative text and drew up his theory of focalization. I also applied Mieke Bal's new and useful points (the frequency of focalization, the function of the diminution/expansion of characters' perspective, the perceptibility of the narrative informations etc.) during the examinations of the texts.

During the examination of the voice, I dealt mainly with the characteristics, functions and tipologization of the interior monologue with the aid of Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds*. The theoretical base of the analysis of the order of time and focalization was Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourses*.

Because Magda Szabó's characters struggle with their fragmented identity, the examination of the narrative identity (in the sense of Paul Ricœur) was also an important analysis point. Because this kind of identity comes of in existence through the context of the remembrance, I studied the characteristics of the remembrative techniques of the novels, and beside them, I also applied other methods of interpretations (for example the points of myth critique or corporeal narratology).

### **3. Achievements**

During the examination of the reception of the author's 1960s novels, I pointed out a critical tendency, that wanted to consider these novels as popular literature books, wherein Magda Szabó made aesthetical and political concessions. The critics stated, that Magda Szabó's further novels did not deal much with the topics (society, progression, communist values, etc.) of the socialist realism, which was expected from the writers at his time, furthermore they did not share the same values with the writer's first two novels, and were written by entertain purposes. It became clear, that nowadays Hungarian literary criticism takes over this attitude without the considering of the (literary) context—and the fact, that the critics of Magda Szabó's novels rather had ideological, than aesthetic objections—and without the re-reading of the novels.

The narrative analyses prove that Magda Szabó's novels should not be considered as popular literature books, because their narrative and poetic techniques are various and complex. The narrative techniques establish complex time dimensions in the texts of the novels and the depiction of the characters' mental language (the quotation of the thoughts, the taking over of the mental language and the using of the monologue forms) are always in accordance with the characters' personality, and their usement do have narrative functions (suspension, opposition of thoughts, controlling of narrative informations). It is the reader's task to summarize the connection between the characters, to put

the informations together that come from the characters' perspective and —because of the open-endings— to create the future of the characters, which need concentration from the reader and these are not the characteristics of the popular literature books. The achievements of the dissertation show us that Magda Szabó's 1960s novels are worth examining —beside the analysing points of this dissertation— from other directions of interpretation, as the analysing of these texts is crucial for summing up the narrative and poetical characteristics of her novels and for placing them in the Hungarian literature history.

#### **4. List of publications related to the dissertation**

- *Irreális színterek – A térviszonyok és az emlékezés kapcsolata Szabó Magda Katalin utca című regényében*, Irodalmi Szemle, 2020/2, 58–65.
- *„Író nő vagy nő író?” – A hatvanas évek Szabó Magda-regényeinek recepciója*, Tiszatáj, 2019/6, 88–103.
- *Az új, vérbeli női epikus születése – Szabó Magda első regényeinek recepciója = Szabó Magda száz éve – A PTE BTK centrumú Kortárs Világirodalmi KutatóKör, a PTE BTK Modern Irodalomtörténeti és Irodalomelméleti Tanszéke, valamint a PTE BTK Klasszikus Irodalomtörténeti és Összehasonlító Irodalomtudományi Tanszéke közös konferenciájának előadásai, Pécs, 2017. október 25–26.*, szerk. SOLTÉSZ Márton, V. GILBERT Edit, Budapest, Széphalom Könyvműhely, 2019, 30–46.
- *Az elbeszéléstechnika sajátosságai Szabó Magda Freskó című regényében = Kitáruló ajtók – Tanulmányok Szabó Magda műveiről*,

szerk. KÖRÖMI Gabriella, KUSPER Judit, Eger, EKE Líceum Kiadó, 2018, 51–64.

- *A test és tekintet szerepe Szabó Magda Az őz című regényében*, Irodalmi Szemle, 2018/7–8, 82–93.
- *Az omnisciens elbeszélő szerepe Szabó Magda A Danaida című regényében*, Tanulmányok – Studies – Studije, 2017/2, 55–70.
- *Az elbeszéléstechnika sajátosságai Szabó Magda Disznótor című regényében*, Partitúra, 2017/1, 51–64.
- *Az elbeszélés-technika sajátosságai Szabó Magda Mózes egy, huszonkettő című regényében*, Irodalomismeret, 2017/3, 60–71.
- *A mítosz szerepe Szabó Magda A Danaida című művében = Átjárások-áthallások – az Eötvös Collegium Magyar műhely 2014. évi konferenciájának előadásai*, szerk. HANTÓ Réka, MUNTAG Vince, MELHARDT Gergő, VARGA Nóra, Budapest, ELTE Eötvös József Collegium, 2016, 53–69.
- *Narrációs technikák és paratextusok Szabó Magda korai regényeiben*, Létünk, 2015/2, 147–168.