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Tar Sándor's early prose and the problem of masculinity

(topic: Literature)

In my paper I try to utilize recent developments in the field of gender studies regarding the problem of masculinity/masculinities to try to address some aspects of the oeuvre of Tar Sándor.

In Hungarian literary studies the most prevalent area for the application of gender-related research is, rightfully and understandably, women's, and to a lesser degree queer literature. Their achievements have been and are improving the thinking about the workings and the canons of Hungarian literature immensely, but, as in these discourses the *heterosexual male* often seems to function as the figure of the unproblematic other, these researches may as a side-effect establish a perspective that represents that group as more monolithic than it really is. The results of the growing literature on men's studies, that now also includes Hungarian translations and original research, can serve as a supplemental point of view, one that makes it possible to paint a more complex picture that also includes the internal tensions and struggles of the "male world", one that is able to reckon with the central claim of R. W. Connell's classic text: that masculinities are always in the plural. Dealing with these issues can help literary investigations interested in the representations of identities to gain important new insights.

The subject of my paper is the prose of Tar Sándor with a focus on his early short stories written before the end of communism in Hungary, published in the collections *A 6714-es személy* (1981) and *Mért jó a póknak?* (1989). The most prevalent interpretational frame of Tar's oeuvre regards it as a kind of sociographical literature, reporting of places and people on the peripheries of society, speaking instead of those who cannot speak, as Esterházy Péter has put it. While this description is in no way incorrect, it can only speak of these texts in broad and general terms, describing their settings but not their actual contents. This, too, may lead to overgeneralizations, dissolving the characters in a homogenous mass of the insulted and humiliated, stressing the tension between their lives and the humanist ideals of society, but underemphasizing the different patterns of identity the texts build up, obscuring the clashes between the members of these underprivileged groups, though these are what motivate the plot of many of these texts.

Taking this pair of blind spots as a starting point, I try to concentrate on short stories (like *Téli történet*, *Celofánvirágok*, *Vízipók*, *Ványa* etc.) that turn their attention to characters who not only are on the social periphery but are also marginalized in their own groups. In simple terms, these characters can be described as being naïve, weak, sentimental or awkward – that is, being representatives of subordinate masculinities in the working-class male groups dominated by macho ethics and practices. In the hope of being able to provide insights both for the understanding of the problematic of competing male identities and for the description of the features of Tar's prose I am going to carry out a close narratological and ideological analysis of several short stories, trying to reconstruct the ways of identity formation and identity crises, the scenarios of dominance and submission, and the implications of their representations. By taking into account both the reception of the author and the recent international literature on the topic I try to work out a framework that makes it possible to formulate relevant assertions about the ethical and social function of literature in society, arguing that stories force us to see large-scale social crises as consisting of small narratives of personal successes and failures, and to regard individuals not only as representatives of a social status but as the point of intersection of many determining factors of identity.