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Moral Emotions in Literary Reception

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Table of Contents

ARTICLES

Moral Emotions in Literary Reception **4**
Introduction

Emotion Detection in Literary Texts with a Corpus Linguistic Approach **6**
A Three-step Method
Gábor Simon

Moral Emotions and Narrative Multiperspectivity in Social Novels **28**
A Reading of Imre Kertész's *Detective Story*
Márta Horváth

Moral Emotions and Aesthetic Experience in Young Readers **43**
Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in Reading a Classic Hungarian Young Adult Novel
Orsolya Szilvássy

Reclaiming Bodies, Freeing Souls **60**
Evoking Transcultural Empathy in Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016)
Kai Qing Tan

From Heroic Ethos to Social Order **81**
Moral Characteristics of the *Hildebrandslied* and their Contemporary and Modern Interpretations
Orsolya Rauzs

REVIEWS

Fritz Breithaupt: The Narrative Brain. The Stories our Neurons Tell. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2025, 274.p. **102**
Márta Horváth

Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind by Francesca Arnavas and Marzia Beltrami, editors. Vol. 37, Issue 2 (2023) of Marvels Tales. Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies. 353.p. **107**
Zoltán Kocsis

Moral Emotions in Literary Reception

An Introduction

One of the central dimensions of narrative reception is moral judgment. When readers engage with narrative texts, they almost inevitably evaluate the agents depicted in them—human characters or human-like beings—through moral lens. Actions are intuitively assessed as "right" or "wrong," the characters as "good" or "bad," and these judgments function as cognitive tools, through which readers map the moral norms that structure the world represented in the fictional world. Moral evaluation thus constitutes a fundamental component of narrative sense-making rather than an optional or secondary layer of interpretation.

Recent developments in moral psychology conceptualize moral judgment as the outcome of the interaction between two cognitive systems: an intuitive, affect-laden system and a more deliberate, reflective mode of reasoning. Depending on the context, one or the other may be differentially activated. Empirical research on literary reception suggests that, in the case of aesthetic narratives, readers tend to preferentially rely upon intuitive and emotion-based judgments. For this reason, the present special issue focuses specifically on moral emotions as key drivers of literary understanding.

Among emotions, the negative moral emotions—such as anger, contempt, moral disgust, or indignation—play a particularly significant role in reception. These emotions are known to intensify subjective experience, capture and sustain attention, and enhance memory formation. In comparison with other types of moral emotions, they therefore exert a disproportionate influence on how narratives are processed, remembered, and interpreted. For this reason, this issue centres around the interpretive function of readers' negative moral emotions and examines how they shape ethical engagement with literary texts.

Human moral expectations are grounded both in culturally specific norms and in principles often regarded as universal, such as the condemnation of killing or of actions that violate another person's psychological integrity. Literary narratives, however, are capable of challenging even these seemingly fundamental expectations. Through specific representational techniques, narrative texts can suspend, complicate, or even reverse readers' default moral responses. Accordingly, the contributions published in this issue investigate which narrative strategies and lin-

guistic devices shape readers' moral emotions and how these emotions, in turn, influence interpretation.

While rooted in evolutionarily constrained cognitive processes, readers' emotional responses are also influenced by cultural context and individual experiences. The articles in this volume take these factors into account as they explore the ethical dimensions of literary texts as a complex and dynamic phenomenon.

From this issue onward, our journal is published in English and has also expanded its profile: in addition to research articles, we also publish book reviews to inform our readers about recent developments in cognitive literary studies. We hope that these changes will allow the journal to reach a broader audience and to provide multifaceted insights into this rapidly evolving field.

We wish all our readers an engaging and stimulating reading experience.

The editors
SZTE, NTNU

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ARTICLE

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Emotion Detection in Literary Texts with a Corpus Linguistic Approach

A Three-step Method

Narrative fiction is rich in emotions described by the narrator or other characters. These emotions can be thoroughly analyzed using close reading techniques, but what methods can be used in a distant reading analysis? How can we detect and identify characters' emotions in large corpora? Beyond the emotional vocabulary of a language, are there any reoccurring patterns of emotion description used by narrators in novels of different genres and ages? The goal of this paper is to provide an overview of the basic problems and methodological proposals in corpus linguistic literature to provide a solid foundation for empirical analysis. In addition, a pilot study is conducted using the ELTE Novel Corpus to analyze the emotions represented in Dezső Kosztolányi's novels and to determine the possibilities of their detection through corpus linguistic analysis. The pilot study centers around the analysis of two negative emotions: the basic emotion of anger and the more complex emotional stance of shame.

Keywords: negative emotions, corpus, corpus linguistics, distant reading, emotion cluster, anger, shame

1. Introduction – Emotion detection in literary corpora

Despite the growing number of digital databases in literary studies, the use of corpora to investigate how the formation of a text influences the reading process remains challenging, especially in the field of emotion research. The reason behind this tendency may be at least twofold. First, literary research in general remains largely suspicious towards quantitative analytical techniques, based on "a general lack of trust in anything that is number-based in literary scholarship" (Zafar & Khan 2021, 85–86), or on the critiques that quantification in the analysis of literature is "useless" (i.e., it tells us "nothing that we did not already know")

or proves to be "trivial" ("counting the word 'whale' in *Moby-Dick* can tell us only one thing: how often the word 'whale' is used in *Moby-Dick*") (Eve 2022, 1–2). Second, staying in the tradition of cognitive poetics, which investigates the engagement of the reader's mind with the literary text (Stockwell 2002, 2), the recently proposed framework of affective-cognitive stylistics (Hogan 2021) focuses on the emotion-related linguistic features of individual works (compared to some form of norms). Since a stylistic feature needs to be encoded cognitively by the reader in order to create an impact on the process of reading (Hogan 2021, 39), the analysis of emotions (either represented in the text or simulated by the author/reader) must unfold primarily on the level of particular works of art, even if the scope of affective style can extend from individual to supra-individual scope (such as genres, periods, or regions, see Hogan 2021, 71). Thus, neither the overall attitude toward computer-assisted methods in literary studies nor the specific emphasis on how style influences reading literature encourages scholars to explore large corpora when they seek to understand the role of emotions in literature. As Klinger, Kim, & Padó (2020, 262) claim, "the task of annotating emotions and corresponding roles manually and automatically are both difficult." Thus, a third possible obstacle to corpus analysis in literary emotion research might be the complexity of emotion representation in texts ("high lexical variability" in Klinger and his colleagues' term). Consider these examples extracted from the novels of the modernist Hungarian writer, Dezső Kosztolányi, available in the ELTE Novel Corpus (Bajzát, Szemes & Szlávich 2021). [1]

> Együtt **sírtak**.
> 'They **cried** together.' [2]

> Mennyire másképp **sírt** a fiú a kertben, ki a sírással mindent lemosott.
> 'How differently the boy **cried** in the garden, who washed everything away with his crying.'
>
> Vili csak pislogott vöröslő, **sírni** készülő szemével, hogy őt, a bajnokot, inasnak küldik.
> 'Vili just blinked his red eyes, about to **cry**, that he was sending him, the champion, to become a servant.'

The common lexical item of these examples is the verb lemma *sír* 'cry', which clearly refers to the feeling of deep sorrow and desperation. But not in all three cases: in the first example, the act of crying can be understood as the expression of

1. The corpus is available here: https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/ (last access: 09/05/2025).
2. Examples in Hungarian are translated to English by the author of the study.

sorrow; however, in the second and third cases, it accompanies remorse and shame (or anger, as clued in the third sentence). These examples demonstrate that even the mere observation of the emotions experienced by the characters and depicted by the narrator can prove to be a difficult task. Beyond the direct naming of these states, a plethora of indirect representational strategies can be found in literary texts (described as metaphorical and "full of allusions" by Klinger, Kim & Padó 2020, 263), and one lexical or stylistic feature can refer to more than one basic or secondary emotion. Finally, it is important to consider the negation of emotions. When using emotion names as key terms in a digital search for representations of emotions, the resulting data may lead to an inaccurate number of occurrences. This includes both the identification of emotional states (e.g., *dühöt érzett* '(she/he) felt anger') and the absence of certain emotions (e.g., *nem érzett dühöt* '(she/he) didn't feel any anger').

The principal objective of this paper is to propose solutions to the methodological conundrum of identifying the emotional states of characters within large literary corpora by adapting state-of-the-art corpus-analytical methods. The main motivation behind the question lies in the assumption that emotions felt by characters of a story can initiate emotional responses (both mental simulation and attitudinal reaction) in readers; therefore, character-related emotional patterns may lead us to a better understanding of how we process narratives and make affective and/or moral judgments. Moreover, by mapping the distribution of emotion representations in texts, one can highlight the emotional dynamics of narratives, an aspect of emplotment, i.e., "the selection and organization of story information" (Hogan 2021, 45). From a methodological perspective, however, the decision point is whether the analyst relies on existing approaches to the literary work, which consider some features relevant for interpreting the narrative, and tries to support these proposals with empirical findings, or lets the textual organization of the characters' emotional responses unfold without any prior observations. The former is a data-based analytical design, whereas the latter implements a data-driven process of digital reading. Finally, emotions felt by characters can be identified with close reading, which can be extremely precise but, on the other hand, slow and costly, or with distant reading techniques, which yield a wide but noisy set of data. I aim to propose here a multi-layered method for achieving a data-driven analysis of depicted emotions which combines direct and indirect queries of emotion depiction in a literary corpus. The focus of the analysis is on negative feelings: the basic-level emotion of anger and the more complex emotion of shame are investigated in the novels of Dezső Kosztolányi (queried in the ELTE Novel Corpus), to demonstrate how corpus analysis can provide literary studies with an extensive and exhaustive data collection.

Thus, the present paper has a strong methodological orientation: the issues of how these emotions unfold or what function they have in the story or the interpretation of the novels are not addressed here.[3] My objectives are much more modest: I will attempt to provide a solid methodological foundation for further corpus-assisted analyses of how negative emotions contribute to the experience of reading literature. To achieve this goal, I first discuss the problem of emotion detection in large collections of texts, then the solutions to this problem proposed in the literature are outlined. After reviewing the methodological repertoire, section 3 presents my own proposal, which is tested in a case study of anger and shame represented in Kosztolányi's works.

2. Emotion detection in corpora – problems and solutions[4]

The main challenge in identifying represented emotions in a corpus is determining the fundamental unit of analysis. The simplest way is to use emotional terms (e.g., in the Hungarian language *bánat* 'sorrow', *öröm* 'happiness', *harag* 'anger', etc.) for extracting affective states experienced by the characters of literary narratives. The main issue arises from the diversity of emotional vocabulary across languages. Emotions can be described using various terms, and expressions related to emotions (such as crying, as mentioned in the examples) can have multiple meanings. The first aspect of this problem can be viewed as a matter of synonymity, leading to the question of how to identify the relevant emotional terms. The second issue pertains to the polysemy of emotion-related words, where effective interpretation relies on our varied situational and bodily experiences. In other words, even the simplest method (relying on emotion vocabulary) may result in methodological problems, either with regard to obtaining sufficient data or maintaining the original focus of the analysis (by targeting only specific emotions).

The ability of talking about our feelings without directly naming them remarkably increases the difficulties of emotion detection. Ulrike Oster (2010, 741) describes this phenomenon in the following way:

> Owing to the methodological necessity of including the node 'fear' in the corpus search, it is only possible to find instances of physiological effects or behavioural reactions if the emotion itself is also mentioned, whereas there does not seem to be a straightforward way of tracing instances in which the physical effect actually stands for the emotion.

3. The application of large language models and generative AI tools in emotion detection is also out of the scope of the present proposal. For recent results in LLM-based approaches, see Fu et al. 2025.
4. Due to the limitations in size, the present paper cannot provide the reader with a general overview of analysing literary texts with computational methodology. Eve (2022) offers a thought-provoking discussion of the field, while Szemes (2024) serves as a useful introduction for Hungarian readers.

In simple terms, it is crucial to consider not only the natural diversity in how we label our own and others' emotions but also the vast range of ways emotions are expressed indirectly. If we overlook this, we jeopardize the comprehensiveness of our analysis, which is one of the main benefits of conducting corpus research, especially in the case of long texts and corpora.

When it comes to identifying felt emotions, we can define emotion terms as words that specifically "denote emotions". In contrast, less overt representations of emotions are referred to as expressions that "convey emotional states indirectly without directly naming them" (Dziwirek & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2010, 14). While the former set of lexical labels provides the language user with direct reference to the emotions they experience, feelings can also be discussed "in terms of bodily reactions, facial and body gestures, their behavioral and situational properties" (Dziwirek & Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2010, 1). In their cross-linguistic corpus-based analysis of Polish and English emotion concepts and their linguistic patterns, Katarzyna Dziwirek and Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk propose a construction-based approach to linguistic emotion representation, i.e., an important shift in the focus of the research from emotion vocabulary to the more inclusive category of the construal of emotion. Since emotion is a complex mental state involving different causes and actions, its linguistic representation is not confined to the core emotion lexical term, but it also extends to the construal of a scenario in the form of a clause foregrounding the feeling, the immediate reactions to it, or the situational factors evoking it.

This kind of conceptual and linguistic complexity of emotion representation is grasped by the term emotion cluster, defined by Valentina Apresjan as follows: "a variety of emotion terms reflecting a range of emotion subtypes" (2013, 535). Emotion clusters can be described with a prototypical scenario incorporating "the general cause of the feeling, the nature of the feeling, and the wishes of the experiencer".[5] As an example, ANGER[6] is " feeling bad toward somebody when somebody did something bad and wanting to do something bad to that person" (Apresjan 2013, 562), including neutral anger (e.g., *angry, anger, mad*), righteous motivated anger (e.g., *indignation*), violent uncontrollable anger (e.g., *fury, rage, to enrage*), anger as a reaction to an insignificant unpleasant repeated stimulus (e.g., *irritation, annoyed*), and unmotivated vicious anger (e.g., *venom, spiteful*). Or, focusing on the other target emotion of the present study, SHAME is described in the following way: "feeling bad when having done something bad" (Apresjan 2013, 564), and it encompasses neutral shame (e.g., *shame, to be ashamed*), ethi-

5. Emotion clusters, thus, serve as an alternative to using emotion vocabularies or sentiment lexicons. Since such a standardized database is not available in Hungarian, the adoption of emotion clusters seems to be a viable option at the present stage of research.
6. Following the notation introduced by Apresjan, emotion clusters are marked by CAPITALS in the present study.

cal shame (e.g., *guilt, remorse*), social shame (e.g., *embarrassed, shy*), conventional shame (e.g., *to regret*), and social stigma (e.g., *disgrace*). As can be seen, the alternative construals of emotion and emotion clusters are two different sides of the same coin: while the former directs our attention to the grammatical intricacy of emotion representation, the latter highlights the diversity of feelings, and thus of causes, objects, intensity, or symptoms; however, both of these approaches strive to model emotion as a scenario with internal complexity.

In a comparative analysis of emotion distribution in Russian and English, Apresjan (2013) makes interesting observations in two corpora, such as the relatively similar frequency of ANGER in both languages or the overuse of SHAME compared to ANGER in Russian (whereas in English, these two clusters occur with only a minor difference in frequency). However, despite viewing emotions as diverse ranges of subtypes, the use of emotional clusters (i.e., a broader set of emotion terms) fails to take into account our natural tendency to talk about feelings in an indirect way It is therefore difficult to obtain a comprehensive picture of emotion representation. Apresjan (2013) proposes the following solution to this methodological issue: beyond mere emotional terms, the analyst can apply fixed constructions that name the emotion as a firsthand experience. In English, the expressions *I would like to express my* X, *I am* X-*ing/I am/feel/get* X, or *It* X-*es me, It makes me* X*, It causes* X *in me* widen the scope of the analysis and can reflect not only on the basic feeling but also on the factor that triggers it. Moreover, this extension reinforces the construction-based approach to emotion identification in corpora initiated by the previous research. Finally, Apresjan's proposal seems to be compatible with one of the general methodological principles of corpus querying, namely, with the principle of context, according to which the context of a phenomenon can provide a vantage point for finding its occurrences (Sass 2022, 611). For example, if anger cannot be addressed directly, one can use the expression *It makes me angry* to identify additional instances of the same emotional state expressed in different ways. However, feelings that are expressed indirectly fall outside the scope of even this broader analysis.

Oster's aforementioned study (2010) explores the metaphorical and metonymical patterns of conceptualizing and expressing fear in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. To enlarge the group of linguistic expressions decoding the emotional state of fear, Oster (2010, see Appendix 1 and 2 in the cited paper) applied not only the name of the feeling as a keyword but also compounds with this emotion term as their first component, e.g., *fear-filled, fear-inducing, fear-scent, fear-widened* (excluding, however, strongly lexicalized expressions, such as *fearful*) and extracted the words that typically co-occur with the keywords. Moreover, she also took the part-of-speech category of the keyword (i.e., *fear* as a noun and as a verb, respectively) into account when analyzing and classifying the data. In

other words, Oster adopted the lexical approach to metaphors and metonymies (observing metaphorically used words in their context) and the metaphorical pattern analysis (choosing the vocabulary of the target domain, here the notion of fear, to find relevant figurative conceptualizations of it in the corpus) to extend the qualitative exploration of expressing emotions with a corpus-based, quantitative analysis of large-scale linguistic material. Additionally, the specific focus of the investigation on figurative language use may shed light on the indirect reference to emotions beyond their direct, literal descriptions, paving the way for a more comprehensive analysis of the patterns of talking about emotions. Nevertheless, Oster's proposal cannot provide any solution to the key issue of finding emotions in corpora, namely the requirement of using the names of emotions to find all relevant expressions of its representation in the corpus. As she puts it, "[e]xpressions that are used figuratively to describe the emotion without naming it cannot be detected with this method" (Oster 2010, 731).

Thus, even though the basic unit of corpus analysis is expanded from the mere occurrence of the individual target word to multi-word expressions and frequent co-occurrences (extended units of meaning using a category proposed by Sinclair 1996), and this tendency is in line with the recognition that emotions are depicted with complex semantic patterns (including literal and figurative meaning), the obstacle of using the emotion term as the starting point of data collection and analysis seems to be a persistent feature of corpus analyses. In other words, on one side of the scale, we can witness the constant expansion of the scope of corpus-based research on emotions. This encompasses both the target category, which ranges from a simplistic interpretation of emotion terms to a deeper exploration of the complexity of emotion clusters and the evolving nature of how emotions are understood, and how these emotions are expressed linguistically, moving from direct representations of feelings to their metaphorical and metonymic interpretations. On the other side, however, the challenge of transcending basic labels for emotional states balances out the methodological advancements brought about by corpus linguistics. Those who can propose a solution to how the analysis can overcome this methodological limitation can open the doors of linguistic emotion research wider than ever before.

3. The identification of direct and indirect emotion representations in corpora – a methodological proposal

After examining significant advancements in the investigation of emotions through corpus-based methods and identifying the main challenge of depending solely on emotion labels, this section outlines a procedure for identifying all relevant instances that represent a specific feeling within a given corpus. In corpus linguistics,

two measurements are widely used for the evaluation of queries: while precision refers to "how many correct matches (vs. false positives) the search for a particular [...] pattern returns", recall reflects "how many of the relevant examples in the corpus were found by the search" (Meurers & Müller 2009, 922). It is easy to see that the use of an emotion term as a target word (or as a component of a target expression) maximizes the precision of detecting felt emotions in literary corpora; however, the vast amount of indirect emotion representation in narratives makes the available techniques of corpus analysis less effective, since the latter expressions remain invisible for searches using direct naming of feelings. The cornerstone of an exhaustive corpus analysis of emotion description therefore lies in maintaining a high level of precision without necessarily causing the fall of recall; i.e., finding both direct and indirect linguistic representations of emotions felt by the characters in literary narratives. With this aim in mind, the method proposed here is a three-step process that utilizes and enhances existing techniques from previous literature by combining them effectively.

The basic logic of the procedure is relatively simple: apply alternative units of analysis gradually embedded into each other to obtain as many relevant examples as possible. The first step of the process is a keyword-based query that uses not only the exact emotion term, but also the subtypes of the core emotion grasped by the complex model of emotion cluster. In addition, including compounds with the particular emotion term as a component (using the * symbol as a wild-card in a more encompassing query expression, e.g., *düh** 'anger*' referring to any expression beginning with the name of the feeling) can broaden the set of relevant hits. The step of keyword-based search renders it possible to identify the expressions depicting the target emotion with the highest level of precision, but it also ensures the optimal level of recall, considering the direct reference to the feeling.

The second step of the procedure focuses on alternative constructions of emotion depiction: the expressions *kifejez** 'express', X-*nAk érez* magát* 'feel themselves X' are general patterns for referring to emotional states, but this list can be expanded with more specific terms related to the actual target emotion (e.g., *bosszant** 'annoy' or *furdal** (*a lelkiismeret*) 'have pangs (of conscience)' in the case of anger and shame). It is expected that the more general the construction is, the fewer relevant hits it will yield. Additionally, more general constructions of expressing feelings can be combined with the explicit reference to the target emotion; therefore, duplicates need to be excluded from the data manually. The construction-based approach, nonetheless, can provide the analyst with less concrete and rather circumscribed representations of emotional states, and hence it increases the level of recall without a necessary decline in precision.

In the last step of the analysis, it is the context that plays a crucial role in emotion detection. Remember that, according to the principle of context in corpus

querying, the immediate verbal context can also serve as a vantage point for finding new instances, especially in the case of indirect emotion representation. On the one hand, the context of a simile carries the potential of depicting someone's emotional state in the absence of naming it explicitly. The contextual pattern *úgy érez, mint* 'feel themselves like' brings a detailed figurative description of the character's mental state to the fore, as in the following example: *Ő is úgy érezte itt magát, mint aki a színfalak között tévelyegve véletlenül a színpadra botlik, egy ismeretlen darab zajos jelenetébe.* ('He felt like he was wandering around the stage, accidentally stumbling onto the stage, into a noisy scene of an unfamiliar play.')[7] Similes can be considered the least transparent but the most interesting way of talking about felt emotions, requiring much effort in categorizing the hit as one instance of the target feeling.

Nevertheless, the context can be used more straightforwardly as well, relying on a reference corpus and observing the typical patterns in which a particular emotion term occurs. Using the Mazsola tool as the Hungarian Verb Argument Browser (Sass 2009),[8] all the verbs are retrievable from the former version of the Hungarian National Corpus in the context of which a specific nominal element occurs in a predetermined grammatical function. For example, the browser shows which verbs are used with specific emotion terms. These verbs can either have the emotion as their subject (where the emotion takes action) or as an inessive object (where a person acts in response to that emotion). Concerning the pilot study discussed below, the nouns *harag* 'anger' and *düh* 'rage' perform the following actions as examples (the numbers of occurrences are presented after each verb): *elönt* 'overflow' (77), *megszáll* 'occupy' (11), *zúdul* 'rush' (8), *irányul* 'aim at' (12), *elfog* 'capture' (48), *forr* 'boil' (13), or *szétvet* 'take apart' (6); and, when someone is angry, they typically do the following actions: *áll* 'stand' (12), *összetörik* 'break' (6), *sír* 'cry' (11), *csap* 'hit' (5), *csikorgat*(*ja a fogát*) 'grind (one's teeth)' (6). These verbs, thus, serve as clues for identifying an emotional reaction, since they direct the attention to the felt quality of being in an emotional state or the immediate behavioral or bodily reactions to the feeling. Therefore, the context-based search is appropriate for extending the analysis to the metaphorical and/or metonymic representations of emotions without using their naming: the analyst can query the typical verbs (obtained from the reference corpus) in the research corpus to find further relevant but indirect references to the target feeling. In the following example, the bodily response of shame (*elpirul* 'blush') is mentioned without any reference to the emotion: *Félresimította a haját, elpirult és mondott valamit.* 'He

7. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=72chapter=9t21279 (the URL addresses of the following examples direct the reader to the chapter of the particular novel in the ELTE Novel Corpus, within which the relevant construction occurs).
8. The tool is available here: http://corpus.nytud.hu/mazsola/index$_e$*ng.html* (last access: 02/06/2025).

brushed his hair halfway, blushed and said something'.[9] However, in other cases, the contextual clue co-occurs with an emotional label as its cause: *Anna, aki azóta először látta őt, a szégyentől elpirulva, a boldogságtól ájultan lapult a fürdőkád bádogfalához, hogy tegyen vele, amit akar.* 'Anna, who had seen him for the first time since then, blushing with shame and swooning with happiness, lay down against the bathtub's tin wall to do with her as he pleased'.[10] Consequently, the careful handling of the data is essential to avoid duplicates in the analysis.

The main benefit of the contextual approach resides in facilitating the extraction of indirect references to emotional states and resulting in expanding the scope of the query. On the other hand, it requires a lot of manual work in data processing and classification, since the hits become noisier and less transparent with the reliance on reoccurring contextual patterns in talking about emotions. The diagram below summarizes the proposed procedure.

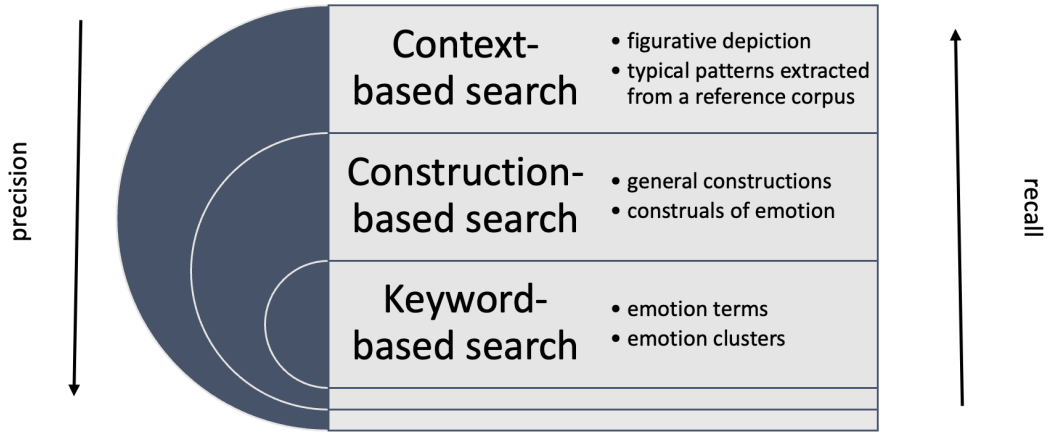

Figure 1: The three-step procedure of emotion identification in literary corpora

As the diagram shows, there is an inverse relationship between precision and recall across the three steps of the analysis presented above. This feature renders the procedure highly flexible for the researcher: depending on the purpose of the analysis, the entire procedure can be implemented, or its application can be limited only to the core steps (i.e., using keywords and constructions). By way of explanation, the corpus analysis can prefer the first or the first two steps when precision is more important than recall. However, even in this case, the proposed method provides solid empirical ground for the extraction and quantification of felt emo-

9. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=44chapter=4t2724
10. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=72chapter=13t34633

tions in narratives. And when the investigation needs to be more exhaustive and it demands a higher performance in recall, the third step proves to be a productive extension of the method towards indirect emotion descriptions. Furthermore, the method implies the complex modelling of emotional states as clusters with a prototypical scenario, the subtypes of the feeling, and its diverse intensity reflected in its description. The differences between the expressions *szégyellte magát* '(s)he was ashamed of him/herself', *szégyent érzett* '(s)he felt ashamed'), *a szégyen kiült az arcára* 'shame settled on her/his face', or *szégyenében elpirult* '(s)he blushed in shame' can be explored due to the fact that these modes of construing the emotional state belong to different basic units (keywords, constructions, and contextual clues) and are retrievable by different steps in the procedure.

It is important to note that precision and recall are used primarily as theoretical notions of assessing the effectiveness of the proposed approach. Thus, neither the precise calculation of these two measurements, nor any further quantitative evaluation of the three-step method is provided here (though the proportion of accurate hits is presented in percentages later). The main reason behind this decision is that I have no gold standard corpus of felt emotions in Kosztolányi's works, compared to which the reliability of any methods can be evaluated. The creation of such a database is highly challenging (see Klinger, Kim & Padó 2020 for details) and requires the efforts of professional or trained annotators (or, alternatively, the exploitation of the reasoning capacity of an LLM). Even though the compilation of a gold standard corpus is a logical next step in the broader project of corpus-driven emotion detection, the present study only attempts to confront the reader with the methodological challenges and outline possible frameworks for a solution. Consequently, precision refers here to the capacity of the method in finding accurate hits of the target emotions as felt experiences, while recall refers (somewhat loosely) to the potentiality with which the diversity of the relevant hits can be explored with the method.

The following section presents the pilot study designed and conducted to test the productivity of the methodological proposal outlined above. I investigated the occurrences of ANGER and SHAME in Dezső Kosztolányi's novels, focusing specifically on the precision of the consecutive steps of the procedure, as well as on the scope it opens for the analyst in finding relevant examples of the target clusters.

4. ANGER and SHAME in the novels of Dezső Kosztolányi – a pilot study

For the sake of the analysis, I chose two negative emotions and their representations in literary narratives. The decision was motivated on the one hand by the

general assumption that negative emotions play a significant role in understanding not only the morality of the narrative but also following the emotional arc of the plot (Vermeule 2011), and on the other hand by the quality of these emotions: anger is one of the basic negative emotions, whereas shame can be characterized as a complex or secondary emotion related to wrongdoing, punishment and hence to moral judgements (cf. Ekman 1992; Szabó 2022, 112). If the proposed methodology proves to be productive in both cases, it can serve as a vantage point for further, more detailed analyses. It is also worth mentioning that the pilot study does not strive to draw any theoretical conclusions either about the role of negative emotions in modern Hungarian novels or about the authorial style of Kosztolányi. Rather, the analysis aims to implement the three-step procedure and demonstrate its effectiveness in corpus-assisted literary research.

4.1 Material

The corpus of the analysis consists of four novels written by Dezső Kosztolányi between 1922 and 1926. Kosztolányi was one of the leading figures in the period of classical modernism in Hungarian literature: a poet, novelist, essayist, and journalist who brought significant innovations into Hungarian literature, paving the way for late modern and contemporary narrative techniques as well.[11] His novels selected for the present exploratory study hold high canonical status, and their digital versions are available in the ELTE Novel Corpus. Together, these novels amount to 201,819 words.

In his novels, Kosztolányi uses third-person narration with internal focalization, which is an ideal narrative perspective if one wishes to explore the characters' emotional states. Moreover, he was one who introduced the psychological novel into Hungarian modernism: either as an ancient Roman emperor or as a maid coming to serve in twentieth-century Budapest, his protagonists possess complex personalities with conflicting thoughts and feelings, and their actions are motivated by intricate psychological processes that are not always transparent to the reader. Given the importance of Kosztolányi and his works in modern Hungarian literature, as well as the intriguing psychological settings he portrays, his novels serve as an optimal source for corpus-based analysis of emotion representation in narrative literature.

4.2 Method

According to Apresjan (2013, 562, 564), ANGER is related to the punishment of someone who has done something wrong to the individual, while SHAME accom-

11. For an overview of his oeuvre and its critical evaluation, see the review of one of his most recent biographies: Bollobás 2018.

panies self-punishment after having done something bad to others. Thus, they can be modelled as complementary emotional reactions after wrongdoing. Both have a diverse set of subtypes (proposed by Apresjan 2013) that served as keywords[12] in the first stage of the analysis: for ANGER, these are *harag* 'anger', *felháborod** 'indignant', *düh** 'upset', *bosszankod** 'annoy', *bosszús** 'annoyed', and *mérges* 'angry'; in the case of SHAME, the keywords were *szégyen* 'shame', *bűnbánat** 'remorse', *zavar** 'embarrassment', *sajnál* 'regret', *gyalázat* 'shame', and *bán* and *megbán* 'regret'.[13] As the first step of the data query, I applied the keywords above to identify all the explicit representations of the target emotions in the corpus.

Then, in the construction-based phase of the study, general and more specific expressions of feelings were utilized to increase the amount of data, including *kifejez** 'express', X *érez** *magát* 'feel themselves X', *bosszant** 'annoy', or *furdal** 'have pangs (of conscience)'. The final stage of the analysis implemented a context-based search, relying partly upon the general expression *úgy érez, mint* 'feel themselves like', and partly on additional data obtained from the Hungarian Verb Argument Browser using the name of the target emotions as keywords in retrieving the most salient verbs in their immediate context. The emotion keywords (listed above) for the ANGER and the SHAME clusters were used either in subject position or as indirect objects (in the inessive case). The list of typical verbs[14] occurring with the target emotions in the reference corpus is as follows:

- ANGER: *elönt* 'overflow', *sújt* 'strike', *irányul* 'aim at', *fordul* 'turn', *elfog* 'grip/capture', *elborít* 'overwhelm/flood', *áll* 'stand', *összetörik* 'break', *sír* 'cry', *vág* 'hit', *csap* 'hit', *szenved* 'suffer', *csikorgat* 'grind (one's teeth)', *elvörösödik* 'turn red';

12. The two sets of keywords were compiled following the detailed description of emotion clusters by Apresjan (2013), and finding Hungarian equivalents of the English emotion terms belonging to these clusters. Thus, keywords are adopted from the literature, and they do not form an exhaustive lexical set of Hungarian emotion terms.
13. As mentioned previously, the lemma with the asterisk symbol renders it possible to obtain not only the nominal or verbal lexeme and its conjugated forms, but also the nouns, adjectives, or participles derived from the keywords.
14. "Typicality" does not automatically mean high frequency here, since some emotion keywords occur slightly above 10 instances in the reference corpus. Therefore, in cases where the keyword was frequent enough in the corpus, I selected only those verbs that had an overall frequency above 5. However, I also aimed to represent all the chosen keywords in the data selection process. Thus, I chose at least one verb from every list obtained by the keywords, and I tried to select the most salient verbs with regard to the emotion. (For instance, *elvörösödik* 'turn red', which is a direct bodily reaction to the emotion ("universal signal", as labelled by Ekman (1992, 175), instead of *felugrik* 'jump up', which can be motivated by more than one emotional state.) To summarize, the selection of verbs was motivated by three principles: high frequency in the context of the keyword, the representation of a wide set of keywords, and the salience of the process described by the verb in the context of the target emotion.

- SHAME: *éget* 'burn', *elfut* 'cover', *gyötör* 'torment', *elsüllyed* 'sink', *bújik* 'hide', *lépked* 'step', *babrál* 'fiddle with', *dadog* 'stammer', *elpirul* 'blush/get red', *feszeng* 'be nervous/uncomfortable, fidget'.

In the context-based search, these verbs were used as contextual clues to find further indirect linguistic representations of the emotions under investigation.

During the data collection process, all hits were exported as concordances to MS Excel tables, providing a larger context for precise interpretation. Since the objective of this paper is to identify as many instances of emotions as possible within the corpus, the main challenge in this analysis is distinguishing relevant occurrences of emotions from non-relevant ones. This involves eliminating instances of keywords, phrases, or contexts that do not pertain to the target emotions. Precision can be calculated by dividing the number of true positive instances by the total number of instances in each category. In the following subsection, the results of the three steps are presented and discussed.

4.3 Results and discussion

When emotion terms as exact keywords were used in data sampling, ANGER resulted in 119 hits, and SHAME was observed 259 times in the novels of Kosztolányi. The precision of the queries with the synonyms or subtypes of the target emotion was, however, just the opposite: whereas ANGER-related terms yielded true positive hits in 79 % of the cases on average, this proportion was only 32 % in the case of SHAME. A true positive example of ANGER is the following sentence: *Nero, mikor rájött a turpisságra, haragra lobbant.* 'Nero, when he realized the dirty trick, flew into a rage.',[15] where *harag* 'rage' refers precisely to the feeling of the character. In contrast, in the example *Ne tessék haragudni, hogy eljöttem.* 'Don't be angry that I came.',[16] mentioning the anger of the partner is rather a politeness formula, and the expression does not refer to any true felt experience of the character. Regarding SHAME, the sentence *Fóris nem csinált titkot szégyenéből, sem akkor, sem most.* 'Fóris made no secret of his shame, then or now.'[17] states explicitly that the character undergoes the emotion in focus. As a false positive hit of the query, consider the following sentence: *Előtte semmi sem szégyen, még sírni sem az.* 'Before him there is no shame, not even to cry.',[18] where it is the lack of any shame that depicts the emotional state of a character. Or, with another example, the sentence *Ezek bűnbánatra és töredelemre intették, vallásos füzeteket hagytak nála, melyekben a hit vigaszát találhatta.* 'They [missionary sisters] exhorted her

15. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=44chapter=24t47969
16. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=254chapter=22t54685
17. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=254chapter=23t58301
18. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=254chapter=27t68050

to remorse and repentance, and left her religious booklets in which she could find the consolation of faith.',[19] which contains the only occurrence of the term *bűnbánat* 'remorse' in the sample, cannot prove that the protagonist of the novel has the specific feeling – only the intention to trigger shame in the character is mentioned explicitly in the narrative. Still, the outcome is unknown. False positive hits are, thus, occurrences that claim the lack of the target emotion or represent only its potentiality, without any strong evidence of its unfoldment, or even refer to it in a formal context (as a mark of polite behavior). Table 1 presents the number of all hits, true positive hits, and the proportion of the two (i.e., the level of precision) in both emotion clusters.

ANGER	**Hits**	**True positives**	**Precision**	**SHAME**	**Hits**	**True positives**	**Precision**
harag 'anger'	62	39	63%	*szégyen* 'shame'	35	25	71%
*düh** 'upset'	28	26	93%	*bűnbánat** 'remorse'	1	0	0%
*felháborod** 'indignant'	1	1	100%	*zavar** 'embarrassment'	114	40	35%
*bosszankod** 'annoy'	8	7	88%	*sajnál* 'regret'	43	4	9%
mérges 'angry'	9	3	33%	*bán* 'regret'	50	5	10%
*bosszús** 'annoyed'	11	11	100%	*megbán* 'regret'	7	4	57%
Sum/proportion	119	87	79%	*gyalázat* 'shame'	9	4	44%
				Sum/proportion	259	82	32%

Figure 2: The occurrences of ANGER and SHAME in the sample

Data shows that the cluster approach, which comprises not only the core emotional term but also its synonyms, effectively encompasses most direct representations of the emotion ANGER (79%). It is also worth noting that, although this average precision ranges from 33% to 100% (thus, the terms are not equally useful in emotion detection), the majority of them yield precise results above 60%. Thus, emotional terms function effectively in finding felt ANGER in the novels.

In the case of SHAME, however, the results are much less promising: although the central term *szégyen* produces a high level of precision (71%), even a larger set of synonyms cannot lead us to a robust amount of good hits (32%). One possible explanation for it is that SHAME is a complicated emotional state, which does not unfold as an immediate reaction to events and acts; thus, its direct representations are less frequent in the sample compared to the basic emotion of ANGER. Furthermore, unlike the term in the ANGER cluster, some subtypes of SHAME are more intensively polysemous: the term *zavar* 'embarrassment', for

19. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=72chapter=19t57601

instance, can occur not only as a noun (referring to confusion) but also as a verb (referring to disturbing/bothering someone or creating a trouble for someone), or, the verb *sajnál* 'regret' depicts shameful apology or pity only in the minority of the cases, and the majority of the hits represents rather sympathy and empathic identification with the partner in trouble (often as a mark of politeness as well). It can be assumed that the more complex an emotion is (and less basic, i.e., having strong social and moral implications beyond the physiological and psychological aspects), the more polysemous the emotion terms belonging to its cluster are; therefore, the more difficult it is to find accurate examples of it in the corpus, even applying these terms as keywords.

Moving on to the constructional stage, Table 2 below summarizes the results of the queries. After naming the constructions, the table provides the number of their occurrences, the number of hits referring to emotion in general (including positive and negative ones), and, finally, the number of occurrences representing ANGER or SHAME. (Because of the low number of true positives, the two clusters were merged into one column in the table.)

Construction	**Hits**	**Emotions**	**ANGER/SHAME**
*kifejez** express'	13	5	0 (0%)
X érez magát* 'feel themselves X'	32	28	3 (11%)
*bosszant** 'annoy'	9	9	9 (100%)
*furdal** 'have pangs (of conscience)'	1	1	1 (100%)
Total	55	43	13 (30%)
Proportion of all hits		78%	24%

Figure 3: The occurrences of the target constructions and their reference to emotions in the corpus

Our first observation is that the overall proportion of the constructions in emotion representation is relatively high: 78% of all hits refer to some emotional state. This finding strongly supports the extended construction-based approach in corpus-based emotion research rather than relying solely on lexical searches. However, the more general constructions do not perform well in terms of the target emotions of the present study: beyond the specific expressions (*bosszant* 'annoy' and *furdal* 'have pangs (of conscience)') with 100% precision, the instances of the general constructions refer only occasionally (0% and 3%) to ANGER or SHAME, as in the following example: *Kopottnak, száműzöttnek érezhette magát ebben a társaságban, mely bottal, cigarettázva vette körül, kíváncsian.* 'He must have felt worn, an outcast in this company, which surrounded him with sticks and cigarettes, curi-

ously.',[20] where the expressions of feeling shabby and as the odd-one-out function as a paraphrase of experiencing self-pity and shame because of social and financial limitations. To summarize the effectiveness of the construction-based queries, they result in relevant instances of emotion representation in literary fiction, but on a low level of precision (24%). Consequently, this stage of the analysis may expand the scope of data collection and contribute to exploring the diversity of emotion attribution to characters in narratives; however, it requires a larger amount of manual work in cleaning the data. The last step of the analysis is to assess the effectiveness of contextual clues in identifying target emotions in the sample. Table 3 demonstrates the clues as keywords, the number of hits they produced in the sample, the number of their usage in emotion representation, and the number of instances referring to ANGER or SHAME (also providing the percentage with which the given clue represents one of the target emotions from all emotional usage).

Clue	**Hits**	**Emotions**	**ANGER/SHAME**
úgy érez, mint 'feel themselves like'	6	4	1 (25%)
elönt 'overflow'	5	1	0 (0%)
sújt 'strike'	5	3	1 (33%)
irányul 'aim at'	1	0	0 (0%)
fordul 'turn'	74	14	4 (29%)
elfog 'grip/capture'	12	6	0 (0%)
elfut 'cover'	2	1	1 (100%)
elborít 'overwhelm/flood'	2	1	1 (100%)
gyötör 'torment'	13	5	2 (40%)
vág 'hit'	29	9	5 (56%)
csap 'hit'	34	6	3 (50%)
bújik 'hide'	9	4	0 (0%)
lépked 'step'	9	5	0 (0%)
szenved 'suffer'	64	50	2 (4%)
babrál 'fiddle with'	21	5	0 (0%)
dadog 'stammer'	19	19	19 (100%)
elpirul 'blush/get red'	10	10	8 (80%)
elvörösödik 'turn red'	4	4	4 (100%)
feszeng 'be nervous/uncomfortable, fidget'	2	2	2 (100%)
Total	321	149	53 (36%)
Proportion of all hits		46%	17%

Figure 4: Contextual clues and their distribution in the representation of the target emotions

20. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=254chapter=14t39106

According to the previous assumption, contextual queries are more limited in emotion detection than the use of keywords or constructions, as less than half of all hits (46%) obtained by the typical contexts contribute to emotion representation. In general, the farther the expression used in the corpus query is from emotion terms as precise keywords, the less effective it is in terms of finding emotions in the corpus. Additionally, contextual clues are distributed very unevenly when it comes to portraying characters' emotions. Most of the terms represent feelings and sensations other than ANGER or SHAME; in other words, the precision of this step of the data-driven analysis is remarkably low (17%). Nevertheless, some of the verbs perform well in the identification of the focused emotional states. They can be considered the typical metonymical references to these emotions, for instance, *elborít* 'overwhelm/flood' for ANGER (*Azt érezte, hogy haragszik rájuk, agyát hirtelenül elborította a vér, nem bírt uralkodni magán, eszébe jutott talán, hogy egyszer asszonya megszidta, bosszút akart állni.* 'He felt that he was angry with them, his brain was suddenly flooded with blood, he could not control himself, he remembered perhaps that once his wife had scolded him, he wanted revenge.')[21] or *feszeng* 'be nervous/uncomfortable, fidget' for SHAME (*Csak feszengett a loncsos, ételszagú szoknyájában, az asztal alá dugdosta kezét, tapogatta arcát, s egész ebéd alatt meg se mukkant.* 'She just fidgeted in her haggard, food-smelling skirt, put her hands under the table, felt her face, and didn't say a word all through lunch.').[22] These expressions contribute partly to the indirect (metonymic and metaphoric) description of emotions and partly to detailing them after the act of directly naming the feeling. Moreover, despite the fact that the 19 clues selected for querying seem to be less frequent in general, 8 of them function in at least 50% of the occurrences as ANGER/SHAME markers. Finally, 36% of all identified emotion descriptions belong to the scope of the present study, which highlights, on the one hand, the significance of these feelings in the emotional dynamics of the investigated novels, and, on the other hand, the relevance of contextual query in investigating the particular target emotions.

5. Conclusion

In general, the effectiveness of the three-step procedure of corpus-driven emotion detection can be summarized as follows. The specific emotion terms as keywords (adopted from the related emotion clusters) yielded 169 relevant hits. Constructions increased this number by 13 new instances, while contextual clues extended the set of true positives by 53 additional occurrences. Thus, keywords and contexts proved to be more effective. One possible explanation for this observation

21. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=72chapter=19t58805
22. https://regenykorpusz.elte-dh.hu/view.php?id=72chapter=9t22889

is that, beyond emotion terms, only a few lexico-grammatical constructions are entrenched to describe specific emotional states in Hungarian (cf. the notion of "inherent expressivity" and the differentiation between conventional and connotational emotivity proposed by Péter 1984). Some of the general expressions related to portraying felt emotions operate on a more abstract level in elucidating the feelings of characters (with a very low precision considering the target emotions of the present study), and only two are dedicated exclusively to ANGER or SHAME (*bosszant* 'annoy' and *furdal* 'have pangs (of conscience)'). One possible future direction for enhancing the proposed method is a thorough exploration of emotion-related constructions in Hungarian.

Furthermore, contextual clues work well as metonymic and/or more detailed references to the characters' feelings; therefore, they are connected more closely to focalization and perspectivization (e.g., who is the experiencer/observer of the described emotion, what is the degree of the transparency of the character's mind), whereas constructions play a role in the unfolding of a more homogeneous internal focalization (when the narrator conveys the feeling from the implied perspective of the character). In this way, constructions render a more diverse lexical representation of emotions possible (i.e., they belong rather to the realm of synonymous relations in the emotional vocabulary), while contextual clues show greater complexity in referring to a diverse set of different sensations and feelings (i.e., these expressions contribute to solving the challenge of polysemy in linguistic emotion representation). Using constructions and contextual clues in emotion detection in corpora resulted in almost 40% more observations of the target emotional clusters than relying on mere emotion terms.

This proportion clearly demonstrates that, while the level of precision goes down with every additional step of corpus search, the scope of the analysis is expanded, which can be considered a key finding of the study. By way of explanation, the methodological proposal outlined above extends the realm of emotions depicted in narrative fiction with a more comprehensive set of data (adapting the principle of context from corpus linguistics and exploiting tools and reference corpora developed for general linguistic analysis). Decreased precision, however, requires a higher amount of manual work, which weakens the effectiveness of distant reading techniques in some degree. That being said, precision and recall are inversely proportional in this case, and the principal motivation of the methodis to increase the latter, hence amplyfing the set of available data for further analyses of (negative) emotions in narratives. This is where the novelty of the proposed three-step method lies, and, if this extension provides a more solid empirical ground in digital literary studies, increased manual control in data processing is worth the extra effort.

The limitations of the procedure include the restriction of the relevant construc-

tions to a small set of expressions and the reliability of the data obtained from the reference corpus. The first issue can be resolved by a comprehensive analysis of Hungarian constructions used in emotion representation. Regarding the second problem, the latest versions of the Hungarian National Corpus, along with more advanced methods for extracting contextual patterns, such as collocation analysis, can be incorporated into the methodology. It is beyond dispute, however, that, despite any difficulties, corpus linguistics serves as a good partner in investigating the patterns of negative emotions in literary fiction.

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nCOGNITO
ARTICLE

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Moral Emotions and Narrative Multiperspectivity in Social Novels

A Reading of Imre Kertész's *Detective Story*

This article explores the interplay between moral emotions and narrative structure in Imre Kertész's *Detective Story*, focusing on the textual mechanisms through which its multilayered narrative perspective is designed to elicit responses of anger and compassion. Drawing on recent findings in moral psychology and cognitive literary theory, the study argues that social novels typically evoke emotional engagement—particularly moral emotions—to stimulate ethical reflection. First, I will provide an overview of relevant psychological frameworks, including the dual-process theory of moral judgment and key models of moral emotions. Second, drawing on the appraisal theory of anger, I will contend that anger and compassion are intrinsically interrelated affective responses. Third, I will extend these theoretical considerations to the domain of literary reception, analyzing the narrative structures that are capable of eliciting anger and the ways in which these affective responses are typically accompanied or modulated by compassion. My central example will be Imre Kertész's *Detective Story*, a multilayered narrative in which the interplay of three embedded narrative levels shapes the emotional architecture of the social narrative. I argue that these layers reinforce the first-order narrator's explicit moral judgment by structuring the text in ways that can elicit both anger and compassion in the reader.

Keywords: social novel, moral emotions, anger, compassion, homodiegetic narration, emotional closure

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Introduction

A widely accepted premise in cognitive narratology is that readers typically adopt the narrator's perspective and process events through the narrator's interpretive filter—understood not only perceptually, but also ideologically and morally. This raises a significant problem when a novel forces the reader to occupy a viewpoint whose ethical and ideological assumptions the reader rejects. Imre Kertész's *Detective Story* poses an even more complex challenge: not only does one of the principal perpetrators serve as a major narrator, but also one of the central victims appears in a narrative position, both embedded within a neutral framework narrative. The resulting multilayered structure invites the reader to navigate conflicting moral perspectives and negotiate their emotional responses accordingly. This narrative design enables the text to orchestrate multiple emotional trajectories and to construct an intricate moral experience. In this sense, Kertész's novel foregrounds a broader theoretical question: what kinds of narrative strategies are capable of eliciting specific moral emotions and how does multiperspectivity modulate the reader's ethical engagement with the narrative?

1. The role of moral emotions in moral judgements

Until a few decades ago, the prevailing view in cognitive psychology was that moral judgments are fundamentally rational. This perspective posited that moral judgment results from cognitive processes requiring effort, control, and consciousness. According to this approach, our moral judgments are based on learned norms stemming in socialization, preceded by reflection on others' behavior. However, the so-called 'emotional turn' of the early 1990s recognized the inseparable link between cognitive functions and emotions (Damasio 1994; LeDoux 1998; Lazarus 1994), prompting extensive research into emotions with profound implications for moral psychology. Researchers have come to realize that our moral judgments are not as conscious as previously assumed; often, they are made instinctively, without deliberate thought (Haidt 2001; Greene et al. 2001). The current inquiry focuses on the extent to which moral judgments are conscious or intuitive, how these aspects interrelate, and under what circumstances one predominates over the other.

One of the most influential theories to explain this ambiguity today is dual-process theory (Prinz and Nichols 2010). According to this theory, most of our cognitive functions are determined by the interaction of two systems. One is fast, working effortlessly, automatically, and unconsciously, while the other is slow, rule-based, and conscious. The first is usually referred to as intuition, which in most cases has an emotional dimension, and the second as rational judgment. According to this view, moral judgments are formed by the interaction of the

two systems, which often work independently of each other, with one system or the other gaining the upper hand depending on the situation (see also Greene 2009). With their social-intuitionist model, Jonathan Haidt and Selin Kesebir go even further, claiming that rationality and intuition are not equally involved in moral judgment. Instead, they argue that moral judgments are primarily made intuitively, with rationality only playing a role afterward when one attempts to explain one's instinctive judgment. They contend that people typically make moral judgments so quickly that they lack the time to deliberate and weigh the pros and cons, often finding themselves unable to articulate their judgment afterward (Haidt and Kesebir 2010). Additionally, neuroscientific experiments have indicated that regions of the brain associated with emotions are active during moral judgment, and individuals who are insensitive to moral issues (often termed psychopaths) exhibit reduced activity in these emotional brain regions (Haidt and Kesebir 2010).

I believe that literary narrative texts are particularly suitable for depicting a wide range of moral judgments and, depending on the plot structure and the narrative techniques used, for promoting either the rational or the emotional side of moral judgment. However, it can be argued that emotional response is generally more pronounced in the reception of literature than in real life, for several reasons. According to Margrethe Bruun Vaage, and Arthur Raney and colleagues, the majority of people read literature mainly for entertainment, and since rational judgment is a considerable cognitive burden, they prefer to avoid it in this context (Vaage 2015; Oliver and Raney 2008). Emotional judgment is also encouraged by the fact that the literary text is capable of portraying the character with all their motives, intentions, aims, and background. The detailed description of the character's motives, emotions, and thoughts enables the reader not only to judge the character according to general social norms, but also to establish a quasi-personal relationship with them, to develop an emotional relationship and an empathetic attitude. This possibility of insight into the psyche of the character is practically never given in real situations, whereas the narrative text can make explicit and reliable statements about the contents of the character's consciousness. This supports emotional involvement and encourages intuitive, emotionally colored moral judgment (Nussbaum 1995).

However, narratives do not construct a single global emotional arc, but rather different narrative arcs for each character and narrator, which together form the emotional profile of the narrative. According to Vishnubhotla et al. (2024), emotion in novels does not follow a single, unified trajectory. Rather, each character possesses a distinct emotional arc, shaped by their individual utterances, motivations, and roles. Furthermore, the narration itself—often assumed to reflect the story's overall emotional tone—follows its own, independent emotional path, which may align with, diverge from, or even contrast sharply with those of the characters.

This challenges the notion that a novel conveys a unified moral or emotional message and suggests that readers may experience conflicting emotional cues, which shape moral judgments in complex and dynamic ways.

Also, Hamby et al. (2023) emphasize that the emotional arc of a narrative constructed by the reader is influenced by framing and linguistic cues as well. The findings of the study reveal that even in tightly plotted novels, emotional progression is rarely uniform or synchronized across different narrative agents. Instead, readers must negotiate divergent emotional signals and integrate them into a cohesive interpretation. This lends weight to the notion that literature demands that readers interpret emotion, frequently across multiple and occasionally conflicting layers. This is especially true in cases where we are confronted with a multilayered narrative, as in Imre Kertész's novel, since in such instances the events are mediated by narrators with entirely different ideological backgrounds and moral values.

2. Anger and compassion in social novels

Among emotions, moral emotions play the most important role in shaping moral judgment. Moral emotions are those that relate to the interests or welfare of either a group as a whole or a person other than the one acting or judging. While the majority of emotions are evolutionarily linked to the interests of the ego and serve to increase one's chances of survival—such as fear—in humans a significant part of the emotional system has evolved in response to social events that cannot be directly linked to the individual's survival. Their function is to regulate social behavior by promoting compliance with social norms and discouraging actions that harm others (Haidt 2003). For instance, guilt and shame motivate individuals to repair social relationships after a moral transgression, while gratitude and compassion strengthen prosocial tendencies such as cooperation and helping behavior. Anger, directed against perceived injustice, serves a corrective function by sanctioning norm violations and protecting communal values. Similarly, emotions such as moral elevation—experienced when witnessing acts of virtue—encourage imitation of altruistic behavior and reinforce moral ideals within a community. In this way, moral emotions form an internalized social mechanism that sustains cohesion and moral order without the need for external enforcement.

Social fiction is considered to greatly influence the reader's moral judgement. One of the most important moral emotions which arises while reading social fiction is anger. For a long time, anger was considered an atavistic emotion that posed a threat to human coexistence by motivating personal retribution. Therefore, it was believed that it had to be suppressed by cultural and educational forces. Modern psychology, however, regards anger as an emotion with a fundamental role in the

moral life of a society. It contributes to the establishment and maintenance of justice, protects human dignity, and deters unjust behavior. Anger is seen as an innate human motivation to actively punish people who refuse to cooperate, cheat, or exploit others (Nussbaum 2016). It is a reaction to perceived injustice and is thus closely linked to our sense of justice. Importantly, anger can be evoked not only by injustice done to oneself, but also by injustice observed in the treatment of others.

According to Jonathan Haidt, moral emotions can be identified primarily by two of their characteristics: elicitors and action tendencies (Haidt 2003). Elicitors refer to the specific situational cues that give rise to an emotion, whereas action tendencies describe the characteristic behavioral responses it motivates. In the case of anger, the emotion is shaped by a distinctive dual-appraisal process that carries significant implications for literary reception and narrative design. Anger does not emerge merely in response to a sense of harm or injustice; it arises when an individual simultaneously appraises a situation as both undesirable and as caused by an agent who is deemed responsible or blameworthy.

This dual evaluation structure—judging a situation as negative and simultaneously attributing its cause to a specific agent—means that anger is a composite emotional response. In narrative fiction, especially in social novels, this means that a text is likely to evoke anger when it presents both a tragic or unjust scenario and a clear perpetrator whose actions led to it. In literary terms, this cognitive structure translates into a story in which readers encounter suffering, oppression, or moral failure, and are also given an identifiable character who is held accountable for it. This structure not only encourages moral judgment but also facilitates emotional investment, making anger a key emotional experience in the reception of social novels.

Social novels typically present precisely these kinds of constellations. They depict socio-political systems that marginalize individuals based on class, ethnicity, gender, or political ideology. But crucially, these novels do not stop at abstract critiques. Rather than portraying injustice as the result of faceless systems or impersonal forces, they often personalize the agents of oppression, attributing actions, thoughts, and motivations to them. Characters in positions of power—police officers, prison guards, bureaucrats or party leaders, to cite a few examples—are portrayed not only as enforcers of systemic violence but as moral agents with individual personalities and moral responsibility. This personalization enables readers to direct their anger not just toward systems but also toward individual representatives of those systems.

Although individual readers apply moral evaluations at varying levels of abstraction, in the context of social narrative their judgments typically extend beyond the psychological boundaries of a single character. In accordance with the genre's

conventions, characters are interpreted as representatives of broader social strata, and moral judgments tend to generalize toward the societal patterns they embody. This interpretive tendency is supported not only by literary expectations but also by a basic cognitive disposition, what Karl Eibl terms the "inductive instinct" (Eibl 2009). As Eibl argues, human cognition is evolutionarily predisposed to infer general patterns from singular instances—a mechanism that originally served adaptive purposes in navigating complex social environments by facilitating rapid learning and prediction. This tendency persists in modern contexts, even when it occasionally produces biased or overgeneralized conclusions. By encouraging readers to extrapolate from individual situations to systemic problems, the genre simultaneously mobilizes cognitive tendencies, transforming personal narratives into moral judgments of systemic significance.

Furthermore, the narrative technique of internal focalization can enhance this effect. When readers gain access to the inner thoughts and justifications of the perpetrator, they may feel both revulsion and moral indignation, particularly when those justifications fail to align with the reader's moral expectations. Alternatively, the use of an unreliable narrator who downplays or distorts their own complicity (as in Kertész' novel) can intensify reader anger, as the narrative exposes gaps between what is said and what is implied or revealed. As previously stated, anger is characterized by two fundamental evaluations: the recognition of a situation as undesirable and the attribution of its cause to a blameworthy agent. As literary narratives are defined as depictions of human actions or personified forces, an undesirable situation is typically presented as a personal misfortune or tragedy experienced by a character. As this, namely, the experience of the suffering of others, is a key stimulus for eliciting compassion, anger typically coexists with compassion in response to characters and events. While these emotions may appear to be in opposition—anger oriented towards punishment and compassion towards care—they can function in tandem, forming a dual emotional response. Emotions directed at suffering (e.g. pity or compassion) and those triggered by intentional harm (e.g. anger) naturally align: compassion for the victim is felt because of their suffering, and anger towards the wrongdoer is experienced as a response to perceived moral transgression. In stories that portray injustice, readers often feel compassion for the victim and anger toward the perpetrator simultaneously, forming a coherent moral stance.

This dual emotional experience is particularly potent in social and political fiction, where systems of oppression are personified through individual characters. By inviting readers to empathize with victims while morally judging the agents of harm, narratives engage both our sense of care and our sense of justice–making anger and compassion not opposites, but deeply interconnected moral responses. In many social novels, readers are simultaneously invited to empathize with victims

and judge the perpetrators, producing a potent mixture of compassion and moral outrage. This dual emotional experience can generate ethical reflection and critical engagement.

The action tendency associated with anger—namely, the desire to correct injustice or punish wrongdoing—has major implications in literature as well. In terms of the emotional structure of anger, we can distinguish between closed and open narratives, depending on whether the emotional trajectory of anger is resolved or left unresolved. Narratives that conclude with justice being served and the culprit punished provide the reader with emotional closure as the desired outcome is achieved. As Raney notes, such narratives are pleasurable for readers because they restore a sense of moral order to the fictional world (Raney 2005). In contrast, much socio-critical fiction adopts an open-ended structure. By withholding closure, these narratives sustain a state of anger even after the reading experience has ended. This emotional persistence plays a significant role in such works, as anger becomes a productive emotional force that has the potential to motivate action well beyond the immediate act of reading.

3. Moral emotions and multiperspectivity in *Detective Story*

Imre Kertész's novel, published in 1977, is difficult to classify in terms of genre. Although the title suggests it is a detective story, it contains few elements typical of crime fiction. Kertész himself described the work as a kind of horror in an interview, but while the depiction of the mechanisms of power can evoke a sense of unease or dread, the novel does not include explicit scenes of horror. In my view, it is best understood as a work of political and social critique, focusing on a psychologically nuanced and incisive portrayal of the inner workings of dictatorship and the social strata that sustain it. The narrative is set in an unnamed South American dictatorship, where the head of the country's most prominent retail chain, Federigo Salinas tries to remain apolitical and proclaims his neutrality. However, the illogical and unpredictable nature of the regime ensures that he becomes a victim nonetheless. The family's only child, Enrique, a university student, is driven by a rebellious spirit and a desire for action, and wishes to join the resistance—a decision his father vainly tries to dissuade him from. In an attempt to satisfy his son's urge for involvement while protecting him from real danger, the father invents fictitious resistance missions. However, the regime—paranoid and perpetually suspicious—uncovers these imaginary operations. As a result, father and son are captured, tortured, and ultimately executed. In a bitter irony, they fall victim to the very innocent deception that was meant to protect them.

The novel depicts the workings of a dictatorial regime marked by irrationality and unpredictability, presenting its three central figures—the perpetrator, the vic-

tim, and the representative of posterity or the external, possibly authorial moral observer—as psychological elaborated characters. Through personalization, the regime is not merely intellectually condemned but also emotionally experienced. The reader is not distanced but drawn in, potentially feeling anger, disgust, and hatred toward the agents of oppression, and compassion toward their victims. By translating political structures into psychological traits and dramatized actions, the novel fosters a quasi-personal connection with both perpetrators and victims.

One of the most distinctive features of *Detective Story* is its complex narrative structure, built upon three embedded narrators: the victim, the perpetrator, and an unnamed lawyer who may be interpreted as a surrogate for the author's moral perspective. Since the two main narrators are the perpetrator and the victim, the novel's narrative structure can be seen as engaging the two primary moral emotions, namely, anger and compassion. As the narrators speak from radically different ethical positions, the text becomes a space where competing emotional trajectories intersect and clash. Readers are compelled to navigate these conflicting arcs in order to construct their own moral stance, guided by both emotional resonance and critical reflection.

The first-order narrator in the novel is the perpetrator's court-appointed lawyer, who appears as a speaker only at the beginning of the text. His primary narrative function is to introduce the second-order narrator by presenting and publishing his notes. From the second chapter onward, the reader encounters the fictional manuscript of one of the perpetrators, which provides a detailed account of the workings of the regime's enforcement apparatus and the case involving the two victims. However, the novel also introduces a third level of narration through a "diary within a diary." After the victims are brought into the story, the manuscript is constantly interrupted by the narration of one of the victims. Unlike the first-order narrator—who withdraws completely from the narrative after introducing the second-order narrator—the second-order narrator remains present throughout the third-order narration, as he not only quotes the victim's account but also interprets and evaluates it. This results in a highly complex, multilayered narrative structure and a compound emotional and moral situation by interweaving the perspectives of the victim and the perpetrator, embedding both within the emotionally restrained yet explicitly evaluative framing narrative of the lawyer.

The first-order narrator, the lawyer establishes a strong and unambiguous moral stance toward the dictatorship and its agents in just a few pages. He describes his client as a man of low intellectual standards (Kertész 2009, 5)[1], "callous", "indifferent"[2], and "cynical to the extreme"[3], who functioned as "a despicable twist

1. The page numbers below refer to this edition. The quotations in the original language are in the footnote.
2. "érzéketlen közönnyel" (6)
3. "A végsőkig cinikus" (6)

in a machine"[4]. This clear moral judgment potentially shapes the reader's own evaluative framework and expectations.

This moral judgement is further strengthened by the fact that the second-order narrator, Martens, thematically represents a broader social group: the oppressors, the enforcers of the dictatorial regime. The dictatorship is embodied in three central characters—the policemen who serve as its instruments. Each represents a different facet of the totalitarian system: its ideological foundation (Rodriguez), its ruthless enforcement (Diaz), and its blind obedience (Martens) (cf. Szirák 2003). These figures are not mere functional placeholders; they are given psychological depth and personal motivation, which greatly contributes to the reader's personal emotional attachment to them and deep resentment towards them.

However, this moral clarity and emotional attitude is significantly complicated by the second-order narration. The second-order narrator, Martens, is a member of the police force that upholds the dictatorial regime, and his narrative recounts his own involvement in its crimes. He describes how he joined the "Corps,"[5] one of the regime's central institutions; how he surveilled his victims; how he prosecuted innocent people through corrupt procedures; and how he assisted in their torture and execution. The account of these actions naturally provokes the reader's anger and moral condemnation.

Yet this emotional response is complicated by two additional factors. First, the character-narrator's internal focalization—his first-person narrative perspective—can evoke a conflicted emotional and moral reaction in the reader. As empirical studies have shown, internal focalization tends to foster strong reader empathy. Yet, when the narrator's moral stance is rejected by the reader, the result may be a form of empathetic resistance—a reluctance to emotionally engage with, or cognitively follow, the narrator's perspective.

This tension is present in Kertész's novel. The reader, directed by the first-order narrator's moral evaluation and the second-order narrator's affiliation with the oppressive regime (his thematic function), is inclined to reject the character-narrator. However, there is a second factor that further complicates the emotional situation: the narrator's personal involvement in the events and his own moral reflections create opportunities for the reader to engage with him empathetically. His moments of critical awareness align with the moral stance of the first-order narrator. For example, he explicitly recounts how he was "brainwashed"[6] after joining the Corps—the executive arm of the dictatorial regime—, yet adds that "I still had a lot left in it, much more than I needed" [7], suggesting he retained a

4. "egy gépezet hitvány csavarjaként" (7)
5. "Testület"
6. "kimosták az agyamat" (11)
7. "Sok minden maradt még abban, jóval több, mint amennyire szükségem lett volna [...]" (11)

degree of critical distance. He believed there was a "standard"[8], and that one could not act without limits; he was disturbed by the hatred and cruelty of his peers and naively maintained the belief that "we are here to serve the law"[9]. His recurring headaches and stammer serve as symbolic manifestations of his inner conflict and inability to fully identify with the system.

However, the reader may justifiably question the credibility of the second-order narrator. Sitting in prison and awaiting his death sentence, Martens records his memories of the Salinas trial—a situation in which an individual tends to try to excuse himself afterwards and justify his despicable actions. He is also a narrator with an authorial disposition (Preston 1997), that means he is conscious of himself as a storyteller: "I want to tell a story."[10]. So, he is aware of the communicative act of writing his memoir for posterity, as well as the moral implications of doing so. From the very first sentences, his writing adopts a self-certifying tone, which prompts the reader to question his moral reliability.

This narrative situation can lead to a very complex and contradictory reader attitude. Martens' actions make him a villain who unjustly harms innocent people, turning him into a character who can evoke anger in the reader based on the psychology of anger. At the same time, he is a first-person narrator, allowing us to gain insight into his thoughts and feelings, as well as his reflections on the system he served and his accomplices. Because he is remorseful and critical of the regime, the reader can even see him as a victim of the regime. In sum, Martens exemplifies what Hannah Arendt famously termed the banality of evil: he is neither a fanatical ideologue nor an overtly sadistic figure. Rather, he is a professional—a man of the system who is simply doing his job. He lacks deep political conviction or genuine hatred. His narrative reveals him as somewhat naive, intellectually limited, and morally indifferent. As a result, while the first-person narrative might evoke empathy from the reader, the narrator's moral complacency simultaneously provokes contempt and detachment. The tension between emotional engagement and ethical rejection can be a defining feature of the reading experience.

Kertész complicates the narrative structure by giving voice to the victim. The third key narrator, the young Enrique Salinas—a victim of the regime—also tells his story in the first person singular, offering direct access to his consciousness. As research previously cited has shown, internal focalization significantly enhances readers' sense of emotional proximity and authenticity, thereby fostering empathy and, in this case, intensifying the perception of injustice. This technique is characteristic of socially critical fiction, where emotional involvement is a central narrative aim. By allowing readers to enter the mind of the victim, the diary

8. "mérce mégiscsak van" (14)
9. "a törvényt szolgáljuk itt" (26)
10. "Egy történetet akarok elmondani." (9)

evokes compassion as a complementary emotion to anger, thereby reinforcing the novel's social critique. However, Enrique's diary is not presented as a continuous narrative like Martens's notes. Instead, it continually reminds the reader of its status as an embedded text through Martens's recurring interruptions—most notably, his comment, "I am turning the page."[11] This narrative device forces the reader to shift constantly between levels of narration and perspective, framing Enrique's account within Martens's point of view. As a result, Enrique's story is always mediated—read not as an independent voice, but as part of Martens's narrative.

The embedding of the victim's diary within the perpetrator's memoir produces profound narrative and ethical consequences. This structure creates a constant tension between opposing moral viewpoints, as the reader is forced to encounter the voice of the victim not in an autonomous space, but filtered through the framework of the perpetrator's account. The victim's perspective, though emotionally powerful and morally compelling, is presented within the boundaries—and under the control—of the perpetrator's narration. This narrative layering complicates the ethical alignment of the reader: while the victim's suffering evokes compassion and moral outrage, the fact that his voice is mediated by the very agent of his oppression introduces ambiguity, distance, and discomfort. It also challenges the reader to remain critically alert, continually negotiating shifts in perspective and authority. Ethically, this technique underscores the power imbalance inherent in systems of violence—not only in physical terms but also in narrative control. By making the victim's story contingent upon the perpetrator's telling, the novel foregrounds how memory, testimony, and even empathy are shaped and constrained by structures of power.

4. Emotionally open structure

In literary theory, emotional closure refers to the sense of resolution or emotional satisfaction a reader experiences at the end of a narrative. When the moral and emotional arcs initiated by the plot and character development are brought to a meaningful end—often through justice being served, characters undergoing transformation, or a restoration of order—the reader experiences closure (Velleman 2003). However, Imre Kertész's *Detective Story* systematically withholds this resolution. Instead of offering catharsis, the novel sustains moral tension and emotional discomfort, refusing to pacify the reader's sense of outrage. It resists the emotional conventions of detective fiction, where guilt is typically exposed, punishment delivered, and narrative order restored.

The affective tension is not incidental but central to the novel's ethical design. As Jonathan Haidt emphasizes, emotions are not merely passive responses; they

11. "Lapozok"

are connected to action tendencies (Haidt 2003). Anger arises from the recognition of an unjust situation and the incongruity between what is and what should be. It fuels a desire to restore justice, punish the wrongdoer, or correct the imbalance. In fiction, these action tendencies do not result in real-world behavior, but they profoundly shape readers' expectations and moral evaluations.

In conventional narratives—especially those aligned with the crime or revenge genre—this arc of anger is satisfied through retribution. The culprit is punished, the innocent is vindicated, and the emotional dissonance is resolved. As Haidt and Sabini argue, readers often experience frustration or dissatisfaction when stories deny this resolution—when victims forgive without consequences, or when perpetrators go unpunished (Haidt 2003, 856). Such stories short-circuit the emotional logic of anger, leaving readers with an unfulfilled desire for justice.

Detective Story sharply diverges from this model. Instead of punishing the guilty, it concludes with the execution of the innocent. Martens, the narrator-perpetrator, is imprisoned and facing a death sentence at the time of writing, but his punishment is neither narratively completed nor emotionally satisfying. His memoir functions more as a self-justifying confession than a redemptive reckoning. Meanwhile, his superiors—Rodriguez and Diaz—remain unpunished and largely unexamined. No moral reckoning, and no restoration of justice occur. The reader is left suspended in unresolved outrage.

This creates what we might call an emotionally open structure. The anger that accumulates throughout the narrative is never resolved; on the contrary, it is intensified. The emotional closure the reader might expect—either through justice, insight, or catharsis—is denied. The novel's structure thus mirrors the political realities it represents: injustice often prevails, and complicity frequently escapes consequence.

The emotional arcs of the three embedded narrators diverge sharply from each other—and from that of the implied reader. Martens attempts to normalize his actions, portraying himself as a loyal servant of the regime, an apolitical technician. Though he shows moments of doubt and discomfort, his tone is largely self-serving. The first-order narrator—the lawyer—briefly offers a clear moral frame, characterizing Martens as cynical and detestable, but then disappears from the narrative, leaving Martens to shape the story. In contrast, the diary of Enrique Salinas invites an affective response based on empathy and moral indignation. The young man's idealism, confusion, and suffering constitute the emotional and ethical core of the novel. His voice undercuts Martens's rationalizations and offers the reader a critical counterpoint.

From a literary standpoint, this denial of closure serves a powerful ethical function. The unresolved emotional arc aligns with the goals of the political or social novel—not merely to depict injustice but to mobilize the reader. By leaving anger

unresolved, *Detective Story* pushes the reader's moral engagement beyond the fictional world. The reader becomes a moral witness—forced to grapple with the uncomfortable implications of complicity, impunity, and the structural persistence of violence. *Detective Story* does not offer a path toward emotional relief, but rather a challenge to remain alert, uncomfortable, and morally responsive.

5. Conclusion

Social-critical novels not only depict structural problems but frequently aim to mobilize their readership. One of the key means of doing so is emotional activation, i.e. the construction of narrative configurations that elicit strong affective responses. Within this genre, the dominant emotional targets tend to be moral emotions, such as anger, contempt, moral disgust, and compassion, which together cultivate a critical stance in the reader. Fictional narratives, however, rarely generate a single emotional trajectory; rather, they distribute different emotional arcs across different characters, producing a complex and sometimes contradictory affective structure. Imre Kertész's *Detective Story* exemplifies this complexity, engaging moral emotions through its multilayered narrative design. The embedded narrative levels establish competing emotional responses—notably, cognitive empathy toward the perpetrator-narrator that conflicts with the reader's moral rejection of his actions. The emotional tension is heightened by the novel's refusal to provide a unified emotional closure, thus leaving readers in a state of affective and cognitive dissonance. In conclusion, *Detective Story* demonstrates how the social-critical novel relies on moral emotions to foster critical awareness, while simultaneously complicating this affective process by withholding emotional closure and thereby sustaining unresolved cognitive and moral tension in the reader.

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Moral Emotions and Aesthetic Experience in Young Readers

Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in Reading a Classic Hungarian Young Adult Novel

This paper views reader engagement, aesthetic appreciation, narrative understanding, and moral involvement, as interconnected aspects of the reading experience. It begins with a summary of theoretical perspectives mainly drawn from cognitive psychology and poetics on how readers engage morally with literary texts, including the potential development of moral literacy. Additionally, the study focuses on a Hungarian young adult novel and seeks to identify some specific textual features that either enhance or hinder the emotional engagement and comprehension of novice readers. *Be Faithful Unto Death (1995)*, originally published in 1920 as *Légy jó mindhalálig*, is a classic and seminal work in Hungarian literature. The novel offers young readers rich opportunities to experience empathy, explore a great variety of moral emotions, and engage in moral reasoning within an emotional landscape rarely depicted in children's or young adult literature. At the same time, the text challenges these capacities, making it difficult for novice readers to fully immerse themselves in the reading process. On the one hand, these challenges mean that the text is better suited to experienced young readers than to 14-year-olds, on the other hand, they can be considered a guideline for the literary and psychological transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of reading experience.

Keywords: Young Adult Fiction, moral emotions, absorption, empathy, Móricz Zsigmond

1. The "Uses of Enchantment" — Expectations of moral usefulness towards children's literature

Moral themes and emotions have been an integral part of children's literature since its early history, and there is a strong consensus that reading literary texts can significantly contribute to children's personal development, including practical competencies such as interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and moral growth. However, in the past 50 years debates have arisen about the aesthetic value and ontological status of literature for young readers, who have sharply criticized the utilitarian perspective. Studies employing modern semiotics, structural investigations, or text-centred interpretation theories have often rejected moral understanding as a literary subject. It is important to know that the polemics against moral aspects were not confined to children's literature, but reflected broader academic discourses about aesthetic autonomy (Caroll 2000). All in all, the issue can be placed within the framework of two traditional philosophical positions: moralism, which asserts that the aesthetic value of art should be judged on the basis of its moral value, and autonomism, maintaining that appreciation of art depends solely on aesthetic standards without moral considerations (Caroll 2000). Although the debate led, at least temporarily, to "an effective moratorium on ethical criticism in philosophical theories of art" (Carroll 2000, 350), it was very beneficial to children's literature in several ways. Firstly, the enormous impact of the discussions helped to consolidate the cultural and social appreciation of texts for young readers, recognising children's literature as a valuable subset of general literature. Secondly, the critics were right to be disturbed by oversimplified, non-literary interpretations that reduced texts for young readers to content about social behaviour. Finally, they paved the way for clarifying and refining theoretical positions regarding literary texts and their uses, including their value in moral literacy.

Drawing on insights from cognitive poetics, this paper aims to contribute to these attempts to refine the theoretical considerations of children's literature. Given the ongoing importance of ethical considerations in artistic evaluation, even in the context of evolving moral and literary values, it is crucial to examine how ethical issues relate to aesthetic understanding among young readers, how these can influence their interpretation of a text, and what they can learn from the reading experience. The "uses of enchantment", to quote Bruno Bettelheim's expression (1976), are not alien to the aesthetic effect, and indeed there are more recent theories of culture that maintain that the human species has had several advantages from engaging in aesthetic communication, and that art in general, as well as the human mind, can be seen as products of human evolution. As already Jerome Bruner has noted, interpreting fictional worlds makes it possible to negotiate meanings, which is "one of the crowning achievements of human development in the ontogenetic, cultural, and phylogenetic senses of that expression" (Bruner

1990, 67). The reception of literary texts can contribute to group cohesion and cooperation by fostering interpersonal relationships and social understanding, which require emotional skills. By experiencing emotions through the arts—whether positive or negative—individuals can practice and improve their ability to interpret the inner states of others and become more empathetic (Keen 2007). Moreover, they can gain experience in fictional situations that simulate real conflicts without risk (Oatley 1999). There are also suggestions about the crucial role of morality in people's interest in fiction: we become emotionally invested in narratives because our minds are wired to be highly attentive to social information, particularly signals of cooperation, fairness and justice within groups. Fiction provides a unique, consequence-free arena in which we can observe, anticipate, and emotionally respond to scenarios involving altruistic punishment and social dynamics, all of which are central to human evolutionary success (Flesch 2007).

However, the fact that we can learn from literature does not mean that we primarily cultivate it because of its practical applications. As Flesch (2007) posits, the uses of "enthrallment" are secondary to the emotional engagement we experience when reading fiction. Enthrallment precedes any instructional purpose: we are captivated by stories—due to our innate biological and social capacities—before considering what we might learn from them as a tool for learning or practising life skills through imitation. Thus, fiction enables us to experience complex social situations and moral expectations in an emotionally compelling yet non-actual way, by activating our evolved psychological mechanisms for cooperation, justice and attentiveness. One ambiguous conclusion that cognitive literary scholars could draw from this is that literary study should be able to contribute to the study of emotion in its own right, advancing our interdisciplinary understanding of human motivation rather than merely applying it (Hogan 2022).

Adapting this perspective, we consider readers' engagement, aesthetic appreciation, narrative understanding and their moral or social involvement in many senses as interrelated—not only in general literature, but also in literature for young people. In the following, the paper first introduces the theoretical background terminology, mainly drawn from cognitive psychology and poetics and then examines a Hungarian novel, focusing on the relation between the narrative strategies and readers' moral emotions and judgments during reading the text. The novel in question, *Be Faithful unto Death* (1995)—originally *Légy jó mindhalálig* (1920) by Zsigmond Móricz—is regarded as a classic and seminal work of Hungarian literature which offers young readers rich opportunities to experience empathy, explore moral emotions, and engage in moral reasoning. However, it also poses challenges to these abilities, to the extent that it engenders a certain level of difficulty for novice readers to become fully absorbed in the act of reading. Therefore, we also have to ask if the affordance of the text correlates with the understanding

competences and aesthetic preferences of its target audience.

2. What are moral or social emotions and why are they important for narrative understanding?

Martha C. Nussbaum, a prominent representative of ethical criticism, argues in her book Love's Knowledge (1990) that literary works serve as reflections on everyday life exploring human existence in ways distinct from philosophy. Unlike philosophy, which often operates on a general or abstract level, literature examines existence in concrete and particularized forms, representing life "as something". She argues that the writer's choice of detail—not only of content, but also of style—is an inherently ethical act, as it shapes the reader's moral and emotional understanding of the world by setting up "certain activities and transactions rather than others" (Nussbaum 1990, 5). Since the novel conveys meaning through the representation of a fictional world—which also expresses thoughts and desires—the reader not only reaches the ethical content, but also continuously practices the sub-skills of ethical reading. Narrative understanding involves emotional as well as intellectual activity: we understand narratives by bringing to the text "our hopes, fears, and confusions, allowing the text to impart a certain structure to our hearts" (Nussbaum 1990, 22). The title—inspired by Dante—refers to knowledge derived from love, a social emotion, suggesting that the narrative tools of literary fiction can shape the moral competencies of readers through both their intellectual and emotional involvement, which is made possible above all by the perception of people and situations rather than abstract rules.

Like Nussbaum, cognitive approaches also link ethical understanding to emotions, but they offer a different lens through which to understand the cognitive processes involved in reading and focus more on relevant cognitive mechanisms. As Jerome Bruner points out, readers inevitably confront both moral issues and emotions, since narratives are "about human plights", and readers interpret stories on the premise that people—both fictional and real—have beliefs and desires (Bruner 1990, 39). Understanding why someone does something is difficult to separate from labelling it right or wrong, as it triggers cognitive and emotional responses in the reader (Keen 2007). In this regard, there is a strong emphasis on the epistemological value of emotions, also supported by neurocognitive studies on the role of emotions in everyday life. Damasio (1994) asserts that emotions, far from being a hindrance, are essential to effective decision-making and rationality, since reasoning requires the guidance of emotions and feelings conveyed by the body. Contemporary affective studies agree that the traditional separation between emotion and cognition is artificial and there is no sharp boundary between emotions and other mental processes (Hogan 2011a).

As a result of these findings, the cognitive revolution has been followed by an "affect revolution" in the field of morality (Haidt 2003, 853) and questions have been raised about how emotions play a role in moral judgment or behaviour. In the view of the social intuitionist model of morality moral reasoning is triggered by "affectively laden intuitions" about a person's character or actions (Haidt 2003, 865), moral judgments rely consequently on an immediate evaluative feeling, and rational reasoning is mostly involved in legitimating judgments (Haidt and Kesebir 2010 and Horváth 2021). However, emotions can have different values regarding the relationship with morality. Basic emotions are predominantly egoistic, morality begins with emotions "related to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (Gewirth cited by Haidt 2003, 853). These "higher order", social or moral emotions which have only indirect benefits to the self, are thought to particularly motivate moral functioning and its development, because they involve the self to be related to others (ibid. 854). Moral emotions consequently result from a complex cognitive mechanism involving multiple social skills and beliefs. To feel compassion, love, shame, guilt, or grief requires social cognition skills such as Theory of Mind and empathy (Keen 2007, Hogan 2011a), and it also involves concepts or scripts of moral behaviour, accepting certain views about how the world is, what is important, and what is right.

The "affective turn" in the study of moral impacts in connection with children's literature is a recent development. While earlier studies focused more on stages of moral cognitive development in the Piagetian sense or according to Kohlberg's theory, more recent directions place particular emphasis on readers' emotions and the anticipations associated with them. Maria Nikolajeva clearly acknowledges emotions as ethical categories in the two chapters (out of eight) devoted to "ethical knowledge" in her comprehensive cognitive literary framework *Reading for Learning* (Nikolajeva 2014) which explores how children's literature can contribute to the cognitive and emotional development of young readers. In line with the abovementioned cognitive research, she considers fiction as a cultural device providing perfect opportunities for young readers to explore how emotions work or motivate human behaviour, without taking any real risks. She doesn't claim that children become better individuals as a result of reading, or that children's literature is ethical in the sense that novice readers—whose cognitive development is still in process—are as capable of judging ethical issues or the behaviour of fictional characters as experienced readers do. In any case, she suggests—accepting Nussbaum's core concept—that children's literature is ethical in the sense that "most children's books pose ethical questions, explicitly or implicitly" (Nikolajeva 2014, 181) offering possibilities also for developing moral literacy skills. We are here more interested in the implicit ethical dimension of literature, which is a large field since morality is also an essential part of any consciousness constructed by

the narrative and "ethics governs the fundamental rules a fictional world is built on, including power hierarchies, the principles of good and evil, and social justice" (Nikolajeva 2017, 84). Thus, the following analysis of Zsigmond Móricz's novel is not intended to be a complex literary analysis. Instead, it aims to demonstrate how the text's features can enhance or challenge the ethical and aesthetic understanding of juvenile texts when read by novice readers whose cognitive-affective capacities can be modelled in light of empirical research findings.

3. An aging classic? Moral emotions and the reading experience in Zsigmond Móricz's *Be Faithful unto Death*

Be Faithful unto Death has a long history as compulsory reading in the Hungarian education system, and it is now a recommended lecture for 8th grade students. The novel has survived several political regimes and is probably the most widely read novel by the author, who is considered one of the most significant Hungarian novelists. In fact, in the last seventy years, this was the most widely published novel by Móricz, appearing in both adult and youth editions. The story is set at the end of the nineteenth century, during the author's childhood. The protagonist is Mihály (Misi) Nyilas, an eleven-year-old student whose impoverished parents have saved just enough to send him to boarding school in the city of Debrecen. At the beginning of the story, he is confronted with the large, gloomy school building. He is proud to be there, but also afraid of it. However, less than a month later, he declares that he no longer wants to be a student there. Through the story of a young person deceived and accused by adults of cheating, lying, and abusing the trust of others, Móricz depicts the loss of innocence and the end of childhood. This brief summary conveys the moral dilemmas and emotions that arise throughout the story. In the plot, the main character becomes embroiled in situations and actions typically associated with school life, suffering some injustices. Even novice readers find these plot elements familiar as they evolve in their dimensions. First, classmates ask Misi for paint in a manner that could be labelled bullying. Then, they rob him of belongings sent by his mother. Finally, he becomes the victim of an adult crime when he loses the lottery ticket. These events are vividly reflected in the protagonist's emotions: he feels various forms of guilt, shame, fear, pride, hope and disappointment. The novel clearly appeals to the emotions of its readers relying on their sympathy, empathy, emotional engagement and inviting them to pass moral judgement.

However, before considering these features, it is important to mention some historical facts regarding the production and the present reception of the novel which also involve aspects of its ethical reading. Although *Be Faithful unto Death* seems to be a perfect example of the coming-of-age genre—characterised by the

underage protagonist's journey towards self-discovery and maturity—it has an ambiguous existence as a young adult text. Firstly, concerning its publication in 1920, the author intended it to be read by an adult audience, but the editors decided to publish it as juvenile reading material due to the characters' age and its being set in boarding school. The moral theme was probably also an influencing factor in this marketing choice, due to the fact that children's and young adult literature from that period emphasised ethical content more directly than literature does nowadays. Secondly, the appropriateness of the novel as young adult literature and the status as a required reading is now widely discussed also from the perspective of the reception. Hungarian literature teachers and scholars have witnessed the loss of the novel's former reputation and popularity, a phenomenon that can only be partially explained by changing historical background and societal norms. Naturally, negative reactions to compulsory reading materials have increased as the school system has become more democratic and new media have replaced traditional forms. Consequently, it has become more difficult for teachers to encourage students to read literary texts chosen by others, since the choice of text or genre is an important motivating factor for readers (Jacobs 2015). According to reader feedback, fourteen-year-old students often find the novel annoying, they do not understand the main character's behaviour or why he feels guilty all the time, nor why he is anxious about trivial matters such as losing his hat or hiding a knife (Lakner 2015). Obviously, we could regard this as the ageing of the text or of Móricz's oeuvre in general, an opinion that is convincingly refuted by recent interpretations (Szilágyi 2013). However, it is less obvious how the ageing process could involve not only the language and an external reality that no longer exists, but also the internal reality of the characters, including their social behaviour and emotions. Therefore, rather than speaking of the ageing of the text as a whole, it is more fruitful to examine the textual features which might negatively influence the emotional engagement and moral understanding of novice readers, suggesting that these features make the text more appropriate for competent readers.

One difficulty can concern the global understanding of the text. From a cognitive perspective, when considering the readers' understanding process, we rely on the concepts of coherence. Texts—literary or not—are incomplete and do not contain all the information and details that readers use to create a mental picture of the world while reading. Therefore, readers try to build coherent meaning based on incomplete textual information by filling gaps through inferences that rely on various mental mechanisms. While doing so, they are guided by the hypothesis that the information is presented with a particular intention or idea in mind, the implied author's intention, which is reflected in the text and should therefore also be reflected in their understanding (Tan 2018). Thus, readers strive for meaning and look for cues to help them understand that idea. This requires a certain cogni-

tive effort, but if they succeed, it also provides pleasure and positive gratification. Consequently, literary narrative comprehension involves more than simply following a story from beginning to end. It involves dynamically constructing mental models, conceptual structures and interpretive hierarchies, and is not only accompanied but also influenced by the reader's emotions. However, the complexity of these mental processes is not only affected by text features but also by readers' competencies. Cognitive narratology and empirical studies investigating reading comprehension primarily focus on competent readers and highly regarded literary texts for adult audiences and do not take into account the perspectives of inexperienced readers. Competent readers are defined as individuals with "high levels of automaticity in a large proportion of components of reading skill" (Carroll, cited by Nell 1988, 9) who already have a general understanding of literature and experience in constructing layered meaning through multiple, interconnected levels of mental processing. Moreover, they have a great variety of reading intentions (e.g., information seeking, curiosity, decision help, reviewing, typographical error finding, pleasure, mood management, etc.) which determine their text choices (e.g., genre decision) and how they process it (e.g., slow letter-by-letter scrutinizing vs. quick scan) (Jacobs 2015). Since readers usually acquire this knowledge and background experience through years of reading, we can assume that novice readers aged fourteen with limited literary experience, less differentiated motivations and not fully developed social cognitive skills may struggle with the challenges of a complex narrative which requires not only a faster "immersion" mode, but also a slower, more reflective "aesthetic trajectory" of reading (Jacobs 2015) often referred to as "close reading".

As for their emotion preferences, young inexperienced readers probably seek out those that are phylogenetically earlier and non-moral in nature (such as fear) and typically avoid moral emotions that emerged later (cf. Raney 2011). Put simply, I would argue that novice readers—as most readers do—usually tend to follow textual cues in 'fast-track' mode (cf. Raney et al. 2017). This is facilitated by familiar elements, suspense and sympathy, which draw them into the story-world due to the "expectations created by the narrative" (Tan 2018, 7). However, if a novel provides a lot of information from sources other than the plot—such as intertextuality, paratexts, detailed and long descriptions of the characters' complex emotional states—and gives more space to stylistic features that have a defamiliarising foregrounding effect, it is more likely that teenage readers will not become absorbed and will be disappointed. This seems to hold true even when we reject the idea that deviation inherently disrupts a reader's absorption (Bálint et al., 2016). Therefore, if readers cannot fit the characters' behaviour within the novel's poetic and ethical framework, they cannot achieve understanding and cannot construct a coherent meaning of the text.

One notable cue for a coherent reading can be that Móricz's novel directs the reader's attention towards ethics already in the original title "Be Good unto Death", which contains the word "good"—a universal semantic primitive. The title is also a biblical reference, almost a direct quotation, but the writer changed "faithful" to "good", altering the original phrase "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10), a fact that the English translation of the novel ignores. Nevertheless, even if readers don't realise the biblical connection, the ethical dimension of meaning can still be understood, because the title phrase is also pronounced by the boy's mother, who can give her son nothing but a moral imperative that becomes a life-guiding commandment for him.

It is quite a peculiar narrative solution that the distant mother's moral perspective remains continuously present in the boy's mind, evoking strong emotions in him and reinforcing the ethical reference, as seen in the following excerpt.

> He was afraid of lying because his mother's words were always in his mind. He could almost feel them burning his skin: 'My son, always behave as if I could see you. Just tell yourself that I can see you, and then you will never do anything wrong.' He could feel her eyes on him and fear tickled his throat. (Móricz 1995, 169)

Accordingly, the novel recounts an internal struggle with morality and temptation, it can be interpreted as an account of the internalising process of the loving yet authoritative moral principle. This mental process largely consists of the character's mindreading, and measuring himself in relation to others that often provokes embarrassment and guilt in him, since guilt comes from a contradiction between joy (a basic emotion) and an action that disturbs the joy. Móricz excels at depicting this kind of brooding, tormented figure experiencing conflicting emotions, which is typical of his prose in general. His narration technique is very effective in this regard. The alternating zero and internal focalisation shapes the narrative from the very beginning. The narrator—maintaining his adult authority and experience—has an overview of the entire story and conveys events in a way that none of the characters can perceive, but the focus often shifts to the child protagonist, offering insight into his thoughts and feelings. Their differences manifest mainly in perceptions and emotional responses. As demonstrated in the aforementioned citation, within the same proposition or textual unit, we encounter both descriptive emotional words belonging to the adult, such as "he was afraid of lying", and expressive emotional phrases, such as "feel them (the words) burning his skin", alongside typical bodily symptoms of an emotion ("fear tickled his throat") communicating the character's inner experiences. While descriptive words suggesting an objective distance are limited in their ability to convey subjective feelings, expressive elements are able to draw readers closer to the subject by displaying the

characters' thoughts and emotions in their bodily dynamism, as if the characters were recounting them themselves. One of the most subtle techniques for shifting points of view within the narrative is the free indirect speech, which blends the two levels together by providing the characters' mental expressions in the form of the narrator's text. The novel offers numerous examples of this fostering a sense of presence in the reader within the fictional narrative milieu that undoubtedly aims to enhance the reader's understanding of the protagonist's emotional state. In order to be able to judge the characters morally, readers have to grasp their motivations. This is where they need mindreading or Theory of Mind (ToM), also referred to as mentalising or folk psychology (cf. Kidd & Castano 2013, Zunshine 2006. Bruner 1990). ToM is a system of cognitive representations of the beliefs, needs, desires, intentions and feelings of the people with whom one interacts both in the real world and fictional ones. It is acquired gradually from early childhood beginning with basic mental state understanding when children realise that others have an internal life that is similar to, but also different from, their own. Children between the ages of 4 and 5 typically realize that others act based on their own beliefs and knowledge, even if those beliefs are incorrect. They also begin to understand hidden feelings and mental causality. Importantly, however, ToM continues to develop beyond childhood into adolescence and young adulthood. There are clear improvements in both the social-perceptual components, which consist of understanding the mental states of others based on directly observable cues, and the social-cognitive components of ToM, which involve reasoning about others' minds through language and thought. In fact, empirical research shows that both 15- to 16-year-olds and 17- to 18-year-olds outperform 13- to 14-year-olds in both cognitive and affective ToM types. Furthermore, there are also gender-related differences as females demonstrates superiority in cognitive ToM. Across adolescence, it is clear that cognitive and affective ToM correlate with attention and affective intelligence, working memory, language comprehension (Gabriel et al. 2021).

With regard to the social-cognitive components of ToM, cognitive categorization can also represent some difficulty for inexperienced readers. According to Kövecses (2000), the structure of emotion concepts is in part viewed as a script, as a sequence of stages of events. Certain basic image schemas are universal, because these arise from fundamental bodily experiences, but the representation of emotional meanings is not. Thus, young readers may struggle to represent emotional meaning if their conceptual schemes regarding the typical causes of a given emotion differ. For example, they may not understand and engage with a sensitive person who experiences certain emotions in situations that are not considered typical within a given context. When Misi worries excessively about his hat, readers may perceive him as lacking strength or even neurotic and this could hinder their ability to empathise with him.

Thus, although most emotional situations in *Be Faithful unto Death* seem to be comprehensible to contemporary readers, some of them can undoubtedly be considered less familiar. These situations can also be attributed to poetic motivations, such as foregrounding the motif of suffering and biblical references, rather than an accurate representation of adolescent subjectivity. Overall, these neither advance the story in a straightforward way nor facilitate immersion or naive reading that young readers prefer or offer a clearly indicated subject position in the narrative either. Therefore, readers' emotional response is less intense and they may feel frustrated, given that the intensity of the response relies on the degree to which the occurrence is consequential (Hogan 2011b).

Another notable feature that may cause frustration is the relevance of negative emotions such as fear, shame, guilt embarrassment and sadness among the protagonist's feelings. All these emotions have moral value as they are linked to social interactions. Shame, guilt and embarrassment are all part of the "self-conscious emotions" because they derive from self-reflection and self-evaluation which are fundamental to them (Eisenberg 2000). Shame and guilt also involve a sense of responsibility and the feeling that one has violated a moral standard. Guilt, along with sympathy, is particularly connected to morality, due to their implied impact on moral behaviour and on its development (ibid.). Fear, on the other hand, is usually considered as a basic, non-social emotion. However, in this case it is also connected to the character's social existence since he consistently monitors and judges himself in socially and morally relevant situations which his fear and anxiety are strongly related to. This means that he is constantly involved in so-called "third-order beliefs" (his thoughts go round what others think or would think about him), which is another characteristic of moral agency attributed to ToM. The narrative displays the phenomenology, the evolution and cognitive patterns of these emotions due to the various situations and circumstances in which they arise.

The novel can also be interpreted as representing the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of emotional development. In fact, childhood and adulthood attributes appear simultaneously in Nyilas Misi's life and cause ambiguity in his existence: he still goes to school as children do, but he also has to earn money like adults; he is deceived because of his childlike vulnerability, yet he also commits minor transgressions and often laments his financial situation. However, Móricz goes beyond the mere capturing of the contrasting values of childhood and adulthood by representing them as intertwined in the character's mental states. Misi is confronted with internal contradictions that provoke complex, often vague and conflicted emotions and can be considered part of the confusing process of growing up in a morally imperfect society. As Szirák (2015) points out, the novel's most characteristic feature is the exchange of child and adult attributes and the randomness of their distribution, which is the root of the protagonist's suffering. In fact,

he experiences 'childish' fear and sadness due to his separation from his family, as well as a mixture of emotions connected to the grownup desire for self-realisation. His feelings of shame and guilt are often hard to distinguish. In this way, readers are invited to explore this emotional complexity of growing up.

Overall, the novel can easily be read as a story about the protagonist's moral emotional life. As early as in the opening paragraph, he experiences awe, which is a complex and rare emotion consisting of fear, wonder and elevation, resulting in a sense of self-transcendence. Awe can be triggered by a wide range of experiences, including natural wonders, artistic masterpieces, spiritual or religious experiences, and extraordinary human achievements. When people feel awe, they focus less on themselves and more on the larger context or whole. Therefore, I propose to view that emotional state as the character's unconscious readiness to encounter something transcendent. Mentioning awe at the beginning sets the emotional tone of the story and also opens up references to growth through self-transcendence. Readers progressing along this path will find explicit reinforcement in the novel's reflections which heavily draw on Darwinian moral philosophy. The narrator attributes a Darwinian thesis from *The Origin of Man* to the most authentic teacher, asserting that "the survival instinct and morality are inborn in people, and are just as much a part of our biological nature as the nature of bees and ants. Moral instincts precede human beings, let alone human laws, which means that moral laws are an older and stronger basis of our existence than human laws" (Móricz 1995, 149-150). As Nyilas Misi enters the world of school and encounters unjust social conditions, he becomes embroiled in a conflict between two types of law. The first is the eternal moral ideals that form part of our evolutionary heritage, the second is the temporary social norms that are aberrant and corrupt.

Apart from the well-known fact that Darwin was an important source of inspiration for Móricz's view of human existence throughout his oeuvre, his conception of morality appears to align with the fundamental principles of more recent evolutionary (literary) theory, too. Flesch (2007) suggests that our interest in narratives is connected to the evolution of cooperation, which brought adaptive advantages to humans living in groups. In order to cooperate, we had to accept the 'costs' of this behaviour, and therefore became endowed with a 'propensity to punish those who cheat the innocent and a propensity to support other punishers' (Flesch, 2007, p. ix). As cultural inventions, narratives recruit this human trait, offering possibilities for practising and learning moral agency. Authors' act of writing and readers' act of reading are guided by the common-sense belief in justice.

Consistent with this, the novel also portrays the protagonist as an ethical reader who is affected by literature due to its moral beauty. The lonely teenage boy's most joyful moments are when he reads fiction. Móricz tells us not only what the character reads, but also what he thinks and how he feels about it in such detail

that we have the sensation of reading alongside him. As these readings are part of his becoming a writer himself, we can identify in them a semi-autobiographical trait. Anyway, "the most beautiful thing" (Móricz 1990, 17.) Misi had ever read is *Heart* by Edmondo De Amicis, which is a juvenile best-seller from the end of the 19th Century. De Amicis's book is similarly a coming-of-age novel, with an eleven-year-old protagonist reading about other boys performing great deeds during the Italian unification. In this way, actual readers of *Be Faithful unto Death* find themselves at the end point of cultural transactions that takes form of a reading chain: we read about a character who is reading a book about a boy reading stories that revolve around other boys and different moral values. What attracts Misi most is the altruistic behaviour of a poor child from Turin helping his father every night without the father being aware of it. He is experiencing moral beauty while reading about the child's anonymous self-sacrifice, as his appraisal of the moral behaviour provides aesthetic pleasure. This episode provides a good example for moral aesthetic judgments, which rely more on emotions than morality judgments do (cf. Cheng et al. 2021). The "beautiful" story about the boy from Turin, who continues to help his father despite his anger at his tiredness, is a sort of prelude to what is going to happen to Misi as he will be wrongly accused of a non-committed crime. Readers (fictional or not) experience strong emotions while reading about morally relevant actions. They feel pleasure and beauty about altruistic behaviour and disgust about morally repugnant acts. However, Móricz's novel does not seem to fit properly into the general moral scheme of stories proposed by Flesch (2007), which consists of three basic figures: the innocent victim, the exploiter and someone who seeks to punish the exploiter. We have the first two elements, but the traditional poetic justice of the villain being punished fails to happen, despite how much readers may long for it due to their inborn preference of justice. In fact, in terms of poetic justice, there is a significant difference between popular genres and artistic literature. The former is usually organised around unquestionable moral values by presenting a clear contrast between good and evil, following the readers' common needs. By contrast, artistic fiction, like Móricz's novel, diverges from this basic setting and focuses readers' attention on moral dilemmas, social injustices, and inhumane situations that cannot be resolved within the confines of the fictional world (cf. Kaul 2008, Horváth and Szabó 2021).

Therefore, since most children's literature texts adopt the conventions of popular genres, it is unusual for moral conflict to remain unresolved and for pessimistic moods to persist for so long, even beyond the end of the story. The ethical symmetry is broken since the cheater will not be punished and the protagonist fails to integrate into the world. Although Misi's innocence in the lottery crime is eventually proven, he does not experience any happiness as he is overwhelmed by the pressure and injustice. Unlike heroes in most boarding school stories, he doesn't

become part of the community; in fact, he is more isolated than before, having seemingly lost his illusions and hopes. The novel's most suspenseful moment—and the culmination of his suffering—occurs when he must appear before the teachers. As cognitive poetics suggests, suspense efficiently helps to focus the reader's attention on structurally relevant elements by increasing their cognitive and emotional activity. The persistence of sadness as a meta-emotion (readers feeling sad about the character's emotions) can also provoke a profound emotional response and become similarly functional for comprehension (Koopman 2015). Importantly, this emotionally charged and ethically ambiguous ending of the story evokes righteous anger in the reader, providing an additional motivation to reflect on the depicted social conditions and the possibility of transforming injustice into justice.

In summary, Móricz's novel offers highly relevant moral content and represents a wide range of moral emotions in their various dimensions and dynamics, requiring an increased level of cognitive and emotional understanding from the reader. Notably, children's and young adult literary texts not only reflect the target audience's developmental stages, but also confront readers with cognitive challenges, such as "testing" their mindreading abilities and illustrating different scenarios involving moral dilemmas or poetic justice. Young adult fiction, in particular, tends to enhance moral emotions and moral judgement (Oziewicz 2015). However, the greater the challenge, the less typical the text appears to belong to the corpus of children's or young adult literature. Accordingly, *Be Faithful unto Death* has some rather atypical traits as young adult novel: the protagonist is not a real hero, the plot is more about his emotional changes than about his actions and in contrast to the evil legitimised by social practice, good remains an endangered, marginalised quality.

At the same time, the story encourages readers to form moral judgements and take a stance by depicting the protagonist's conflicts with his environment. Thanks to the variety of situations and emotions, this process is not confined to the limits of a child's black-and-white thinking, nor does it become clichéd; information from several directions has to be taken into account and moral conclusions have to be concidered in more detail. In this way, readers are given numerous opportunities to study emotions and motivations, since they can delve into the protagonist's psyche, which would be impossible in real life. Overall, due to its complex nature, the text is better suited to experienced young or adult readers than to fourteen-year-old children and the aforementioned challenges can be considered a guideline for the literary and psychological transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of reading experience.

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nCOGNITO
ARTICLE

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Reclaiming Bodies, Freeing Souls

Evoking Transcultural Empathy in Han Kang's *Human Acts* (2016)

Abstract

First published in Korean, Han Kang's *Human Acts* depicts the brutal massacre and the military's violent suppression during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising to share the long-lasting impact of the traumatic event with audiences across time and space. The acknowledgement of shared trauma, regardless of geography, time and culture, is strongly indicated by Han's conscious decision not to celebrate her Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of the persistent violence against humanity in the ongoing wars around the world (Noh 2024). Addressing the reception of trauma narratives, this article examines how *Human Acts* evokes readers' transcultural empathy for shared trauma arising from war and civil unrest. To this end, it applies recent approaches to embodied reading by Caracciolo and Kukkonen as well as concepts in trauma studies, including (implicated) witnessing, affect and transcultural empathy. Its analyses of passages with detailed and defamiliarizing depictions of the human body (body parts, viscerality and senses) in the realist setting illustrate how readers affectively enact "what it is like" to be involved in the uprising through their "virtual bodies" (Caracciolo 2014). The disruptions in the embodied reading process implicate recipients in the secondary witnessing of violence (Rothberg 2019) and elicit their acknowledgement of shared trauma through embodied means, which "can build bridges between people from diverse historical backgrounds" (Garloff 2020, 211). Moreover, by figuratively reclaiming the students' bodies through their virtual bodies, readers assist in the important Korean spiritual process of freeing the lost souls of Gwangju from the trauma and towards the afterlife. The article thus argues that recipients' post-reading recognition of their collective responsibility against injustices against humanity can "lead to new versions of collective politics that build on alliances and assemblages of differently situated subjects" (Rothberg 2019, 21).

Keywords: affect, embodied cognition, the Gwangju Uprising, shared trauma, transcultural empathy

1. Introduction

Narrative empathy through the lens of cognitive literary studies is defined as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 2013). According to Suzanne Keen, it can be understood in different ways. For example, based on their own dispositions, readers can empathize with characters through self-identification with their emotions or experience "spontaneous empathy" with characters even before any affective identification (ibid. 2007, 169). Empathy thus differs from sympathy, i.e., the feeling for and not with someone, and empathetic aversion, which causes personal discomfort in readers through self-directed focus and results in the breakdown of the reception process (Eisenberg 2005; Keen 2013).

Moreover, researchers of cognitive approaches to narratives claim that certain genres of both fictional and non-fictional texts (e.g., history, memoirs and autobiography) and narrative techniques can elicit a higher level of immersion, or feelings of being "transported" into the "narrative world" and, by extension, greater empathy from the different types of readers (Gerrig 1993, 157; Miall 2009; Mar et al. 2008). Exemplary techniques include the use of specific narrative situations to limit perspective or characters' consciousness, the use of detailed settings and repeated narratives set in a stable story world, as well as devices such as foregrounding (Keen 2013, Para. 9). In addition, recipients' empathy and the reasons for such affective responses depend on "their own identities, situations, experiences, and temperaments" and might therefore differ from those of the authors (Keen 2013, Para. 7). As reflected in the findings of Vaughn et. al. (2018) on empathy using fMRI scans to measure neural activity, even though empathy is hardwired due to mirror neurons, its extent is "modulated by our beliefs about their intentions, circumstances, and group allegiances" (1). Especially relevant to this article is the result showing that there were more neural activities in regions of the brain associated with empathy when the participants viewed in-group members experiencing pain as compared to out-group members undergoing the same.

Such intergroup biases fleshed out by the study of neural activation underscores the obstacles that impede empathy and are especially pertinent in discussions about transcultural empathy. Here, transcultural empathy can be understood as the adopting of "perspective or ... frame of reference vis-à-vis other cultures" in order to "include relevant constructs from other cultural world views" that extend one's ways of thinking and subjective understanding of the world (Bennett et al. 2003, 425). When discussing transcultural competences, Salice-Stephan points out that, if the mindful interactions between people from cultural backgrounds are "deepened and habitualized" through "continuous deliberative and non-punctual processes", the act of shifting perspectives can undergird one's "ability to identify

commonalities", making it commonplace to "reconcile differences" amidst inherent cultural divides (2019, 85–86).

In the field of cognitive poetics, Peter Stockwell argues that reading can elicit "empathy for response" and "empathy for action", with the former connected more to aesthetics and the latter to ethics (2020, 183). In particular, works of "political satire, religious allegory, or literary works which foreground social or personal issues as a strong provocative message" can put real-life (social) changes into effect; "the aesthetic response to a literary work can [likewise] operate as a call to practical action too, in which case the emotional engagement is being used instrumentally for its ethical force" (ibid.). Such a call to action through reading is especially intrinsic to the analysis of Han Kang's 2016 novel, *Human Acts*, when we consider the potential transcultural empathy in recipients engaging with the narrative via their diverse (international and intersectional) subjective backgrounds.

First published in Korean, *Human Acts* is set in the stable and realistic story world of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising by South Korean students and their violent suppression in the hands of the government military. Presenting six testimonies from a diverse group of demonstrators, some of whom have died and others survived, the novel unveils myriad experiences of the violations against humanity and its aftermath from different perspectives, all of which trace back to the involvement and cold-blooded murder of a teenage boy called Dong-ho on 18 May 1980. Han's novel evokes empathy in readers for the shared trauma arising from war and civil unrest, being "a clarion for remembrance and acknowledgement of the past, haunting the present of the nation and shaping its future" (Fiaz et al. 2023, 98). As Han herself notes, "readers also felt pain [when] reading [Human Acts]" perhaps "because of [people's] love that [they] feel pain together in front of all the evidence of violence and human atrocity or human debasement" (Allardice 2025).

With its worldwide accessibility as well as acclaim, its impact extends beyond the geographical sites of Gwangju and South Korea. Translated into more than twenty languages, *Human Acts* elicits on transcultural empathy in its readers, setting them the task of remembering the uprising and the tragic narratives of the fallen that have been silenced and distorted by the former Chun Doo-hwan government (see Jun 2017; Park 2018; Mosler 2020; Ryu 2020; Lewis 2022). The Nobel Prize-winning publication effectively inserts the long-lasting impact of the massacre into global consciousness and actively gives voices to the senseless loss of lives from the ongoing wars around the world.

2. Transcultural empathy through embodied reading

In her chapter on transcultural empathy, Katja Garloff states that trauma can be transmitted amongst people, especially because of its "latency," which increases

its exposure to more recipients. Those entangled in the transmission network of trauma would, as Garloff puts it, be "force[d] into other times and places, where their unprocessed experience will translate into dreams, stories, eyewitness accounts and other symbolic formations that call for particularly attentive listening or reading" (2020, 211–212). For some scholars, transcultural empathy constitutes the constructive aspects of trauma. It particularly highlights the potential of trauma to "[forge] new connections across cultural, ethnic, religious or national boundaries," as traumatized people's state of exile necessarily brings them into contact with one another (ibid. 211; Caruth 1996, 18). Such new connections can arise from positive affect, including feelings of solidarity that manifest when the listener identifies and feels with the victim.

There are also scholars who claim that contestations and negative affect, including rage and resentment, can lead to recuperation and reconciliation when perpetrators "mimetically reproduce the victim's affects" and experience the "absolute helplessness in the face of violence" felt by the victims (Garloff 2020, 215; 217). Some writings about the Holocaust, such as Jean Améry's, thus call attention to "the expression of anger, rage and resentment in trauma narratives, as well as to the ways in which these affects are transmitted onto readers" (ibid. 217). The affective destabilization in instances of transcultural empathy constitutes "moments of uncertainty and confusion for writers and readers" and thereby challenges their epistemological assumptions (ibid. 214–15). Ultimately, affect, which is circulated amongst organisms in interaction, "stretches, expands or shrinks the socio-political space, by orienting us toward one another in what Ahmed aptly calls an 'affective politics'" (Ritivoi 2020, 144; 146; Ahmed 2014; Cvetkovich 2003).

The process of transmitting trauma and affectively creating human connections amongst characters and readers regardless of cultural and historical backgrounds is also observable when we turn our attention to "the acts of transcultural witnessing that trauma often entails" (Garloff 2020, 211). To make sense of one traumatic instance, we refer to our comprehension of other atrocities, a process that conversely shapes our understanding of other events (ibid. 212) while reflecting the principles adopted by earlier practitioners of cognitive poetics in their examination of "the cognitive unconscious, metaphorical thought, radial categories (related to priming effects), creativity, cognitive linguistics, aesthetics, distributed cognition, and cognitive artefacts" (Brook 2017, 114). Such multidirectional memory is connected to the notion of political affect (Rothberg 2019, 124–25). For Rothberg, the two extreme ends of affect are competition and solidarity, with the latter being "the politically desirable spectrum of affects" (ibid. 25–26). The multidirectional exchange of traumas across time and space elicits recipients' post-reading recognition of their shared responsibility against injustices against humanity and can "lead to new versions of collective politics that build on alliances and assemblages

of differently situated subjects" (ibid. 21). The recipients are hence not mere witnesses who usually "testif[y] about an event, whether a crime or an ordinary occurrence, and... [are] moral figure[s] of extraordinary power" (Dean 2020, 111). Instead, they are implicated witnesses whose "actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators" (Rothberg 2020, 201).

The wide range of affects experienced by readers of *Human Acts* can greatly shape their sense-making of the depicted trauma, their understanding of past events, and the extent of their transcultural empathy for those suppressed in violent events such as the Gwangju Uprising. Based on recent cognitive approaches to narratives, embodied reading means that the reader "gives experience and emotional responses a much more important role in cognition than first-wave, computational cognitivism" (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014, 261). In addition, embodied cognition, which occurs in the body-mind-environment nexus, includes affect as an important role in sense-making processes (Ward et al. 2017, 373; Colombetti 2016, 145; Ritivoi 2020, 143). Ultimately, organisms, including human beings, seek autopoiesis, i.e., "[t]he self-maintenance of an organized entity through its own internal processes," and homeostasis, or "[t]he tendency towards a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes" ("Autopoiesis" 2022; "Homeostasis" 2018).

The same can be said about embodied readers. Readers undergo the secondary witnessing of violence through the embodied reading of works such as *Human Acts*. Particularly key to this analysis is Caracciolo's (2014) claim that the embodied reader experiences narratives in a perceptual-bodily manner and refers to higher-order socio-cultural meanings and values to make sense of the works. Following the theory of mirror neurons, which enable us to "through a kind of automatic inner imitation to understand their intentions and attune ourselves to their feelings" (Boyd 2009, 103-4), Caracciolo states that readers can share and imagine characters' experiences by grounding their "virtual bodies" to the textual passages and connecting their "embodied abilities" to the characters' "fictionally actual body" (2011, 117). Readers' hypothetical enactment of characters' experiences involves "an experiential feel" that cannot be linguistically expressed but is nevertheless related to the "what-it-is-like" to experience something (ibid. 2014, 101). Each embodied reader also simultaneously draws on their own experiential background, which is the trove of experiential traces consisting of their individual "experiences, evaluations, and bodily engagements" (ibid. 35).

For Caracciolo, embodied reading allows people to acquire new story-driven experiential traces from indirect experiences, such as when they watch actions in films and read about being abused in prose (ibid. 46). Our updated experiential background reshapes our perception of our cultural environment and our place in society. In the case of the embodied reading of Han's *Human Acts*, our virtual

bodies, which can both afford identification and reflect affective reactions prior to identification, enable us to experience "what it is like" to be violently hurt by those who are supposed to protect us. As Ritivoi claims, affect "not only circulates but also accumulates over time, yet it emerges less through explicit naming of states ('I am disgusted' or 'I feel sad') as it does through enactment and performance" (2020, 145). Even if we are not aware of the Gwangju Uprising, South Korean history and culture, multidirectional memory kicks in as we imagine the violence depicted in *Human Acts*: to comprehend the monstrosities, we recall our experiential traces about past traumatic events and affective responses to identify similarities in the experiences depicted in the novel. This process of embodied reading, aided by the sense of familiarity, intensifies our experiential feel of "what it is like" to be in the uprising. The new story-driven experiences as well as our reassessed understanding of past traumas in our experiential background can strengthen our transcultural empathy.

Further noted by Merja Polvinen (2016), the enactive reader enacts texts while being simultaneously aware of the fictionality of the text, i.e. with its so-called "double vision of fiction" (ibid. 2017), the embodied reader is not immersed in the narrative space to the point of forgetting that the text is itself an artifice (140–141). Polvinen's stance hence largely accounts for the intersubjective interaction between the reader and the text, where the latter affords readers' simulating of narrative conventions using necessary cognitive and semantic skill-sets (Polvinen 2018, 74). Such reader-text intersubjectivity is explained by the process of metaphoricity—with the text offering a "metaphorical literary" and "cognitive environment" (ibid, 2025, "Literature and Enactive Cognition")—that affords the formation of "a special kind of interpersonal, inter-bodily, and inter-affective meaning coordination" between the reader and the text (Jensen and Cuffari 2014, 280). The enactive reader, while not similar, are nevertheless comparable to Tsur's notion of the "versatile reader" who "has coded the various poetic styles in a way that is more efficient than memorizing long lists of specific conventions for each poetic style" (2021, 313). Such automated coding, it seems, recalls the precognitive triggering of experiential traces and the resulting indescribable experientiality, before being cognitivised through figurative expressions to capture the qualia of experiences, including those of the traumatic nature.

3. Perceiving body parts through Dong-ho's senses

Adopting different forms in the six testimonies, *Human Acts* shows that each way of recalling traumatic events is valid and deserves to be listened to seriously (see Lanius et al. 2003; Craps 2013; Pederson 2020, 223–24). As noted by Lee Ji-Eun, "traumas suffered by both men and women, heightened by Han's particular

narrative style and choices, create intimate and visceral experiences for readers that illuminate one searing historical moment" (2022, 361). To heighten transcultural empathy, the testimonies employ images of the body in different conditions, with the soldiers' violence inscribed in the deliberate descriptions of the civilians' body parts. The characters' detailed visceral responses and exteroception also defamiliarize readers' simulated experiences in the realist setting, thus disrupting the embodied reading process to implicate recipients in the witnessing of the atrocities.

The passage about the soldiers' attack on the couple of churchgoers seen through Dong-ho's eyes after Jeong-dae's murder highlights the scattered images of amputated body parts that disrupt our ontology: "Before the man in the suit had finished speaking, you saw a person's arm—what? Something you wouldn't have thought it capable of. Too much to process—what you saw happen to that hand, that back, that leg. A human being." (ibid. "The Boy"; emphasis added) The listing of body parts, synecdoches of the whole, and the questioning of its sight ("what?") trouble most readers' embodied experiences of the passage. Furthermore, the second-person narrative not only directly addresses and places the reader in Dong-ho's position to perceive the surrounding bloodshed. It also interpellates the reader, asking the question, "What would you do if you had been there?" Moreover, the narrative situation suggests the presence of a narrator beyond the diegesis, whose otherworldly voice heightens our awareness of fictionality while guiding our senses in the stable but unsafe story world.

The world of the dead is ever present in *Human Acts*. Dong-ho's testimony, which opens the novel, impales us with disturbing details not just about physical injuries inflicted on the demonstrators' bodies; the rot and stench from the natural process of putrefaction are also frequently reiterated to remind readers of the aftermath of the crime against the innocent. As Lee claims, "Han brings readers to the site—to the sight, sound, stench, and spectres of Kwangju in May of 1980" (2022, 362). Indeed, such images reflect the realities of trauma, which "involves senses—smells, sounds and taste—rather than conscious reflection—words or thoughts" (Ritivoi 2020, 148).

Through Dong-ho's eyes, we perceive white cotton covers "stained with blood and watery discharge," "those faces torn lengthwise, shoulders gashed open, breasts decomposing inside blouses," "the face of a young man whose throat had been sliced open by a bayonet, his red uvula poking out," and the "jumble of spilled, opaque intestines" that Eun-sook tries to "stuff back inside a gaping stomach" (Han 2016, "The Boy"). Dong-ho's report punches us repeatedly in our guts as we move from one distressing image to the next. Feelings of the uncanny abound with the destabilized "inside/outside" binary: the intestines and the uvula should never be "outside" of the body. The extent of violence is undeniable: even the old man, who would have lived through the Japanese occupation, is said to have perceived with

"his [flinching] eyes" what seemed to be "the most appalling thing in all this world" (ibid.).

The effects of putrefaction are further specified as Dong-ho describes the "differing degrees of horror" and the bloating of the "smallish woman in her late teens or early twenties" into "the size of a grown man" (ibid.). Through his eyes, readers simulate the changes in her body over time. Silently directed by the haunting narrator, they also allow the unidentified woman's body and "the sheer rate of decomposition" to shock them, like they do Dong-ho:

> Stab wounds slash down from her forehead to her left eye, her cheekbone to her jaw, her left breast to her armpit, gaping gashes where the raw flesh shows through. The right side of her skull has completely caved in, seemingly the work of a club, and the meat of her brain is visible. These open wounds were the first to rot, followed by the many bruises on her battered corpse. Her toes, with their clear pedicure, were initially intact, with no external injuries, but as time passed they swelled up like thick tubers of ginger, turning black in the process. The pleated skirt with its pattern of water droplets, which used to come down to her shins, doesn't even cover her swollen knees now. (Han 2016, "The Boy")

The details again spotlight the increasing difficulty in identifying the decomposing dead. Identification becomes even more tedious through the eyes of Dong-ho, who is without his spectacles and whose eyes are strained from the work. Trying to imagine with such limited perspective would require readers to squint and search within their own experiential traces to fill out the rest of the images.

The readers are likewise impacted by their simulated sight of the woman when they subsequently read about the writer's trauma from seeing a photograph of such a woman in the chapbook when she was eleven. At the sight of "the mutilated face of a young woman, her features slashed through with a bayonet", the writer (a possible substitute of Han's consciousness) notes, "some tender thing deep inside me broke. Something that, until then, I hadn't even realized was there" (Han 2016, "The Writer"; emphasis added). Her thick description of her visceral reactions uses an embodied metaphor to highlight not just the fragility of people, and especially children; it also reveals her awareness of such fragility only after the destruction. This process of embodied simulation, as argued by Stockwell, is especially active: "Readers of literary texts in which embodied metaphors occur have similarly been observed responding in a physical, embodied, and deep-seated way, especially when mirroring or echoing characters' experiences. The consequence of this is often that readers return changed by the literary experience." (2020, 196)

The writer's sentiment is further echoed by the mentally battered Jin-su: "Before, we used to have a kind of glass that couldn't be broken... it was only when we were shattered that we proved we had souls" (ibid. "The Prisoner"). Although the writer was young and not in Gwangsu during the uprising, she nevertheless senses the ruthless damage inflicted on the woman through the picture. While "major events in modern Korean history—wars, massacres, military actions, civilian uprisings—... [tend to be] portrayed as histories of man" (Lee 2022, 362), the multifaceted focalisers in Han's novel underscores the universal impact of trauma: the writer in the novel, the woman in the photograph and Han herself are likewise affected by the uprising. Similarly, by indirectly encountering the violent event portrayed in *Human Acts*, the fragile souls of readers, including women, might never be fully mended.

Similar to the testimonies in *Human Acts*, readers of Dong-ho's report can respond in a multitude of ways. Based on their disposition and experiences, they might undergo empathetic aversion if they are unable to stomach the vivid images of violence. They might become too distressed if the disturbing images trigger suppressed memories and/or story-driven experiences. They might consequently put down the book to save themselves from the soul-crushing state that the demonstrators have found themselves in. Other readers might be able to remain transported into the storyworld, for example, to enact the sight of the gut-wrenching injuries and the stench that Dong-ho himself has begun to emit due to sweat and exhaustion. Some readers might also simulate the viscerality of the unidentified woman's decomposing state to make sense of both her unnatural state of being and the natural state of putrefaction of bodies. Either way, the readers here embark on what Stockwell refers to as "a form of simulation in which [they] enter into a different level of existence while retaining a thread back to [their] actual lives. Engaging in fictional or lyrical worlds, especially if the experience is highly immersive and ambient, takes [their] consciousness somewhere else and alters the way [their] bodies behave in ways that are not simply echoic or metaphorical, it seems" (2020, 220).

The testimonies in *Human Acts* gesture at real-life atrocities and their possible reoccurrences through the systemic and unceasing reign of the "pyramid of violence" (Han 2016, "The Factory Girl"). As noted by the writer, beyond a geographical site with a historical past, "Gwangju" now connotes tyranny and "all that has been mutilated beyond repair," with those affected by the uprising forever poisoned by "radioactive matter" that would never disappear (ibid. "The Writer"; see also Finck 2022, 9). With the second-person narrative situation in Dong-ho's testimony, readers are hailed into the narrative world: they are likewise affected by the "radioactive matter," regardless of geography, time and culture. It can be hypothesized that those with certain dispositions are likely to feel more empathetic towards the loss of lives during similar conflicts. For those of us who have never

experienced war in real life, something tender in us might also become broken as we—holding on to that "thread back to our actual lives"—affectively enact our own death and decomposition in the face of senseless brutality.

4. Inhabiting the dead with "The Boy's Friend"

It is one thing to perceive the body parts from the outside, and another to experience them from within. Placed after Dong-ho's report, Jeong-dae's testimony shifts the embodied reading process by using the first-person narrative situation. Now, readers are transported into the broken bodies and consciousnesses of the dead. Reading Jeong-dae's testimony affords gaining firsthand experience of the souls trapped in corpses in states of decomposition and treated like carcasses by the soldiers. His descriptions of the "tower of bodies," unlike the Tower of Babbel, foreground the embodied experiences of helpless silence and solitude after death.

Through his eyes, readers are similarly crushed by the weight of the uprising: "Bodies with their skulls crushed and cratered, shoulders dislocated, rather than having been shot," "bodies that still appeared relatively intact, dressed carefully in neat hospital gowns, and swathed in bandages", and the "necessary" killing of the injured "mob" in the hospital (Han 2016, "The Boy's Friend"). As if "decapitated" (ibid.), the dead demonstrators are not easily identifiable. Without proper burials, their lost souls cannot be laid to rest (Baker 2008). For Lee, Jeong-dae's voice "warns that the act of killing is not the end for either the perpetrator or the dead: *hon* remains to bear witness to the body's journey, whether the detailed, step-by-step decay of the body or postmortem human practices or abuses" (2022, 364).

Via the first-person narrative situation, readers undergo the trauma more deeply by enacting Jeong-dae's impressions of his own body, which, in a state of "blood and watery discharge," was "crushed out of shape" under the tower of bodies (Han 2016, "The Boy's Friend"). Aided by the weather—be it warm or wet—, the hastened decomposition turns the corpses into nutrition for insects. Seeing a body from the hospital that has clearly been cared for before its arrival, Jeong-dae expresses his "hatred for [his own] body" and for its "shameful, detestable" condition (ibid.). The "I" narrative situation makes readers mouth the same words about their own bodies.

Then, in the collective personal plural, the readers speak together with Jeong-dae and the other dead demonstrators, "Our bodies, tossed there like lumps of meat. Our filthy, rotting faces, reeking in the sun" (ibid.; also Finck 2022, 9). Faced with the logical depiction of the crushed bodies succumbing to the natural processes of decay, readers cannot help but effectively simulate "what it is" to be in Jeong-dae's body. They might recall the crushing of useless old cars in scrapyards or their own action of working on plasticine or pushing down that sandwich for lunch to make it

easier to consume. In the last case, with the feedback loop equating the sandwich with the crushed bodies, readers would be turned off from the meal.

To be in Jeong-dae's shoes also means to recall past instances of the self being crushed. Readers with the appropriate dispositions will follow his descriptions of the bodies to simulate being carelessly carried and piled onto one another like carcasses or bags of rice, only to become trapped under "the tower of bodies":

> Our bodies are piled on top of each other in the shape of a cross. The body of a man I don't know has been thrown across my stomach at a ninety-degree angle, face up, and on top of him a boy, older than me, tall enough that the crook of his knees presses down onto my bare feet. The boy's hair brushed my face. I was able to see all of that because I was still stuck fast to my body, then. They came toward us. Helmets, Red Cross armbands over the sleeves of mottled uniforms, quickly. Working in pairs, they began to lift us up and toss us into a military truck. An action as mechanical as loading sacks of grain. I hovered around my cheeks, the nape of my neck, clinging to these contours so as not to be parted from my body. (Han 2016, "The Boy's Friend")

The initial stacking of the bodies "in the neat shape of a cross" indicates some level of honour on the soldiers' part towards the demonstrators. Yet, the soldiers' "mechanical" movements suggest the need to get the job done; feelings are not involved in the task of shifting the bodies—treated like "lumps of meat" or unwanted inventory—out of sight and out of mind.

As readers refer to their experiential backgrounds, their physical memory of being crushed and the affective responses connected to those moments afford insight into Jeong-dae's perception of the tower of bodies. To Jeong-day, the tower of bodies is a "rotting carcass of some many-legged monster" (Han 2016, "The Boy's Friend"). For those of us with story-driven experiences from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we might compare this "corpse of some enormous, fantastical beast, its dozens of legs splayed out beneath it" to Frankenstein's creation. While both are made of body parts from the dead, the latter lacks the excessive limbs of the former. However, unlike Frankenstein's creation, the tower of bodies cannot seek justice against the government on its own.

With its the first-person narrative situation, Jeong-dae's testimony strongly draws readers in to make sense of his experiences by inhabiting his body and taking on his senses. They thus ground their "virtual body" to the passages and connect their "embodied abilities" to Jeong-dae's "fictionally actual body" (2011, 117). To understand his experiences of being crushed, I recall my uncomfortable experiences on the public transport during peak hours and the smells that accompany the ride.

As Giovanna Colombetti has shown in her work, embodied cognition comprises both enactment (or the imagination and simulation of what "it is like") and affective responses (2016, 145). While recalling experiences of being crushed, our affective responses from the past are also evoked. When enacting the bus ride and the physical experience of being crushed, I thus also recall traces of my discomfort on the bus and my exhaustion from the early morning or late evening ride.

Readers with more harrowing experiences might undergo stronger physical sensations from their memories. Consider, for example, the experiential traces of those who were at or are immensely aware of the Halloween celebrations in Seoul's Itaewon district on 29 October 2022 or Travis Scott's Astroworld Festival on 5 November 2021, in Houston, Texas, two events that led to the tragic deaths of attendees by crushing. While reading the above passage, readers present at the event(s) might recall their fear of being crushed to death and the futility of trying to escape. Others who, like me, followed the related news closely, might also remember story-driven experiences from the videos of those tragic evenings. (When doing so, we would also recall associated experiences, such as my example from the bus or the scrapyard.) Such affective simulation of "what it is like" in the narrative of *Human Acts* can, through "continuous deliberative and non-punctual processes" of exposure to such embodied discomfort, slowly but surely become "deepened and habitualized" (to reiterate Salice-Stephan's point on building transcultural competences) in the readers a shared experience that overcomes the in-group/out-group biases that influence the extent of their empathetic responses.

Our cognitive feedback loop ensures the process of multidirectional memory and our experiences of transcultural empathy: our understanding of "what it is like" to be in the uprising and piled amongst bodies in *Human Acts* reshapes our comprehension of the previous experiences. Our affective responses, according to White, present "an intensity that variously energizes, contradicts, deconstructs and overwhelms the narratives through which we live" (2017, 178). No longer is being crushed on bus rides as terrible as it might seem, while each crowded bus ride might evoke my story-driven experiences and negative affective responses to the passage from *Human Acts*. Meanwhile, others might consider the careless treatment of those crushed in Seoul, Houston and Gwangju to recognize the need to respect humanity and safeguard our fragile souls, regardless of time and place. This purposeful process of eliciting readers' acknowledgement of shared trauma can, according to Garloff, "build bridges between people from diverse historical backgrounds" (2020, 211).

5. Freeing lost souls: The embodied reader's task

Jeong-dae's testimony enables embodied readers to use their virtual bodies to affectively enact the demonstrators' helpless rage against the crimes. Through readers' intense embodied reading, the experiential feel of the passage becomes more potent and thus increases our transcultural empathy for the tower of bodies. The soldiers' burning of the bodies burns the readers' fragile souls by extension, and the invested readers experience Jeong-dae's rage against the perpetrators. The same resentment is expressed by Seon-ju on seeing the photograph of Dong-ho and the other young boys shot dead at the Provincial Office. Echoing Améry, resentment can be a spark for empathy and change. For Seon-ju, who has closed herself off to others after the abuse at the hands of the police, it is this resentment that makes her feel alive again.

For the readers, the rage towards the injustice depicted in *Human Acts* is especially provoked as they affectively simulate the burning of the tower of bodies with virtual bodies:

> Water in the viscera hissed and boiled, until the organs dried and shrivelled. Black smoke rolled off our rotten bodies in ragged, intermittent breaths, and in those places where there was nothing left to produce it the white gleam of bone was revealed. ... The tower of bodies collapsed into an indistinguishable heap of glowing embers, bodies formerly separate now mingled together... Souls shocked from their bodies (Han 2016, "The Boy's Friend"; emphasis added).

The viscerality of the burning corpses recalls memories of cooking meat on the stove top. Eun-sook, for example, feels sick when "watching [meat] cook on the hot plate. When the blood and juices rose to the surface, she had to look away" (ibid. "The Editor"). Some readers might be likewise affected by the image of burning bodies. The plural personal pronoun again ensures that readers feel the flames with the dead demonstrators. Through their mirror neurons, the flesh of the readers and the dead is now "mingled together." If number is strength, then they are empowered like Seon-ju at this moment of resentment.

Seon-ju is called upon—not just by the professor, but also by Lim Seong-hee, the former leader of the factory women's labour rights movement—, to tell her story. Lee highlights the importance of taking such actions: the survivors who see photographs of the dead could not stop the massacre, but they can now "acknowledge[e] a moral [albeit heavy] duty to retrieve and face the past" (Lee 2022, 363). While not directly involved in the uprising, readers are also responsible for remembering the lost lives and helping them to enter the next world. Like the body from the hospital, corpses must be found, cleansed and buried in funerals for

the souls to be freed from their trauma (Baker 2008). By affectively simulating the experiences of the boys, readers offer their "virtual bodies" to the dead and partake in the figurative reclaiming of their souls to assist them into their afterlives. Hence the readers, like the writer, remember the innocent humanity of the young boys "so that no one will ever be able to desecrate [their] memory again" (Han 2016, "The Writer").

In the same vein, Hang Kim states that, "to respond to the aspiration of the Gwangju citizens to be human in those days, [readers] have to stand at the grey zone where people suffered from nightmare and painful memory remembered by their bodies. This is nothing but the ethics of Gwangju" (2011, 620). By recalling the boys' identities, readers also "[meet] fellow human beings [such as the prisoner, Seon-ju and the boy's mother] who were not able to be there to stand with the boys. In so doing, [they] recognize them as embodiments of human acts in all their humane dignity, and as reminders of humanity's staggering capacity for inhumanity" (Lee 2022, 362). Through embodied reading, the readers conduct the same "funeral odes" for the souls as in the play "Snowflakes" (Han 2016, "The Editor"). The process reframes those killed during the uprising from victims to justice warriors. Like the once-hunched-over characters in "Snowflakes", the dead demonstrators can now stand up straight as the readers reclaim and free their souls through their virtual bodies.

Besides the dead, Han's *Human Acts* sheds light on the survivors' guilt and trauma. Although the survivors perceive themselves as secondary witnesses because they did not die from the violence (Assmann 2018, 207), their testimonies illustrate the effects that persist in the living in the aftermath. The prisoner suffers from cognitive dysfunction and long-term physical as well as phantom ailments (Pederson 2020, 225; see Jak 2018; Green et al. 2017; Lanius et al. 2003). Illustrating Van der Kolk's findings about the somatic symptoms of trauma (2014, 100; 143), Jin-su and the prisoner are insomniacs who depend on alcohol—their "emergency medicine"—to black out from life (Han 2016, "The Prisoner"). The young Kim Yeong-chae is admitted indefinitely to the psychiatric hospital due to violent and suicidal tendencies. The post-traumatic stress experienced by these former prisoners, who are only in their twenties, drains them of will and energy, with many of them committing suicide and being reduced to mere statistics.

Although the prisoner was freed soon after the trial and has a job as a taxi driver, he remains incarcerated by his trauma. His self-perception remains that of "[w]atery discharge and sticky pus, foul saliva, blood, tears and snot, piss and shit that soiled your pants" (Han 2016, "The Prisoner"). He has internalized the soldiers' physical abuse, which served to effectively "prove to [prisoners] that [they] are nothing but filthy stinking bodies. That [they] are no better than the carcasses of starving animals" (ibid.). Demonstrating the transmission of violence and trauma,

he states that "[s]ome memories never heal... [he is] not a safe person," reiterating his label of "violent element" given by the soldiers (ibid.). Similarly, people in Gwangju "all had something twisted about their faces, as though they were contorted with transparent scars" (ibid. "The Factory Girl"). Having been on the receiving end of brutality, they are all part of the cycle of violence.

Through embodied reading, readers, as though pulled into the in-group of the victims, are likewise tainted by the violence, with pseudo-wounds inscribed upon their virtual bodies and onto their experiential backgrounds. Recall that the readers have "met" the people who could not save the boys in the uprising. When the prisoner states, "I never let myself forget that every single person I meet is a member of this human race," he is referring to the readers too (Han 2016, "The Prisoner"). When he asks the professor, "[W]hat answers do you have for me? You, a human being just like me" (ibid.), the same question is posed to the readers. In writing about empathy for action, Stockwell states that "[i]nvolvement for action arises from a view of reading that is not passive and that extends beyond the end of the physical act of reading itself" (2020, 220). Just as readers offer their virtual bodies to the dead demonstrators during the active reading process, their metaphorical standing with fellow witnesses of the soldiers' cruelty in the post-reading phase illustrates their transcultural empathy. Lee describes the living in Gwangju as "soulless, as if the life has been sucked out of them" (2022, 364). But readers' transcultural empathy carried out through the act of remembering after closing Han Kang's novel ensures that the survivors will not be left behind. Such solidarity, even if stemming from resentment, can bring the living dead back to life. By engaging with the two extreme ends of affect related to trauma, readers can hence support Han's aim "eventually to reach human dignity—that bright place, where the flowers bloom" (Shin 2016).

5. Conclusion: The embodied reader's epilogue (20XX)

As a "gesture of refusal" (Shin 2016), *Human Acts* echoes Bradbury's (2012) point on remembering injustices and making sense of the past to overcome trauma and regain agency (also Fiaz et al. 2013). By remembering, individuals and communities resist the erasure of histories and the denial of crimes against humanity. Encompassed in the statement, "Testimony. Meaning. Memory. For the future," the characters in Han's novel must reopen "the door leading back to that summer" to work their way "back to the world before the massacre" (Han 2016, "The Factory Girl"). Doing so requires the bearing of witness and listening to the voices of the oppressed to demand accountability from the perpetrators. Doing so, according to Cathy Caruth, affords "the possibility of a future" (1996, 70).

Just as the writer provides an epilogue to *Human Acts*, the embodied reader

likewise produces an epilogue that retrieves the dignity of those innocently lost in wars. As the writer says in the sequel to *Human Acts*, *We Do Not Part*: "In retrospect it baffles me. Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively—brazenly—hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces?" (Han 2025, Ch. 1) Like the writer's affective responses to the indirect enactment of the savagery of the uprising, the embodied reader, now an implicated witness, is similarly changed and haunted by the narrative. Through the cognitive feedback loop, the embodied reader's encounter with the uprising triggers "the dazzling purity of conscience" and "the absence of fear" in the collective pursuit of justice (ibid. 2016, "The Prisoner"). Through the narrative situations, readers are hailed to use their conscience and contribute to the restitutional assemblage of the uprising, i.e., to produce new stories that constitute "a journey of viewpoints" (Lee 2022, 367). Readers do this by affectively enacting their own versions of the uprising through their diverse experiential backgrounds. The act of embodied reading hence anchors to the aims of *Human Acts*, which, with its multiple testimonies and its plot fragmentation, builds on "that ongoing and unfinished imagination that grapples with the memory of those who are lost but not forgotten" (ibid. 367).

This article has shown the process of embodied reading and its impact on readers. Some readers might share Dong-ho's brother's disposition and might not finish reading the novel for the good reason of not retriggering traumatic experiences. Others, however, might persist with the embodied reading, as discomforting as it might be. In doing so, they follow the writer's mantra of remembering the uprising and those affected: "But now, if we can only keep our eyes open, if we can all hold our gazes steady, until the bitter end..." (Han 2016, "The Writer"). The possibility of transcultural empathy as gestured by this embodied metaphorical expression goes beyond the 1980 event as the novel turns the uprising into a "truly universal" tragedy, with Gwangju "transcend[ing] the political and historical circumstances that have long used and abused the massacre" (Lee 2022, 369; Armitstead 2016). Han's decision not to celebrate her Nobel Prize win for *Human Acts* crucially marks the recognition of the continued aggression against humanity in the global world (Noh 2024). While there is no stopping to the transmission of trauma, readers, now "changed by the literary experience" in the post-reading phase (to cite Stockwell 2020, 196 again), can be called to action by their empathy to acknowledge the shared trauma and the importance of proactively enacting justice for others in current times.

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nCOGNITO
ARTICLE

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From Heroic Ethos to Social Order

Moral Characteristics of the *Hildebrandslied* and their Contemporary and Modern Interpretations

Abstract

The present study focuses on the *Hildebrandslied*, a medieval German heroic poem, which tells the story of a fight between father and son. The aim is to investigate how the characteristic moral elements of heroic narratives appear in the text, i.e., the values of loyalty and bravery, and the emotions pride, shame, and anger. The analysis of the text also highlights how narrative devices can influence the empathy and moral judgements of contemporary medieval and modern audiences regarding the two characters. The study suggests that the special combination of the narrative techniques makes the identification with the father figure generally more likely, which supports the potential function of the text as a moral parable. Through its exemplary role, the poem may have helped medieval Germanic people understand and apply a certain hierarchical norm system of loyalties, which enabled and accompanied the development of complex societies in Europe. However, since socio-historical circumstances have changed over time, it can be expected that there is a culture-related difference in the text interpretation of contemporary and modern audiences.

Keywords: *Hildebrandslied*, heroic narratives, loyalty, norm hierarchy, moral judgements, moral emotions, narrative devices, empathy, audience reception, moral parable

1. Introduction

Every society has moral norms and principles. Although the moral domains of cultures show considerable variation, the general purpose of the rules is to protect individuals, communities, and the divinity by limiting self-interested egocentric actions (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 373; Hogan 2022, 18). Our moral emotions and

judgements can motivate us to act in accordance with these norms. Emotions that are linked to moral norms respond to actions in different ways: the violation of norms evokes negative moral emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, whereas behaviours that conform to these rules evoke positive emotions, like gratitude, pride, or respect. Our moral emotions can be either reactive or reflexive, i.e. either directed at other people or ourselves. To make judgements, we have to interpret behaviours as morally significant, then they are labelled, e.g. as good or bad / just or unjust (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 382; Prinz 2009, 17–18 and 68–69; Prinz & Nichols 2010, 112–114 and 120). For this, we rely partly on conscious cognitive reasoning, which can be performed in a deontologist or a consequentialist way. In the first case, we decide based on a moral norm; in the second case, we assess the good or bad consequences of actions (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 369; Prinz & Nichols 2010, 113–115). Various studies and experiments have proved that emotions accompany and influence our moral thinking, and that the intensity of emotions and judgements correlate (Prinz 2009, 21–26). Nevertheless, the exact proportions of emotions and cognitive reasoning in the judgement process is still debated (see Greene 2008; Haidt 2001; Prinz & Nichols 2010).

According to Bruner (1986, quoted in Haidt & Joseph 2008, 389), moral reasoning basically operates in two modes: the paradigmatic and the narrative mode. Our culture supplies us with logic and scientific rules for the former and with texts or narratives for the latter. The close connection between the moral domain and texts is indicated by the fact that "[s]oon after human beings began to write, they began to write about morality", first in the explicit form of laws and prohibitions, later also in the form of stories "shaping emotions and intuitions" (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 367). In addition to influencing emotions, stories also "serve to store up cultural meanings and, through both their content and their structure, they help to guide the thinking of individuals" (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 389). Narratives can help us understand ethics and organise our moral concepts into a coherent system, motivating us to behave morally (Haidt & Joseph 2008, 390; Hogan 2022, 1).[1]

Because of their essential social functions, it is no wonder that we understand stories primarily from a moral perspective upon first reading. The different types of narratives (e.g. romantic, revenge, or heroic narratives) are generally, sometimes even cross-culturally, connected to emotion-based ethical ideals that elicit a certain moral response, and their plot focuses on specific moral emotions (Hogan 2022,

1. Hogan (2022, 1) brings the following example for the specific role of literature in morality: "Kǒngzǐ (Confucius) urged his followers to study the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shījīng*), explaining, 'The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them, you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father and the remoter one of serving one's prince' (*Analects* 17.9)".

69–73).[2] As we are normally not neutral to stories or characters but get emotionally involved, the process of interpretation also depends on our feelings (Horváth 2021, 104). If we can empathise with the characters and like them, our moral judgement can eventually be more favourable (Toepfer 2016, 46). Literary devices that can influence the readers include detailed descriptions of the characters, their motivations, thoughts, and emotions (Barthel 2008, 32).

The role of temporal and geographical distance as well as of cultural differences in eliciting different moral interpretations of the same narrative is a question of peculiar interest. Since such factors can hinder emotional identification with characters and can reduce the comprehensibility of a story's logic and context, older literary texts will not necessarily have the same moral effect on contemporary and modern audiences. Studies adopting a cognitively-informed approach to classical or medieval literary texts can shed light on how modern readers differ culturally and cognitively from contemporary readers (see Harbus 2010, 22–24).

To see how all this works in a specific case, I will analyse the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (English: *Lay of Hiltibrant*), which is an illustrative example of the integration of ethical aspects into stories. It belongs to the German medieval literary canon and reflects events taking place in 5th-century Italy under Ostrogothic rule.[3] The poem itself may have been composed around the 7th century in the Lombard Kingdom in northern Italy. Its surviving fragmentary version was written down in the 9th century in the monastery of Fulda by two scribes. It consists of 68 alliterating lines and is very probably a copy of another written text. The exact oral and written transmission to Fulda is unclear (Broszinski 1985, 139–142; Kartschoke 2000, 125–127). The poem tells the story of two Ostrogothic warriors, Hildebrand and his son Hadubrand. Hildebrand's lord, the legitimate ruler Dietrich, had to flee earlier from his adversary, Otacher, who is a usurper from Dietrich's and Hildebrand's perspective. After spending about thirty years in exile with his lord, Hildebrand returns home with an army. They are stopped on the way by Hadubrand's army, a military contingent of the usurped kingdom. The exact circumstances are unclear, since the text does not give a detailed description

2. For example, in revenge narratives, the protagonist typically suffers a deep personal loss caused by someone and seeks to punish the wrongdoer (often through secret violent or painful means), but this can lead to unintended harm to innocent people. The ending is tragic or ambiguous, highlighting the moral consequences of vengeance. The dominant character emotions are hatred and anger. Readers generally feel sympathy but may also react with disgust and disapproval due to the (unjust) violence of the character and the violation of social norms. Revenge stories focus on the moral ideals of loyalty and bravery, and they implicitly support social authority (Hogan 2022, 99–100).
3. Odoacer (in the poem: Otacher), King of Italy, who had deposed the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was killed and succeeded by the Ostrogoth Theodoric the Great (in the poem: Dietrich) in 493. However, the *Hildebrandslied* reverses the historical facts, portraying Otacher as the aggressor who drives Dietrich away and takes over his land.

of the situation. Father and son meet on the battlefield as chosen champions of their armies and prepare for a duel. They are both unaware of each other's identities, so Hildebrand asks the younger man about his father and kin. Hadubrand replies, revealing his name, and recounts what he has learnt about his father from older people: his father was Hildebrand, a brave and renowned retainer of the ruler Dietrich, whom Hildebrand followed into exile, leaving his wife and young child behind. Hadubrand thinks his father must be dead by now. Hildebrand realises that his opponent is his own son and indirectly informs him that he is his father. He wants to resolve the confrontation by offering Hadubrand golden arm rings as a gesture of his goodwill, but his son interprets this as a trap. Hadubrand insults the older warrior and states firmly that, to the best of his knowledge, his father was killed abroad in battle. Hildebrand sees now that the duel is inevitable and laments their fate that, returning home after thirty years of exile, he should kill his son or vice versa. Then he changes the tone of his speech, and provoking Hadubrand, he expresses his readiness to fight. The poem then describes their combat, but the text breaks off in the middle of it, leaving the outcome unknown.

Previous studies of the *Hildebrandslied* that discuss moral issues concentrate primarily on the dilemma faced by Hildebrand (whether to follow the heroic ethical code and fight, or to reconcile with his son), on the negative judgement of Hadubrand (regarding the older warrior as a deceiver), or on individual moral emotions. These studies analyse the poem mainly in the context of other Germanic or Indo-European literary works (e.g. Birkhan 2002; Katona 2021; Schumacher 2003). Some scholars focus on the surviving written version to determine why it was recorded in the 9th century. They regard the story either as a negative moral example, i.e. a Christian warning against murdering one's relatives because of the warrior ethos, or as a religious means of the conversion of the pagan Saxons, or as a mirror of political events of the 9th century (see Kartschoke 2000, 128; Neuser 1990, 1–2). In the first part of the present paper, I try to broaden the perspective by providing a comprehensive description of the moral values, emotions, and judgements in the *Hildebrandslied* that are typical of heroic narratives. I also attempt to interpret the poem in the context of socio-historical changes in the Early Middle Ages, building on the idea of the hierarchisation of values (see Hogan 2002; O'Keeffe 2013) as an essential factor in the formation and existence of warrior societies. My aim is to show that the *Hildebrandslied* could have functioned as a moral parable throughout the centuries, reflecting and facilitating social changes in early medieval Europe.

Medieval literary texts can be characterised by a very close relationship between text and audience, due to their primarily oral presentation (Barthel 2008, 17). In section 3, I will proceed to discuss what narrative devices can be found in the *Hildebrandslied* that are assumed to influence the audience's moral reactions,

as this can be relevant for the moral function of the narrative. A comparable study was published by Toepfer (2016), which presented new perspectives on the cognitive analysis of the poem. However, her study focuses only on devices that guide the interpretation towards tragedy-specific effects and treats the audience as a homogeneous entity. I will supplement her observations by adding further narrative techniques to the discussion. Furthermore, my aim is to explore how the interpretations of contemporary German(ic) and modern audiences differ, which again influences the text's function as a moral example. Such differences between medieval and modern mental representations are also implied by Barthel (2008, 1–2) and Harbus (2010, 22–24).

Through my analysis, I hope to prove that the *Hildebrandslied* did not merely draw attention to the problems related to the heroic ethos, but it had the potential to help people organise moral values into a hierarchical system and accept the ethics of their society. Although the text has lost this function over time, many of the poem's moral aspects remain intelligible to the modern reader.

2. Moral values, emotions, and judgements in the *Hildebrandslied* as a heroic poem

2.1 Conflict and hierarchy of moral values

The *Hildebrandslied* belongs to the relatively small corpus of surviving heroic poetry in Germanic languages (Birkhan 2002, 61; Kartschoke 2000, 124). Germanic people very likely had various types of shorter and longer heroic narratives with a long oral tradition; their existence is mentioned in many historic accounts from the 1st century AD on (cf. Birkhan 2002, 55–56; Kartschoke 2000, 124–125). The surviving texts contain recurring motifs such as "courageous death, the good ruler and the grasping, the generous act and the cowardly, the loyal retainer and the treacherous" (Frank 2013, 84). As for moral norms and ideals, heroic narratives are generally "connected with a hierarchical and militaristic ethics—an ethics of loyalty, bravery, and related virtues" (Hogan 2022, 72). The idea of positing a value hierarchy could enrich the *Hildebrandslied* studies, especially when examined against the socio-historical background, as I will show below.

The central moral value of loyalty appears in the *Hildebrandslied* in an ambiguous form since, in the case of Hildebrand, two important principles collide: according to the Germanic heroic code (see O'Keeffe 2013, 101–103), warriors had to be brave in battle, retainers were expected to protect and revenge their lord, and remain loyal to him.[4] "As the Old English poem *Andreas* suggests, if the

4. This heroic ethos, present in medieval texts, was described by the Roman historian Tacitus as early as the 1st century AD: "In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; it is disgraceful for the companions not to equal their chief; but it is reproach and infamy during a

lord were to go into exile, his retainers were apparently expected to accompany him" (O'Keeffe 2013, 103). In return, the lord rewarded loyalty by giving land, gifts, and rank. The other crucial principle is that of loyalty to family and kin, which is a basic universal human norm. Murder and family feuds, for example, are considered great sins in the Old High German poem *Muspilli* (Birkhan 2002, 90).

It is the cruel fate of Hildebrand that he is confronted with the same kind of moral dilemma twice in his life (see Birkhan 2002, 71; Katona 2021, 143). First, when he has to choose between following his lord, Dietrich, in exile or staying with his family, protecting his wife and child. Life repeats itself when, thirty years later, he must decide whether to fight against his son and stay loyal to his own army, or to try to reunite with his family but violate the heroic ethical code. The surviving fragment of the *Hildebrandslied* only details this second dilemma (lines 30ff.):

- Hildebrand realises that his opponent is his son.
- He indirectly tells Hadubrand that he is his father (line 32: *a man so closely akin*)[5] and offers him valuable arm rings with positive intentions (line 35).[6]
- After Hadubrand rejects the gift, Hildebrand expresses his sorrow over his fate (lines 49ff.):

  'Ah, now, mighty God!', said Hildebrand, 'a woeful fate will occur.
  [...]
  now must my own child strike me with the sword,
  smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.

- In the end, Hildebrand not only surrenders to fate, but also demonstrates his bravery and readiness to fight in accordance with the heroic ethos. He mocks his opponent and challenges him to combat (lines 55–57 and 60–62):

whole succeeding life to retreat from the field surviving him. To aid, to protect him; to place their own gallant actions to the account of his glory, is their first and most sacred engagement. The chiefs fight for victory; the companions for their chief" (Tacitus, chapter 14).

5. Citations in the paper follow the English translation in Armbruster & Broszinski (1985). For the easily accessible online translation of Ashliman (1997/2013) visit https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/hildebrand.html
6. In the English translation in Armbruster & Broszinski (1985) Hildebrand does this as a token of *favour,* Ashliman (1997/2013) uses the word *friendship*. The original Old High German text uses the word *huldi,* which can mean both, according to Schützeichel's (1969) Old High German dictionary.

> Yet you now may easily – if your courage serves you –
> win the armour from so noble a man,
> carry off the spoils, if you have any right on your side.
> [...]
> Let him who may, discover
> which man may today boast both the suits of armour
> or be master of both these breastplates.

It is clear from the text that Hildebrand first opts for the loyalty to kin, acting on spontaneous personal emotions. It is only when he is rejected by his son that he turns back to warrior loyalty. Thus, the poem depicts this underlying moral value of heroic narratives as the result of a conscious, deontologist decision based on a moral norm.[7]

At this point, it is important to mention striking parallels between the *Hildebrandslied* and other narratives that also relate to the conflict of the two loyalties discussed above. One example is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which contains an Old English account of the feud and power struggle between Cynewulf and Cyneheard, two royal kinsmen in the Kingdom of Wessex in the 8th century. At the end of the given chronicle entry, Prince Cyneheard and his warriors slay King Cynewulf with some of his men. As a reaction, a larger group of Cynewulf's retainers come to revenge his death. Cyneheard tries to win their support as a potential new king by offering them money and land and revealing that some kinsmen of the royal retainers are in his company. The loyal retainers reject his offer, answering that no kinsman is as dear to them as their dead lord and that they do not want to follow his murderer. At the same time, they promise their kinsmen in Cyneheard's company free passage if they leave the prince, which they refuse (O'Keeffe 2013, 104–105). In this narrative, "the focal point of the story is social order" and "the conflicting demands of kin and group", where social order "is seen to triumph [...] as the demands of kinship, though pressing, give way to the demands of loyalty to lord" (O'Keeffe 2013, 105). Another example is the Sanskrit Vedic poem *Bhagavad Gita*, which also focuses on the conflict between warrior duty (kṣatriyadharma) and family duty (familial dharma). In this text, Prince Arjuna faces his kinsmen as enemies on a battlefield and feels it immoral to fight against them. However, the deity Krishna, who accompanies him, convinces him that warrior duty is superior to all other duties and moral principles (Hogan 2022, 95–97). Hogan argues that

7. This outcome is not very surprising since reasoning and rational decision generally seem to play a decisive role in moral dilemmas (Horváth 2021, 105).

> family bonds are perhaps the types of moral commitment that are most likely to inhibit an individual's full commitment of his or her life to the larger society, especially in the case of war. Thus, it becomes particularly socially important to encourage people to place kṣatriyadharma above familial dharma in cases where the two are incompatible (Hogan 2022, 96).

Interpreting the *Hildebrandslied* in the context of narratives such as the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode and the *Bhagavad Gita* can shed light on some considerable insights. It seems plausible that the two loyalties, which are regularly contrasted in *Hildebrandslied* studies, are not equally significant values. Instead, they may form a hierarchy of norms, in which warrior loyalty precedes loyalty to kin. This potential hierarchy is even highlighted in the Old High German poem by repetition, combined with intensification: Hildebrand faces the same morally challenging situation twice in his life. He decides in both cases in favour of his lord/army, but in the first case, he "only" has to leave his family, whereas in the second case, he has to kill his son, thus destroying his whole bloodline.

One might ask at this point what the underlying motivating factor behind this norm hierarchy can be. Both Hogan (2022) and O'Keeffe (2013) stress the establishment of social order in this regard. If we go back in history, late antique and early medieval Germanic societies were heterogeneous political entities consisting of various ethnic elements, not exclusively of Germanic origin. These societies were constantly at war, especially in the Migration Period, which resulted in a new military kingship (Wolfram 1997, 8 and 18–19). Therefore, it was not uncommon for people of the same ethnic background or even for relatives to fight each other as members of rival political formations. Obviously, such a warrior society needed a norm system that supported its existence and was therefore dependent on the principle of warrior loyalty. Here, I would like to refer to the theory of Eibl (2004, 158ff.), which describes the transition of human dispositions into society (*Vergesellschaftung*). According to this theory, people are born with the general evolutionary principle of kin selection and the favouring of relatives. The expansion of kinship groups to complex societies comprising individuals who do not necessarily know each other can lead to moral conflicts. The reason for this is that the old norm of kinship solidarity is not replaced, but supplemented by the new moral principles, which can lead to conflicting loyalties (Eibl 2004, 158–159 and 172–173). Regarding the nature of Germanic societies of the Migration Period, which both the plot and the oral composition of the *Hildebrandslied* can be dated back to, the warrior loyalty of the heroic code could eventually predominate over other norms that might threaten social cohesion. This is also suggested by the two parallel texts that I previously cited, according to Hogan (2022) and O'Keeffe (2013).

In my opinion, the *Hildebrandslied* reflects the process of the establishment of early medieval Germanic societies and the social changes that accompanied it: Hildebrand and Hadubrand are members of the same ethnic/kin group, yet they belong to different political formations (Hildebrand and his fellow warriors were maybe even integrated into the Hun Empire during their exile). They both live in a warrior society, where the ancient norm of kinship solidarity was supplemented by the norm of heroic loyalty, which leads to moral conflict situations. The socio-historical chronology of the two loyalties is reflected in Hildebrand's reactions (first opting for reconciliation with his son, then fighting as a champion of his army). The fact that the same kind of moral dilemma is repeated in the poem twice and that the outcome is in accordance with the heroic code in both cases, indicates in my view that heroic loyalty is presented here (based on real life) as the superior norm. In this context, it becomes clear why Hadubrand does not seem to judge his father negatively at the beginning of the dialogue, when he names his father and recounts the story of his exile. Instead, Hadubrand presents a value-neutral account of the past (lines 18–22):

> Long ago he went to the east, he fled Otacher's hatred,
> away with Dietrich and many of his warriors.
> He left at home sitting
> in the dwelling a young wife, an ungrown child
> bereft of inheritance. He rode away to the east.

In this case, too, the conscious, norm-based judgement has taken overhand, putting the interests of society before the individual.

From this point of view, the *Hildebrandslied* does not simply show the conflicting values of warrior life or criticise the heroic code but rather appears to have the effect of a moral parable about the superiority of warrior loyalty in the norm system of a military society. Hildebrand is, in this respect, the hero, the ideal representative of this society with its heroic code. His "status as a hero [...] will not rest upon the fact that he wins the battle, but rather on the fact that he has to bring himself to fight it at all" (Murdoch 1996, 43). This model function of the narrative was very likely still valid, when the poem was written down and/or copied. The relationship between lord and retainer and the essence of the heroic code lived on in the social system of early feudalism. Warrior mentality was still necessary because the Germanic kingdoms were often re-formed through external warfare, conquest, and internal power struggles within ruling families. This was definitely true for the Carolingian Empire in the 9th century, when successors of Charlemagne rebelled and fought against each other through decades—and when the surviving version of the *Hildebrandslied* was put to parchment.[8]

8. That the Germanic heroic ethos was still a strong motive even in the 10th or 11th century is clearly

2.2 Moral emotions and judgements of the main characters

Moving on to moral emotions, heroic narratives generally depict some aspects of pride, shame, and anger (Hogan 2022, 72; see also Frank 2013, 84). These emotions are usually connected to the moral values of loyalty and bravery. According to cognitive theories, pride relies on the positive self-evaluation of our "social and moral acceptability", based on some physical or intellectual achievement. It can be an important motivational factor in moral behaviour (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007, 346 and 361). In the *Hildebrandslied*, pride appears as a reflexive individual emotion right at the beginning, when father and son meet and prepare for a single combat (lines 1-3):

> This I have heard told,
> that warriors met singly,
> Hildebrand and Hadubrand between two armies.

They are probably acting as the leading champions of their armies (Kartschoke 2000, 126) in order to resolve a military conflict through their duel; otherwise, they would not have time for the long dialogue (lines 11–62) during a normal battle. The situation could evoke pride in Hildebrand and Hadubrand because of their social and moral acceptance: they are likely to have been chosen as champions because of their bravery, strength, and past achievements that correspond to the ethical standards of the warrior society. This means that they are acknowledged positively by their lords and fellow warriors. Moreover, they should represent their community in a conflict situation, which role they obviously accept, and that again can earn them positive feedback from their people, making them feel proud. This emotion can motivate them to act in the combat in accordance with heroic moral values.

As the emotion of pride can also be connected to one's identity group, another version of this emotion can be identified in the text (see Hogan 2022, 72). At the beginning of the dialogue, Hadubrand boasts about the bravery of his father and his special position in the favour of Dietrich (lines 26–28):

> the dearest of warriors [...]
> He was always in the forefront of the army; fighting was always too dear
> to him. He was renowned among brave men.

demonstrated by the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. It recounts the historic Battle of Maldon in 991, in which an Anglo-Saxon army fought against invading Vikings. The poem praises warrior loyalty and bravery: it depicts the extremes of the heroic ethos as faithful retainers revenge their fallen lord and die in the hopeless battle, while it criticises those men who flee cowardly (see O'Keeffe 2013, 111 and 114–117).

This signals that Hadubrand is proud of his father (Murdoch 1996, 40), i.e. his family and lineage, which is his immediate identity group. Besides, his previous description of his father (see lines 18–22 above) choosing warrior loyalty over family and thus following the superior moral ideal in a very delicate situation may also be a source of pride for him, as he has an ancestor with such high moral standards.

The second characteristic moral emotion in heroic stories is shame. It can be regarded as the counterpart of pride, since it functions "as an emotional moral barometer, providing immediate and salient feedback on our social and moral acceptability" (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007, 346), but with a negative valency. Shame involves a focus on the self and one's identity (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007, 349–350). In heroic narratives, this emotion is commonly depicted as "'public shame,' which is to say, shame before some body of observers" (Hogan 2022, 93). In honour-based social groups, like medieval warrior societies, shame is a feeling that one definitely tries to avoid, since a shameful act would result in the loss of honour, social exclusion, or rejection, which could be worse than death itself. In heroic texts, the characters often invest a lot of energy in avoiding public shame (see Murdoch 1996, 5; Țăranu 2022, 243–244 and 247). According to Murdoch (1996, 12), a Germanic hero "is normally shown in foregrounded action, carrying out a task of importance which it is his duty to complete, driven by an inner imperative which is dependent also upon the social constraints which he has accepted. To waver from this—however unacceptable the task—would damage his reputation".

In the Old High German poem, when Hildebrand tries to avoid the fight and offers his son precious arm rings, Hadubrand misinterprets this as a treacherous, immoral act aimed at killing him. There are several reasons for his negative judgement of Hildebrand and the situation. First, he has heard about the death of his father from people he considers reliable (lines 15–16: *our people, old and experienced men*; lines 42–43: *mariners travelling westwards across the Vandal Sea*). He also reacts on the basis of a stereotype concerning Hildebrand's age. Since it is unlikely that an active warrior would live very long, Hadubrand reasons that Hildebrand must have become old[9] because he is a coward who is used to applying deception. In this context, old age is a reason to be morally disqualified. So, as a result of this cognitive reasoning, Hadubrand interprets the arm rings as a means to distract and kill him.[10] Accordingly, Hildebrand's claim to be a very close relative is considered by Hadubrand just as much a lie (Schumacher 2003, 185–187).[11]

9. Since Hildebrand later says that he has spent about thirty years in exile, and he has a grown-up son experienced in warfare, he must be at least fifty years old, but rather closer to sixty.
10. For a detailed description of the possible ways in which the arm rings could be exchanged, see Wagner (1997, 320–323).
11. According to a less common interpretation, Hadubrand believes Hildebrand, but consciously decides against his exiled father because such a relative would be disadvantageous to him at home

As a reaction, he humiliates Hildebrand in front of both armies,[12] accusing him openly (lines 39–41):

> You are exceedingly crafty, old Hun,[13]
> you entice me with your words, you want to hurl me with your spear.
> So you are greatly aged, so continually deceptive.

However, since Hildebrand is not a deceiver and has no such immoral intentions at all, he cannot feel real shame. First, he reacts as a father, feeling sorrow and deep emotional pain over his fate. He regrets not the insult, but the failed reconciliation. Nevertheless, the public shaming is enough for him to change the course of his actions, and he behaves as it is "demanded by the political framework in which he operates" (Murdoch 1996, 34). He tries to defend his wounded honour by proving his courage in battle and accepting the inevitable fight, in order to avoid being perceived as shameful (lines 49–54):

> 'Ah, now, mighty God!', said Hildebrand, 'a woeful fate will occur.
> I have been wondering of summers and winters sixty,[14]
> where I have always been assigned to the company of the spearmen,
> whereas at no city has death been inflicted on me;
> now must my own child strike me with the sword,
> smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.

Just as in the case of loyalty at the level of moral values, there is also an antagonism at the level of moral emotions with regard to Hildebrand's warrior/social identity and private life. This manifests itself in the irreconcilable conflict between his fear of "the possibility of living the shame of giving up battle" and his parental love for his child (Țăranu 2022, 256).

"The humiliation of the main characters is likely to inspire anger" (Hogan 2022, 93), which is the third characteristic moral emotion of heroic narratives. Anger is

(see Toepfer 2016, 42). In this case, he too faces the moral dilemma of choosing between loyalty to his lord and loyalty to kin. He decides in favour of the former, just like his father did earlier.

12. Since the opponents later throw spears at each other at the beginning of the combat (lines 63–64), they must stand at a greater distance from each other during the conversation, so that the other men can very probably hear it (Wagner 1997, 323).
13. The arm rings of Hildebrand were originally a gift from *the lord of the Huns* (lines 33–35). He is believed to be King Attila the Hun, who lived in the 5th century, just like the other historical figures in the *Hildebrandslied*. Clearly, the appearance of the jewels must give the impression that Hildebrand is a Hun himself. (Interestingly, the offering of precious arm rings that used to be in possession of King Attila to avoid a fight appears as a motif in another literary work based on Germanic legend, namely in *Waltharius*, an epic poem written in Latin probably in the 9th or 10th century.)
14. According to the prevailing academic view, this means 30 years (see Birkhan 2002, 64, footnote 45).

often elicited by "violations of autonomy norms" or challenges to a person's individual rights, for example, if someone is insulted (Prinz & Nichols 2010, 129–130). This emotion then "generates an inclination for aggression and retributive punishment" (Prinz & Nichols 2010, 125). This description suits both warriors in the Old High German poem. Hadubrand misinterprets Hildebrand's attempt at reconciliation as an open insult against his bravery and common sense (i.e. against his person). This triggers anger, leading him to humiliate Hildebrand aggressively. Prinz and Nichols (2010, 136) contrast anger with disgust. The main difference is that "one can be angry at a person for doing something wrong without feeling as if that person is intrinsically bad. Disgust, in contrast, tends to transfer from action to person". This refines the picture, as in my view, Hadubrand also feels disgust, transferring perceived immoral acts (lying, deceiving, and cowardice) to Hildebrand himself. As for Hildebrand, he challenges his son in a form of verbal combat and questions his bravery (lines 55–57):

> Yet you may now easily – if your courage serves you –
> win the armour from so noble a man,
> carry off the spoils, if you have any right on your side.

After insulting each other, their duel—which is a form of physical aggression and physical punishment—is inevitable.

3. Narrative characteristics influencing the moral emotions and judgements of the audience

It is an intriguing question how the story and the 9th-century written version of the *Hildebrandslied* have been received through the ages. In this respect, empathy is a crucial factor because it can influence moral emotions and judgements. In the literature on moral concepts, there are various interpretations of empathy. I use this term for the process of understanding and imagining another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspective, which means imagining everything from his/her point of view. Yet, while we see the world primarily through this person's eyes, we are still aware that we are two distinct individuals. For empathy, we need a significant amount of information about the target person and the situation or events happening to him/her (Barthel 2008, 31; Goldie 2000, 195–196 and 198–199). In literary texts, this can be achieved, for example, with the help of narrative devices that place a character into the foreground, showing his/her motivations, thoughts, and emotions explicitly; or we can construct these mind contents ourselves, relying on certain text elements (Barthel 2008, 31–32). Barthel (2008, 14–15) states that empathy is individual, i.e. subjective, and that we do not have enough information about medieval people to describe their responses to texts and narrative devices

with 100% certainty. Nevertheless, she assumes that medieval authors also applied strategies to guide the empathy of their audiences (Barthel 2008, 27).

An important device in the *Hildebrandslied* is the repetition of content elements. In my opinion, it is used to emphasise the most important aspects of the story:

- the close blood relationship of the two warriors (line 4: *father and son*; line 17: *my father was called Hildebrand*; line 23: *my father*;[15] line 32: *a man so closely akin*;[16] line 53: *my own child*),
- the theme of exile and foreign lands/people (line 18: *Long ago he went to the east*; line 22: *He rode away to the east.*; line 35: *the lord of the Huns*; line 39: *old Hun*; lines 42–43: *mariners travelling westwards across the Vandal Sea*; line 48: *an exile*; line 50: *I have been wandering*;[17] line 58: *eastern folk*),
- fighting, which the characters prepare for at the beginning and carry out at the end. There are altogether 29 lines where fighting, warriors, or armour are mentioned (e.g. line 3: *two armies*; line 6: *rode to the fight*; line 26: *the dearest of warriors*; line 37: *lance*; line 46: *armour*; line 51: *spearmen*; line 59: *refuses you combat*; line 63: *spears of ash-wood*).

These three aspects are causally related: the combat occurs because Hildebrand and his army are considered foreigners (and therefore enemies) by Hadubrand and his army, while the blood relationship connects the two opponents and is responsible for the tragic nature of the fight. Expressions of kinship reflect Hildebrand's and the audience's knowledge of the family relationship, whereas expressions of foreignness show Hadubrand's viewpoint. These two alternating perspectives recur throughout the poem. This technique of multiperspectivity could potentially provide a basis for the reader's developing empathy towards both characters.

The story is told by a narrator, who has longer text passages at the beginning (lines 1–10), in the middle (lines 33–35), and at the end (lines 63–68) of the poem. These passages introduce the situation and the protagonists briefly and describe physical actions.[18] The narrator is completely neutral towards the two warriors and the conflict, and he does not make any judging comments. The rest of the poem is a dialogue, which is a characteristic feature of Germanic heroic poetry (Birkhan 2002, 73). First-person utterances make it easier for us to connect with characters and share their viewpoints and feelings (Barthel 2008, 32 and 78). In the *Hildebrandslied*, both the father and the son characters have almost equal "speaking

15. It is in line 23 in the original Old High German poem.
16. It is in line 31 in the original Old High German poem.
17. The original text also adds: *ur lante* ('abroad').
18. Apart from that, he only makes six short identifications of the speakers during the conversation, e.g. *Hadubrand spoke, Hildebrand's son* (line 14), *said Hildebrand* (line 49).

time", but the surviving text clearly favours the father in terms of content (see Bostock 1955, 38; Toepfer 2016, 39–40 and 44). Almost 90% of the conversation in the fragment is either spoken by Hildebrand or supplies information about him in Hadubrand's lines. This surplus of information about Hildebrand can give the audience more opportunity to develop empathy towards the father figure (cf. Goldie 2000, 198). One can imagine how he might feel: happy to see his grown-up, brave warrior son, proud to hear a positive account of his own past deeds, sad because his son believes him to be dead and refuses to reconcile, and crushed at the prospect of having to kill his only descendant.

Empathy can also be facilitated by the transparency of the thoughts and emotions of characters (Barthel 2008, 32). In the poem, Hildebrand's exclamations reveal his emotional excitement (Toepfer 2016, 42); first, when he tells his son that he is his father: *I call the great God [...] from Heaven above to witness* (line 30). A second exclamation appears when he is rejected and accused of deception. Here, it seems as if he were talking only to himself (Toepfer 2016, 42) or—if we picture a live performance by a minstrel—to the viewers, expressing memories of his physically exhausting past and his sorrow over the tragic future (lines 49–54):

> 'Ah, now, mighty God!', said Hildebrand, 'a woeful fate will occur.
> I have been wondering of summers and winters sixty,
> where I have always been assigned to the company of the spearmen,
> whereas at no city has death been inflicted on me;
> now must my own child strike me with the sword,
> smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.

Besides Hildebrand's dominance in the dialogue, the relative transparency of his mind may also make it easier for the audience to experience empathy and compassion for him to a greater extent, and to judge him more favourably than his son (see Barthel 2008, 80; Toepfer 2016, 42).

The poem also uses the technique of background knowledge, as Hadubrand is unaware of what Hildebrand and we know, namely, that his opponent is his father (Toepfer 2016, 39). The fact that the reader and the father figure share this piece of information presumably influences the audience's empathy again in his favour. Since the audience knows that the insults against Hildebrand are unsubstantiated, they may feel morally legitimated[19] compassion for the father (Barthel 2008, 37; Toepfer 2016, 41). On the other hand, Hadubrand's lack of knowledge can make him less blameworthy when he publicly shames and rejects his father for reasons that do not correspond to reality (see Hogan 2022, 167).

19. According to Barthel (2008, 37), the audience can feel morally legitimated compassion towards a character experiencing undeserved, deep sorrow, which is described in the text repeatedly or in detail. This sorrow is undeserved if the character has not acted against the moral norms described or implied by the text.

Another narrative device—a longer flashback—reinforces these effects. The flashback consists of 15 lines at the beginning of the dialogue, where Hadubrand tells the story of his father that he heard from older people. In my opinion, this part of the poem has two functions: Hadubrand acts here like a narrator, providing the audience with information about Hildebrand. Both the quantity and the positive nature of this information direct empathy and appreciation towards the older warrior (see Toepfer 2016, 40). On the other hand, the flashback also shows Hadubrand's real judgement of a father he believes to be dead. Thus, we see that Hadubrand's emotions and moral judgements about Hildebrand differ depending on whether he thinks of him as his dead father or his current adversary. In the former case, he speaks of him as a brave, loyal, and beloved warrior, but as a crafty and treacherous man in the latter. As a result, the audience can realise that Hadubrand actually respects the father he knows and can judge him more leniently.

With the help of these narrative devices, the audience gains insight into the perspectives of both father and son. The fragment also generates a potential for compassion for both warriors because they embody heroic values (Toepfer 2016, 43) and try to act morally. However, most of the narrative techniques place Hildebrand in the foreground. He is also portrayed in the fragment as the active, agile participant in the situation (Bostock 1955, 38; Toepfer 2016, 44). Consequently, readers/viewers are drawn more deeply into his mind and feelings, can empathise more strongly with him, and can form a more positive attitude towards him.

The above techniques make use of the fact that people are usually very motivated to follow the perspectives of fictional characters (Szabó 2021, 55). Nevertheless, "it is frequently a matter of drawing on common connections from real life in order to understand characters in the fictional work" (Hogan 2022, 163). The *Hildebrandslied* contains universal elements that can serve as such common connections. The motifs of conflict and separation among family members can evoke personal memories, intensifying the emotional involvement of readers/viewers, due to the innate kin selection disposition and our tendency to favour relatives (cf. Eibl 2004, 158–159). However, when the *Hildebrandslied* is interpreted by present-day readers, the temporal and cultural distance[20] can hinder emotional engagement and cognitive understanding because modern audiences normally cannot draw on Germanic moral values and traditions to contextualise their interpretation (cf. Barthel 2008, 1–2). As Țăranu (2022, 249) puts it: in medieval literature, "we encounter a moral and emotional landscape rooted in shame and honour that appears strikingly alien from the institution- and dignity-based, modern liberal societies". Besides, since appreciation and judgement are formed based on prevailing norms and val-

20. The problematic aspect of language and the role of translation in the interpretation of the poem will not be treated in this paper.

ues (Barthel 2008, 42), their changes in time or differences between cultures can result in different reactions of the audiences. Such a culture-specific element is, in my interpretation, the heroic code with warrior loyalty as a superior moral ideal, which is very probably unfamiliar to modern readers. Because of this, present-day audiences are unlikely to take this ethos into consideration in their cognitive reasoning processes. As a result, they may condemn Hildebrand for leaving his wife and child and not giving up the duel against his son. They may also regard shaming and insulting as immoral deeds, whereas back then these were absolutely acceptable and expected actions, fulfilling the heroic ethos. For the same reason, modern audiences may fail to recognise the feeling of warrior pride of the two champions. To take another example, if Katona (2021, 139) is right that modern audiences tend to forget that the conversation takes place within hearing distance of two armies, then for them the shaming and the insults will not be considered public acts. Therefore, present-day readers will probably not experience the same degree and quality of emotions towards the two main characters as the text might imply. In my view, these gaps and differences in understanding do not change Hildebrand's status as the hero of the text, but they make it less likely or even impossible for the average modern reader to see him as the embodiment of the norm hierarchy that held Germanic societies together.

4. Conclusion

The application of theories about moral concepts and about their appearance in literary texts has revealed important characteristics of the *Hildebrandslied* and has hopefully led to new insights. As an example of Germanic heroic poetry, the text contains the key moral elements of heroic narratives, as discussed in section 2. Crucial underlying values of the story are warrior loyalty and bravery in accordance with the heroic code. These values motivate the presence of certain emotions such as individual and social pride of the characters, implicit shame (that every warrior wants to avoid), as well as anger and disgust, which are evoked in Hadubrand through the seemingly immoral deeds of his opponent. Apart from pride, these emotions have negative valency, whether they are reflexive or reactive. The judgements of the two warriors that guide their actions largely rely on norm-based thinking.

In fact, it is the norms of their society—specifically, warrior loyalty and loyalty to kin—that lead to a specific moral dilemma. In this regard, I considered the possibility of a norm hierarchy originating in socio-historical circumstances. The priority of loyalty to lord has already been suggested in the case of other texts including the same value conflict. The norm hierarchy could have supported the existence of military societies of Germanic people in Late Antiquity and the Early

Middle Ages. This would make the *Hildebrandslied* a mirror of the social and cultural changes of the Migration Period and early feudalism, when (smaller) ethnic groups were organised into larger societies and state formations that led constant warfare. Throughout its oral and written existence, the *Hildebrandslied* could have functioned as a moral parable for contemporary Germanic people. It showed the realities and complexities of warrior life, placed the heroic code into the broader context of a complex moral system, and motivated people to accept the hierarchy of loyalties with the heroic code at the top, in the interest of society and its elite. This could explain why the poet or the scribes do not give details about the characters' appearance, age, and military position, on the size and composition of the two armies, or on the exact location and cause of the military conflict (Bostock 1955, 36–37). One is not interested "in Hildebrand and Hadubrand as individuals so much as in the situation in which they found themselves" (Bostock 1955, 37), which can thus be more easily internalised.

As section 3 demonstrates, the fragmentary poem employs various narrative techniques that can influence the audience. All in all, the text evokes a certain level of compassion and understanding for both characters, but Hildebrand is the real hero of the story and the central focus of empathy (cf. Bostock 1955; Toepfer 2016). A decisive factor in the interpretation can be the audience's familiarity with the social, historical, and moral context of the poem. There are culture-specific elements in the story that are unlikely to be understood by modern lay readers, such as warrior pride, certain aspects of heroic loyalty, or the necessity of the hierarchy of loyalties. This can prevent modern audiences from regarding the text as a moral parable that promotes a warrior mentality in favour of the established social order.

Although the exact content, wording, and use of narrative devices cannot be reconstructed for the original poem and its possible oral variants, it seems plausible to me that the *Hildebrandslied* was composed, passed down through the centuries, and written down because it functioned like a parable, supporting both the individual and society in accepting and applying the necessary community norms—rather than "only" criticising the heroic code. Assuming that "the early medieval Germanic hero is a warrior in a realistic context, who is characterised in literature by the part he plays within a set of predetermined political and social constraints" (Murdoch 1996, 3), then the Hildebrand of the fragment is the ideal hero in every respect, both regarding intratextual narrative devices and extratextual moral standards (i.e. the heroic code of Germanic warriors and its priority in the hierarchical norm system of the contemporary society). Through Hildebrand's figure, the narrative could possibly help individuals understand and internalise a complex system of moral norms as well as elicit desirable moral behaviour, these being fundamental and universal functions of narratives.

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nCOGNITO
REVIEW

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Fritz Breithaupt: The Narrative Brain: The Stories our Neurons Tell. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2025, 274.p.

In the early 2020s, international literary scholarship showed intense interest in the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of storytelling. A growing number of monographs set out to explain how the human brain constructs and processes narratives, which cognitive mechanisms are essential to narrative production and reception, and in what ways narrative shapes and regulates our thinking. During this period, three seminal papers were published in the Anglo-American context within the span of just three years: Will Storr's exploration of the science of storytelling (*The Science of Storytelling*) in 2019, Paul B. Armstrong's *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, an investigation of the neuroscientific foundations of narrative in 2020, and Christopher Comer and Ashley Taggart's work on narrative imagination (*Brain, Mind, and the Narrative Imagination*) in 2021. To this emerging body of research we may also add *The narrative brain* (2025), first published in German in 2022 (Das narrative Gehirn) by German-American scholar Fritz Breithaupt.

Of the works mentioned, Breithaupt's monograph achieves the most balanced integration of scholarly rigor and accessible exposition in my estimation. While the other three interdisciplinary undertakings seek to avoid excessive reliance on either literary-theoretical or neuroscientific terminology so as not to alienate readers from adjacent fields, Breithaupt goes a step further by explicitly aiming to make his line of reasoning comprehensible to non-specialist audiences as well. His book presents its central arguments with virtually no technical vocabulary, yet the clarity of its structure and the abundance of illustrative examples ensure that the discussion remains both coherent and intellectually persuasive. Breithaupt's central claim is that narrative constitutes the most rewarding mode of thinking for human beings, which he not only articulates clearly but also performs it by embedding his exposition in a series of scientific anecdotes, thereby rendering the reading experience engaging as well as informative.

Before turning to a detailed discussion of how the brain rewards narrative thinking, Breithaupt first revisits a question that has been posed and answered in countless forms: What is narrative? Unsurprisingly, he does not confine narrative

to the domain of fictional storytelling. In line with a central premise of cognitive theory—i.e. that the brain does not fundamentally differentiate between fiction and reality during its core processing operations—Breithaupt considers narrative to be any instance of a story being told, whether it appears in the form of a casual exchange with a neighbor, a social media blog post, an effective advertisement, a staged performance, or a novel. Rather than defining narrative primarily through structural features, he approaches it from the perspective of function. At its most basic level, he argues, narrative as a sequence of episodes facilitates orientation in the world, contributes to the categorization and segmentation of complex phenomena, and helps to structure the processes of lived experience. In accordance with the claims of literary Darwinism (or evolutionary literary theory), he understands narrative as a terrain for acquiring experience, planning, forecasting, shared emotional engagement, and creativity—all without exposure to real danger—, thereby playing a substantial role in fostering group cohesion and reinforcing ethical norms. Yet because narrative has such a wide range of functions pointing in diverging explanatory directions, Breithaupt contends that this functional plurality ultimately obscures rather than clarifies the phenomenon. He therefore proposes approaching its definition from a different angle.

At the outset, Breithaupt emphasizes that despite traditional narratology providing significant insights for cognitive approaches to narrative, he aligns with Jerome Bruner in conceiving narrative not chiefly as a textual construct but rather as a distinctive mode of thinking. Accordingly, the focus of his book is not on narrative as discourse but on the processes of the mind that generate and interpret stories. In this sense, the title "The Narrative Brain" may initially appear misleading: Breithaupt is not concerned with identifying which neural regions are activated during storytelling or reception, nor with mapping the specific neuronal structures involved in narrative processing. Rather, the title signals a shift in emphasis—away from narrative as an object on the page and toward narrative thinking as a fundamental cognitive operation. What matters for Breithaupt is not the anatomy of the brain, but the mental architecture that enables humans to construct, comprehend, and be affected by stories.

What, then, characterizes narrative thinking? To answer this question, Breithaupt designed an experiment modeled on a game similar to "telephone," in which participants were asked to read a story and then recount it to another person, who in turn retold it to a third person. With this method—adapted from the pioneering memory experiments of the American psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett—Breithaupt sought to simulate the oral transmission of stories between participants. Unlike Bartlett, however, who had his British subjects read unfamiliar Native American tales in order to eliminate the influence of prior cultural knowledge, Breithaupt deliberately selected narratives drawn from his participants'

own cultural environment. His premise was that narrative transmission in real life typically involves stories whose settings, characters, or situations are already meaningful to the listener; such familiarity, he argues, is precisely what arouses interest and motivates narrative attention. The differing experimental designs led to strikingly different conclusions. Whereas Bartlett claimed that memory is guided by preexisting cognitive schemas that rationalize incomprehensible material, Breithaupt found that the core of narrative thinking does not lie in causality but in emotional impact. In his experiments, successive retellings altered nearly every narrative detail, yet the emotional pattern remained remarkably stable. These findings suggest that narrative cognition is fundamentally emotion-driven, and that causality—long regarded as the backbone of narrative—serves primarily as a vehicle for emotional experience. Notably, emotions such as sadness and happiness proved to be most stable, which Breithaupt interprets as evidence of their evolutionary function as universal adaptive responses.

Breithaupt distinguishes three types of narrative emotions: the emotions experienced by the characters, the emotions elicited in the reader by the situation depicted in the narrative, and the reader's empathic emotions directed toward the characters. This tripartite system is useful as it draws attention to the different levels on which affective engagement can occur during narrative processing. At the same time, from the perspective of cognitive narratology—which focuses primarily on the reader's processes of understanding and interpretation—it would also be possible to conceptualize these dynamics differently. From a recipient-oriented standpoint, both the emotions of characters and the emotion-eliciting situations may be understood as textual stimuli, fundamentally distinct from the reader's empathic or emotional responses.

The characters' emotions, for instance, are accessible only insofar as the reader infers them through mentalization, forming an internal representation on the basis of verbal or behavioral cues. For this reason, an alternative dual-system model could also be viable: one that separates textual emotion cues from the reader's cognitive-emotional reactions, and distinguishes between two core mechanisms of reception—mentalization and empathy in response to characters, and basic emotion programs activated by narrative situations. While Breithaupt's tripartite distinction remains productive and illuminating, such a complementary model might offer an additional way of clarifying the relationship between stimulus and response within narrative emotion.

Overall, Breithaupt's book persuades not through terminological rigor or systematic method, but through the heuristic agility and intellectual dynamism of its argumentation. One particularly intriguing example is his connection between the concept of character and the problem of narrative identity in the chapter "Identity as Pathology." Expanding the dynamics of narrative identity beyond the Ricœurian

notion of temporal unfolding, Breithaupt foregrounds recipient creativity—the capacity to imagine what characters might do, say, or feel in possible situations—and our tendency to regard characters as beings endowed with a wide field of potential actions. He refers to this receptive attitude with a term borrowed from interactive storytelling and video-game design: *playability*. The stability of characters, by contrast, is ensured through the cognitive operation of *tracking*, that is, the capacity to recognize individuals as identical to themselves despite their varied manifestations. Drawing on Josef Perner's theory of "mental files", Breithaupt understands tracking as a cumulative process through which we gradually store information about persons in order to render them predictable. Its most significant consequence, he argues, is the very possibility of moral and legal *accountability*, which presupposes a stable and continuous identity. Finally, the mental operation of *justification* links the dynamic and static aspects of identity by reconstructing a character's inner perspective so as to explain and legitimize their behavior, integrating it into their life story. This process becomes especially crucial at narrative turning points, when a character acts against our expectations: we simultaneously grant them freedom within their field of possibilities and reinterpret the surprising action as a coherent and meaningful element of their evolving identity.

Breithaupt places the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of identity at the center of his framework, and in doing so offers one of the most compelling contributions of his book. He convincingly argues that only a flexible and open identity can become a true participant in narrative thinking. Any attempt to rigidly fix identity, he suggests, is ultimately a reductive and discriminatory act—a form of labeling that forecloses possibility, suppresses surprise, and reduces the individual to a predictable pawn. This condition, which he memorably terms the "pathology of identity," underscores the ethical and imaginative stakes of his project. Against such reduction, Breithaupt highlights the narrative mode as a vital cultural practice—one that must be cultivated and sustained—because it safeguards our capacity to envision alternative courses of action, to rethink the self, and to remain open to transformation. For him, narrative thought contains the possibility "to escape and exit from a world that is perceived as too narrow" (232) and thus emerges not merely as a cognitive habit, but as a profound resource for freedom, creativity, and humane understanding.

Although the book sets out to describe narrative thinking as a universal human cognitive capacity rather than to explore the cultural diversity of its manifestations, the most captivating chapter for me is the section in which Breithaupt, through an analysis of the Grimm tales, develops an argument about the structure of modern subjectivity. In the chapter titled "Telephone Games," he traces the emergence of a new heroic ideal in the Grimms' stories, contrasting it with earlier narrative traditions prior to the eighteenth century. Whereas earlier narratives typically centered

on unwavering, immutable characters, the Grimms introduced into Western culture a fundamentally different hero: a fragile human being whose very vulnerability exposes him to danger, yet also renders him capable of transformation. This hero does not passively endure threats, but actively responds to them learning to assess his environment in terms of its potential risks. For Breithaupt, this vulnerable protagonist provides a narrative articulation of Enlightenment ideology: the notion that the educable, transformable human being is the morally valuable one, since the very possibility of change forms the basis of education and self-perfection. Vulnerability thus becomes a moral virtue. Whereas steadfastness and invulnerability had stood as the supreme ideals prior to the mid-eighteenth century, by its end vulnerability had come to be celebrated in their place. In modern Western culture, vulnerability ultimately emerges as a fundamental precondition of narratability.

What is particularly impressive in Breithaupt's approach is that the analysis of universal features of narrative cognition and the account of its historical development are not presented as mutually exclusive frameworks. Rather, they emerge as complementary perspectives which, taken together, offer a convincing explanation for the complexity of narrative as a human phenomenon. Breithaupt's book will therefore be an engaging and enriching read for anyone interested in understanding the distinctive workings of the human mind.

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REVIEW

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Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind by Francesca Arnavas and Marzia Beltrami, editors.

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This special issue of the journal brings together an impressive number of distinguished scholars in order to enrich the field of cognitive narratology, which is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses a wide range of approaches. This patchwork, which supports the foundations of a rising discipline, is reflected in the structure of this special issue. Therefore, the editors do a great job with the opening of the issue by outlining its ambition to tie together the various contributions that compose its core pillars in order to crystallize the initial chaos that appears in the case of an interdisciplinary research field. They explain how combining cognitive narratology and literary criticism with fairy-tale studies allows for fresh insights into how the bodies and minds of audiences interact with the text. Themes that are brought as examples, such as metamorphosis, monstrosity, gender, and queerness, highlight and set the stage for contributions that range from historical analyses to studies of modern media and even creative experimental pieces. As a result, *Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind* offers an ambitious interdisciplinary adventure into an emerging academic field where interpretation, classical and postclassical narratology, cognition, and corporeality converge. Novelty emerges regarding this special issue as the contributing authors revisit traditional fairy-tale scholarship by examining not only the fantastical transformations of the characters of fairy tales but also the profound, embodied processes that animate these narratives. The editors set the stage by arguing that fairy tales are not merely disembodied stories but vibrant, sensory experiences that reveal how our bodies and minds are inextricably linked.

The most important notion to review is the goal set by the editors and authors of the introductory chapter, Francesca Arnavas and Marzia Beltrami. They propose that the goal of this special issue is to forge an interdisciplinary dialogue that rethinks traditional separations between body and mind, that is, the great "Cartesian divide". The editors and contributors therefore sought to demonstrate that fairy-tale narratives are not just abstract stories but embodied experiences that describe transformations, metamorphoses, and sensory details in order to shed light

on the underlying processes that affect the audience of these literary works of art and to initiate a challenge to the traditional separations between physicality and thought. As a result, through this interpretation, fairy tales open up new ways of understanding human cognition and the processes that affect both our bodily and psychological experiences. In summary, by merging fairy-tale scholarship with cognitive narratology and embodied literary criticism, the goal of this special issue is to expand the field of interpretation and offer the readers a new way of looking at narratives, thus inviting fresh perspectives on how our physicality and mental processes interact in both historical and contemporary contexts.

One of the strengths of this issue lies in its diverse array of contributions. In the introductory essay, Arnavas and Beltrami articulate a vision where cognitive narratology meets literary criticism, drawing attention to themes like metamorphosis, queerness, and the interplay between intuitive and deliberate thought. This framework is then enriched by articles that traverse a broad historical spectrum. For instance, topics range from seventeenth-century metamorphosis narratives by La Force and d'Aulnoy to contemporary explorations of embodied cognition in video games. An illustrative example of this undertaking is Karin Kukkonen's detailed examination of metamorphosis in early modern fairy tales, in which the author reconfigures the conventional reading of these texts as well as situating them within a larger dialogue about embodied knowledge and social interaction.

Regarding the academic context, this special issue is a substantial contribution to the field of cognitive narratology. The authors use a wide variety of literature and primary sources, thus rooting the project firmly in its broad context. In the introduction, the contextualization of the project clearly shows that fairy tales have long engaged with questions about the body and mind. Therefore, Arnavas and Beltrami argue that reading a fairy tale is not just an abstract, intellectual act—it is also a sensory, embodied experience. By situating traditional themes, such as beauty and transformation, alongside contemporary concerns (like queer and disability theory), the editors propose an embodied-cognition perspective as a tool to rethink narrative strategies across historical periods and media forms. The authors throughout the special issue draw from a vast array of academic literature on the theory of the embodied mind, referencing, among many others, Miranda Anderson's *The Renaissance Extended Mind* (2019), Andy Clark's *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (2008), Jack Zipes' *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (2006), Kylee-Anne Hingston's *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction* (2019) and Peter Garratt's *The Cognitive Humanities: Embodied Mind in Literature and Culture* (2016). In what follows, I highlight the most interesting aspects of the individual contributions.

In her article, "Metamorphosis: Embodied Narrative at Play in the Seventeenth-Century Fairy Tale", Karin Kukkonen examines how seventeenth-century *conteuses*, such as La Force and d'Aulnoy, use metamorphosis not merely as a plot device but as a means to explore the continuity—and occasional tension—between body and mind. Kukkonen argues that the sudden transformations typical of these narratives (for instance, a man turning into an eagle) serve as a metaphor for the interplay between intuitive, embodied responses and more deliberate, reflective cognition. Kukkonen's work also highlights the social and cultural practices (such as salon games and the concept of sprezzatura) that support these narrative innovations.

John Patrick Pazdziora's article, titled "Queer Disabled Bodyminds in the Fairy Tales of Dinah Mulock Craik and Oscar Wilde", explores how fairy tales by Wilde and Mulock Craik reaffirm the legitimacy of bodies that deviate from normative standards. It examines the ways in which these texts use specific body and mind relations and representations to challenge established ideas about beauty, ability, and identity. For instance, the author deconstructs the image and representation of the monster, which is synonymous with the other in society, the abnormal, marginalized groups, thus illustrating the capabilities of fairy tales in shaping both our bodily (or gut) reactions to these people and the norms of society. As a result, Pazdziora sheds a light on how the interplay of physicality and cognition in these narratives opens up alternative discourses on pain, marginalization, and the possibility of transformative care.

In "Love, the Moon, and the Body: George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* and *Little Daylight* as Reflections onhe Embodied Mind" by Francesca Arnavas, the focus is on how George MacDonald reworks fairy-tale motifs. Rather than the typical passive "sleeping beauty" trope, MacDonald's narratives depict princesses, who, through their embodied actions, subvert expectations and engage with desire and self-realization. Based on these observations, Arnavas argues that these texts reveal a more dynamic conception of embodiment; consequently, this concept also highlights that the body's actions and the mind's intentions are inextricably linked. Furthermore, the conclusion emphasizes the revitalization of the genre of fairy tales through George MacDonald's texts that empower the heroines by playing with the concept of embodiment, active subjectivity, and the reimagination of the sleeping beauty trope.

Marzia Beltrami's "'Feeling Thought': Exploring the Materiality of the Mind in A. S. Byatt's Fairy Tales" delves into A. S. Byatt's distinctive fusion of intellectualism with the physical, sensory world. Using the notion of the "feeling thought" (a term borrowed from T. S. Eliot), Beltrami examines how Byatt's fairy tales blur the conventional divide between mind and body. According to Beltrami, in Byatt's work, thinking is not a disembodied process; instead, it is intimately connected

to materiality, whether in the texture of a landscape or the tactile experience of emotion. The article also highlights the importance of the dualism that is tied to the mind and the body, while providing a cognitive literary criticism on A. S. Byatt's works.

"Writing and Drawing *The Three Dresses* (Creative Practice as Research)" by Jess Richards explores a narrative that is told from the unusual perspective of three dresses (made of snow, darkness, and mirrors). In the narrative, the three dresses voice the inner life of a persecuted young woman. Upon reviewing the narrative, Richards employs a mix of artistic practices (for example, freezing and melting a china doll) to literally capture transformation, thus highlighting how material processes can embody and express emotional states. This work stands out for its experimental approach to storytelling, where inanimate objects become vibrant carriers of experience and which display agency.

Anna Kérchy's article, "Conceptualizing the Embodied Cognition of Uncertainty in Two Terrifying Tales: Lucy Lane Clifford's *The New Mother* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*", delves into how fear and uncertainty are embodied experiences within these two dark fantasy narratives. Both *The New Mother* (1882) and *Coraline* (2002) blend gothic horror and cautionary fairy-tale elements, using monstrous maternal figures to explore childhood anxieties and the destabilization of home as a safe space. Clifford's *The New Mother* follows two young sisters who, lured by a mysterious girl with a pear drum, lose their real mother and are confronted by a terrifying substitute with glass eyes and a wooden tail, reinforcing a cautionary moral lesson about disobedience and the dangers of misinterpreting reality. In contrast, *Coraline* portrays its young protagonist as an active agent of her own survival, as she resists the Other Mother's suffocating love and monstrous control in an uncanny alternate version of her home. Kérchy highlights the embodied experience of fear in both stories, pointing out how physical reactions, such as increased heartbeat, shivering, and sweating, mirror the characters' psychological distress and contribute to the reader's immersion in the horror. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, she connects these fears to Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* (the uncanny) and Melanie Klein's ideas on maternal ambivalence, showing how these monstrous maternal figures oscillate between care and threat. Furthermore, Kérchy contrasts the narrative strategies employed by both authors; while Clifford's text relies on gaps, omissions, and understatement to amplify uncertainty, at the same time Gaiman's *Coraline* employs an omniscient narrator and "psychonarration" (a metaimaginative storytelling method to explain the unconscious psychological processes occurring in the mind of the protagonist) to give readers insight into the protagonist's internal struggle with fear and cognitive dissonance. Ultimately, Kérchy argues that while *The New Mother* enforces a rigid cautionary message about obedience and punishment, *Coraline* presents a modern,

empowering perspective in which fear is not simply something to be avoided but a challenge to be faced, encouraging young readers to embrace uncertainty as part of self-discovery, reflecting a broader philosophical engagement with the nature of existence, identity, and perception.

Naomi Rokotnitz's article, "From Affective Schemata to Authentic Becoming: How Reading about Bodies Can Shape Our Mental Landscape and Philosophical Outlook; Postcritique and A. S. Byatt's *A Stone Woman*", explores how literature engages readers on both cognitive and embodied levels. She challenges traditional literary critique by embracing a postcritical perspective that considers how texts shape emotions, perception, and bodily responses. Through an analysis of A. S. Byatt's *A Stone Woman*, Rokotnitz examines how the protagonist's physical metamorphosis from human to stone provokes deep reader engagement via sensory and affective cues. She connects Byatt's storytelling techniques to cognitive science, particularly theories of embodied cognition, showing how reading about bodily transformation can alter readers' perceptions and self-awareness. Byatt's tale is also framed within existentialist philosophy, suggesting that personal transformation (whether this transformation is being literal or metaphorical) can lead to an authentic way of being. Ultimately, this article argues that literature does not merely inform but also enacts change within the reader, fostering a dynamic interaction between body, mind, and narrative.

Finally, Mattia Bellini's "Fairy-Tale Bodies and Embodying the Fairy Tale in Telltale Games' *The Wolf Among Us*" examines the representation of bodies and the concept of embodiment in the video game titled *The Wolf Among Us* (which is an adaptation of Bill Willingham's Fables comics). Bellini explores how fairy tales traditionally construct and reinforce societal norms about physical appearances, associating beauty with virtue and deformity with villainy. *The Wolf Among Us* subverts these conventions by portraying bodies as sites of oppression, suffering, and social struggle. The game's use of "glamours" (magical spells that allow non-human fables to appear as regular humans) serves as a metaphor for exclusion and the pressure to conform in society. Bellini also highlights the interactive nature of video games, arguing that embodiment in *The Wolf Among Us* extends beyond narrative representation to the player's lived experience. Players' interaction with the game through decisions shape the protagonist's, Bigby Wolf's, moral and psychological development throughout the narrative. As a result, the game reinforces or challenges traditional fairy-tale archetypes based on the interaction by the players. The study concludes that the game presents a postmodern and often pessimistic perspective on bodily identity, questioning the cultural hierarchies imposed by fairy-tale traditions while engaging players in a dynamic process of meaning-making.

The thematic scope of this special issue centres on how fairy-tale narratives embody and mediate the relationship between body and mind, demonstrating how metamorphosis, sensory experience, and the "marvellous" transformations can act as sites for reimagining embodied cognition. Additionally, the volume is commendable for its ambitious attempt to link cognitive narratology with feminist, queer, and disability theories, thus expanding the conceptual reach of fairy-tale scholarship. Furthermore, together, these writings traverse a broad historical, societal and even a diverse media spectrum, starting from the early modern French *conteuses* through the Victorian narratives to contemporary digital interactivity. However, this interdisciplinarity also presents limitations in the form of a dense theoretical framework, rooted mainly in cognitive literary studies, which can lead to an uneven cohesion among the contributions, while the predominant focus on Western traditions leaves cross-cultural perspectives on embodiment underexplored.

Nevertheless, the different articles jointly and persuasively argue that storytelling is, at its core, an embodied act and that fairy tales, in particular, invite readers to revisit the entrenched dualisms of mind and body. By situating transformations and sensory experiences at the centre of interpretive practice, the contributors successfully establish a fertile framework for reconsidering how narratives shape, reflect, and compose human cognition. The issue thus initiates an important academic discourse rather than proposing a definitive synthesis, offering a stimulating foundation for future research at the intersection of cognitive narratology, embodied experience, and fairy-tale studies.

Overall, *Literary Fairy Tales and the Embodied Mind* is a diverse, thought provoking and rich collection of scholarly articles that successfully initiates a discourse regarding the body, the mind, and narratives. Its strength lies in its innovative reconceptualization of fairy tales as dynamic sites for exploring human cognition, even as its scope invites further research and more inclusive, cross-cultural perspectives. Therefore, the titular special issue is a must-read for scholars interested in the emerging field of cognitive narratology or the evolving relationship between literary form and embodied experience.