

# *A KATEDRÁRÓL / FROM THE PULPIT*

## MEGSEMMISÜLT ARCOK

Gondolatok Harsányi Zsolt Karácsony a gályán című novellájáról

### ANNIHILATED FACES

Reflections on Zsolt Harsányi's short story "Karácsony a gályán" [Christmas on the Galley]

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### ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

A tanulmány Harsányi Zsolt Karácsony a gályán című novelláját elemzi a protestáns gályarabság irodalmi feldolgozásainak kontextusában. Az elemzés során vizsgálom a gályarab-téma korábbi irodalmi megjelenéseit, különös tekintettel Kocsi Csergő Bálint emlékiratára, ezt követően arra fókuszálok, hogyan jelenik meg ez a történelmi trauma Harsányi művében. Az írás rávilágít Harsányi irodalmi pályájára és annak ponyvairadalomként történő értékelésére is. A novella elemzése során olyan kérdéskörökkel foglalkozom, mint a testi-lelki szenvedés, az emberi méltóság elvesztése, a hit megtartó ereje, valamint a megbocsátás lehetősége egy karácsonyi szimbolikával átszótt, tragikus történet keretében. A novella fontos szerepet tölthet be a gályarab-irodalom irodalomtörténeti kánonjában.

### ABSTRACT

The study analyses Zsolt Harsányi's short story Christmas on the Galleon in the context of the literary treatment of Protestant galley slavery. In the course of the analysis, I examine previous literary representations of the galley slave theme, with particular reference to Bálint Kocsi Csergő's memoir, and then focus on how this historical trauma is represented in Harsányi's work. The paper also sheds light on Harsányi's literary career and his evaluation of it as a ponyvai literature. In analysing the short story, I deal with issues such as physical and mental suffering, the loss of human dignity, the saving power of faith, and the possibility of forgiveness in the context of a tragic story with Christmas symbolism. The short story can play an important role in the literary history of the Gaelic novel.

Kulcsszavak: protestáns gályarabság, mártírium, megbocsátás, szépirodalom vs. ponyvairadalom

Keywords: Protestant slavery, martyrdom, forgiveness, high literature vs. pulp fiction

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## Introduction

There is a sea of literature about the Protestant galley-slavery. The Protestant galley-slavery is little thematized in Hungarian fiction. Both statements are true. It was only in the period of Classicism, at the end of the 18th century, that the concept of literature as art became widespread in Hungary. However, in the case of old Hungarian literature, to which the galley-slave memoirs belong, we can't limit our study to the narrow interpretation of the modern concept of literature, which would include only works written in Hungarian with artistic intentions.<sup>1</sup> In fact, according to Péter Kőszeghy, "[f]rom texts scattered in discourses had emerged what we now call literature, the 'real literature' [...], only to be scattered again into discourses from the last third of the 20th century".<sup>2</sup> Thus, many contemporary writings on galley-slavery, such as the memoir of Bálint Kocsi Csergő, do not meet the criteria of modern fiction in today's terms.

Even so, we can find examples of writing about Protestant galley-slavery in modern Hungarian fiction. György Moldova's *Negyven prédikátor* [Forty Preachers] speaks of the historical event through the figure of Bálint Kocsi Csergő, while Magda Szabó mentions János Jablonczay in several of her biographical novels, such as *Ókút* [Old Well] or *Régimódi történet* [Old-fashioned Story], whom she presents as her galley-slave ancestor. These texts approach the topic from different perspectives, yet provide a link between galley-slavery and Hungarian cultural and historical memory. The aim of this paper is to examine this phenomenon through the interpretation of a lesser-known literary example, a short story by Zsolt Harsányi. Harsányi, who was a Patak student, explored the theme of galley-slavery in a unique way, which offers opportunities for comparison with Péter Bod's translation of Bálint Csergő Kocsi's memoir, *Kősziklán épült ház ostroma* [The Siege of the House Built on the Rock].

My aim with this analysis is to show how Harsányi's writing reflects on galley-slavery not only as a historical event, but also as a symbol of individual and joint suffering. At the same time, I will also examine how Harsányi's short story relates to the literary tradition of Protestant galley-slavery and how it fits into the narrow but significant corpus of fiction that has captured this historical trauma.

## A short snapshot of Zsolt Harsányi's career

Zsolt Harsányi (Korompa, January 27, 1887 – Budapest, November 29, 1943) was an outstanding figure in the Hungarian literary life and theatrical scene. His wide-ranging work as a writer, journalist and translator has brought him widespread popularity and professional recognition.

<sup>1</sup> A régi magyar irodalom, in KLANICZAY, Tibor (ed.): *A magyar irodalom története 1600-ig*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1964, 7–32.

<sup>2</sup> KŐSZEGHY, Péter: A régi magyar irodalomtörténet írása, avagy mi az „igazi irodalom”, *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 119 (2015), 1–12, 11.

He showed remarkable talent even at a young age. As a student at the Patak College, he won the Kazinczy Award of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which foreshadowed his successful career as a writer. He continued his studies at the University of Cluj-Napoca, where he discovered journalism, which later played a significant role in his life. He started his professional career as editor of *Kolozsvári Újság*, then in 1913 he became a staff member of *Budapesti Hírlap*, and later of *Pesti Hírlap*. In addition to journalism, his literary and theatrical activities became increasingly prominent. From 1910, together with Sándor Incze, he was editor of the journal *Színházi Hét*, which later became known as *Színházi Élet*. His knowledge of the theatre and his flair for stagecraft have enabled him to adapt classic novels to the stage and even to film with great success. Among his works, for example, we can find the adaptation of Kálmán Mikszáth's novel *A Noszty fiú esete Tóth Marival* [The Noszty Boy's Case with Mari Tóth], which he directed to great acclaim. He also wrote original plays, like *A zenélő óra* [The Musical Clock], *A grófkisasszony* [The Countess], or *Háry János*.

Harsányi achieved his greatest success with his historical and biographical novels. He strove for biographical authenticity in his work, and did extensive research before each novel. His most significant works include *Az üstökös* (a novel about Sándor Petőfi's life, 1932), *Ecce Homo* (a biographical novel about Munkácsy Mihály, 1934), as well as *Magyar Rapszódia* (a novel about the life of Liszt Ferenc, 1935). These novels were a great success not only in Hungary, but also abroad, with *Magyar Rapszódia* [Hungarian Rhapsody: The Life and Loves of Franz Liszt] published in eight languages by 1938, for example.

Harsányi's activities were significant not only as a writer but also as a public figure. As the president of the Hungarian Pen Club and a member of the Kisfaludy Society, he actively participated in the promotion of Hungarian literature. In 1938, he was appointed director of the Vígszínház theater, which was one of the most prestigious cultural positions at the time. He was awarded the Corvin Wreath for his achievements in 1935.<sup>3</sup>

What could be the reason why, while Harsányi was a well-known writer and a prominent public figure in his day, few people today would be able to say exactly who he was, when stopping in front of his bust in the Patak school garden? The tension between popularity and literary value is perhaps best reflected in the text by László Németh entitled "Mi

<sup>3</sup> The summary is based on the following sources: Harsányi Zsolt (író, forgatókönyvíró), URL: <https://www.hangosfilm.hu/filmenciklopedia/harsanyi-zsolt> Last Accessed: January 21, 2025; the introduction to *Két elbeszélés*, URL: <https://mek.oszk.hu/14500/14546/14546.htm> Last Accessed: January 21, 2025; Harsányi Zsolt, in KENYERES, Ágnes (ed.): *Magyar életrajzi lexikon*, 1. kötet: A-K, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967, 679.

a ponyva?” [What is pulp fiction?] which also gives an insight into the oeuvre of Zsolt Harsányi.<sup>4</sup>

### Side note: What is pulp fiction?

In 1938, a libel suit was brought by Zsolt Harsányi against Géza Juhász, after Juhász described Harsányi's biographical novels as pulp fiction. László Németh was summoned as a witness in the case, and during the proceedings, he discussed the issues of literary integrity and pulp fiction. Németh did not understand why such a criticism would be considered as defamation: “Is it really a matter of defamation, wheter one is writing pulp fiction?” [...] Géza Juhász, if he was wrong, at best demoted Zsolt Harsányi, but he did not offend his integrity. Zsolt Harsányi could sue him for discrediting him, but not for defamation, although it is difficult to discredit a book that sells hundreds of thousands of copies on the pages of a daily that sells a thousand copies and fades right away into oblivion.“ In his testimony, László Németh fundamentally reassesses Harsányi's oeuvre. He considers his writing to be outstanding in terms of research and data collection, but he criticizes its lack of artistic ambition:

*“Harsányi does one of the writer's jobs properly: data collection. He read the biographies of Madách, Petöfi, Liszt, conducted research even in family libraries – he had just enough slips of paper, as a philologist would say. As an artist, however, he was content with chronologically rewriting these slips of paper with the most rudimentary literary devices, often just transcribing them.”* According to Németh, there are no deeper, more nuanced literary struggles or ideas in Harsányi's works that would elevate them above the level of pulp fiction: “We cannot find any elaborated figures, carefully painted pictures, adjectives highlighting at least a trace of the struggle with which the writer guards the hues of his thoughts. [...] What we have said implies that Zsolt Harsányi's biographical novels have no significant literary value.” Harsányi's novels, according to Németh, satisfy a particular kind of “thirst for pulp fiction”. These works concentrate on biographical curiosities and gossip surrounding these great cultural figures, without really bringing the reader closer to the historical characters portrayed: “There is also a snobbish variety of the public's thirst for pulp fiction, which is always sneaking around the great cultural figures, but is only interested in the incidental, the biographical, the pulp-y. This kind of thirst for pulp fiction is perhaps even more dangerous than reading an honest detective novel.”

Thus, Harsányi's work was a huge success with the public in his time, but according to László Németh, its literary value was debatable. Moreover, in the 1950s, he was posthumously criticized on ideological basis as well.<sup>5</sup> His oeuvre has thus not become part of the ‘official’ canon, and

<sup>4</sup> NÉMETH, László: Mi a ponyva? *Magyar Művészet*, 7, (2019/1), 86–88.

<sup>5</sup> See BESSENYEI, György: Harsányi Zsolt a szórakoztató-iparos, *A könyvtáros*, 4 (1954/4), 33–35.

his name and work are little known to the wider public today. This is the context we should consider when examining the short story “Karácsony a gályán” [Christmas on the Galley] in the volume *Két elbeszélés* [Two Short Stories].

### “Karácsony a gályán” [Christmas on the Galley]

Among Harsányi's shorter works, the volume *Két elbeszélés* [Two Short Stories] exemplifies the tension between pulp fiction and literary value. The first story in this volume, probably published in the 1930s by the Országos Református Szeretetszövetség,<sup>6</sup> is the “A kilenc kacsá” [The Nine Ducks]. It is a simple anecdote turned into a short story, which amuses with its lightness, but has little literary value. “Karácsony a gályán” [Christmas on the Galley], on the other hand, carries more complex layers of meaning, even if it ends with a slightly pretentious twist. It is difficult to fathom the editorial intentions behind the juxtaposition of these two writings, which are very different in style, subject, exposition and even length. It is almost only in terms of genre that a parallel can be drawn between the two: both belong to the genre of narrative short prose, which has (had) the peculiarity of ending with an unexpected punchline. From a terminological point of view, it is important to note that the concept of narrative short prose included both longer, almost novella-length texts and shorter short stories.

The story begins on the galley. On deck and in the cargo hold, we can hear the bustle of the sailors doing their pre-departure chores. The overseers try their whips, waving them in the air, while the galley-slaves – who are used to the constant beating and shouting – are waiting sitting on their benches, chained next to the oars. “[T]he tragic ticking of the clock of eternal and monotonous suffering” is broken by a new galley-slave brought in, who intensifies his pain through self-torture: “he kept muttering something to himself, his lips forming the words in a whisper, and he was banging his head with his fist,” as if driven by some inner compulsion or guilt. Among the prisoners there is another, particularly well-built man, described by the narrator as a “giant”, one of the “Hungarian heretics”, a pastor. The overseers are particularly cruel to him: he is beaten more often and punished more severely than the others because he remains stubbornly silent, even when asked about the man who was sitting next to him before falling down the bench, dead. We learn from a fellow galley-slave that he is silent because his son was murdered three years ago: he is suffering for him and cannot forget him. On Christmas Eve, the self-torturing young man asks the giant to take his life. He is tormented by the guilt of having killed a man and wants to confess this to the pastor before he dies. The giant listens

<sup>6</sup> The book does not include the year of publication, but the copy found on MEK (Hungarian Digital Library) shows that it was purchased by the OSZK (National Széchényi Library) in 1939. URL: <https://mek.oszk.hu/14500/14546/pdf/14546ocr.pdf> Last Accessed: January 21, 2025

and tries to console him, but the dialogue reveals that it was the son of the pastor that the young man killed.

The stakes of the short story are the intertwining of these two tragic fates. Its backdrop is the galley, and the narrator, in addition to the characterization of the young and the elderly man, pays special attention to the suffering of the galley-slaves and the cruel treatment they receive. The narrator describes the torture of the slaves in almost horrendous detail: "There was an elderly man lying on the floor, limbs unnaturally twisted as he rolled down from his narrow perch. As far as the dim candlelight revealed, blood trickled down from his mouth and stained his sparse grey beard. His glassy, crossed eyes stared fixedly into the abyss."

The galley-slave literature often depicts the suffering of Protestant preachers in an extremely vivid way. The "rhetoric of suffering"<sup>7</sup> may also have become the typical discourse of the galley-slave writings because the martyrs are turned into the likeness of Christ via the torture. As Mihály Imre writes, "christiformitas is an essential element of martyrology, of which there are many variants, and the aspiration to it involves the whole personality: its emotions, will, as well as its physical and spiritual gifts".<sup>8</sup> We cannot discuss here, how the Protestant galley-slaves became "the ideal embodiment of the Protestant concept of martyrdom", we can only point out that the memoirs of Bálint Kocsi Csergő or Ferenc Otrokócsi Fóris played a significant role in this process.<sup>9</sup> Both write in detail about the sufferings of the deported pastors, and in the fifth part of his book, Kocsi Csergő describes in nine points the tortures they had to endure before being taken to the galley. The sixth and seventh parts of the work are about the journey to the galley and the forced labor. The adjective "horroristic", even if somewhat anachronistic in this case, may also be applied to his writing: "On the eighth day of April, they were cast down to the bottom of the ship upon the Adriatic Sea, where it is beyond belief how greatly the multitude of lice had increased around them, to the point that they nearly devoured them. The dreadful stench, arising from the filth of the ship, but most of all from the rotting foot of Mihály Miskolczi, caused many to fall into grievous sickness." "István Séllyei was often cruelly beaten. As András Turóczi was lifting a very, very large beam, it was dropped, crushing his legs so severely that others had to carry him even into the prison. Similarly, György Körmöndi's leg was cruelly injured, and János Ujvári's head was grievously wounded by the rigging. János Szomodi was just as ceaselessly beaten, as he was ceaselessly laboring. András Szodai was beaten

<sup>7</sup> PÉNZES, Tibor: "Hogy a' Posteritas meg-tudgya, kicsoda [...] Idvezült Czeglédi István" Köleséri Sámuel és az első református vértanú, *Studia Litteraria*, 51, (2012/3–4), 142–160, 144.

<sup>8</sup> IMRE, Mihály: Consolatio és reprezentáció – mártírok vigasztalása Zürichben, *Studia Litteraria*, 51, (2012/3–4), 161–188, 186.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 165.

four times in a single day, and so mercilessly that his face was split open, and his blood poured forth in abundance." Despite the cruel treatment, Kocsi Csergő reports that the trust in God of those who survived did not diminish: "Amidst their many tribulations, they felt not only the consolations of God's working spirit within them, by which they both exhorted one another to steadfastness unto the end and remembered their forsaken congregations and their suffering companions, as testified by the letters they wrote from the galleys, but also received many beautiful and comforting letters, filled with godly admonitions, from many, most notably from Miklós Zaffius, as from a Nehemiah, of whom, O Lord God, remember to his good."

Zsolt Harsányi's work describes the physical and mental tortures suffered on the galley with similar detail to that of Kocsi Csergő. The violence and brutality in the work do not only serve as a backdrop to the conflict between the suffering pastor and the guilt-ridden youth, but also set the mood for the story as a whole. On this gloomy, suffering-filled "stage", Zsolt Harsányi shows not only the cruel fate of the marginalized, but also the extent to which violent forces of religious persecution can suppress human dignity. The short story creates a world where physical suffering overwhelms almost all thoughts and feelings, and the fate of the abused is filled with horror. The detailed descriptions, such as the bloody back, tortured bodies and disfigured faces are able to take the reader beyond the boundaries of reality, into a world where human pain and suffering are the central themes.

It is only in the second third of the short story when it becomes clear that there are also "Hungarian heretics" on the galley. "The overseers addressed the galley-slaves as "spawn of heretical serpents," which can be paralleled with the recollections of Bálint Kocsi Csergő, who wrote that the Jesuits called them "rebels, faithless curs, heretics, lower than the Turks, and, together with all the Reformed people, sons of hell." These words do not only reflect religious and social discrimination, but also create the horrific atmosphere in which the galley-slaves live. The slaves are not only physically tortured, but their total mental annihilation is also among the overseers' intentions. An example of this is the scene that plays on the similarity between a dead body and a living body: "One blow slashed across his face, another across his forehead, a third smacked him right in the closed eye and split his eyelid. Blood rushed from the giant's beaten and hairy face. It dripped from his forehead into his already bleeding eyes, ran down his split cheek and fell in thick drops from his nose into his beard. But he did not raise his hand to wipe the blood from his face; he just sat there motionless and held his face to the whip, like a nursing home patient turning his face towards the summer sun. And so were both men bleeding there: the dead man on the ground with his eyes open and the living man on the bench with his eyes closed. Even his lips were split, and the saddle of

his nose was split open by the strap, while his face started visibly swelling already while the blows continued.”

The enslaved man’s face is basically destroyed by the whipping, and it is almost impossible to distinguish the dead from the living. The narrative in this scene has a particularly strong impact on the reader. The detailed and violent images are not only shocking, but also show how the human face, and thus human dignity, is destroyed by cruel treatment. The impact of brutality and cruelty on the human body and soul does not only reflect the disintegration of the personality.

Both in Bálint Kocsi Csergő’s memoirs and Zsolt Harsányi’s short story, faith as a source of enduring and transcending human suffering is emphasized. This aspect is powerfully, perhaps somewhat pretentiously, presented at the end of Harsányi’s short story. The giant, who becomes a symbol of suffering and physical and mental anguish throughout the short story, makes a profoundly human gesture towards the young galley-slave at the end. Despite the fact that the young man killed his child, the giant is able to forgive him in the spirit of Christmas. This act is not merely a giving up of personal revenge or anger, but also a recognition of that the liberating power of forgiving opens the way to grace for both parties.

The figure of the young galley-slave goes through a symbolic transfiguration at the end of the story. In the closing image of the short story – “The pastor cradled the sleeping young man as a father watches over his child’s dreams” – motifs of Christian sacrifice and redemption emerge. The young galley-slave is “reborn” through a journey of crime and punishment and takes the place of the giant’s lost son, symbolizing the family becoming one again. This point resembles Bálint Kocsi Csergő’s memoir, where faith endures even in the most inhuman circumstances, and is not only a means of survival, but also of spiritual victory. Both works show that faith is not an act of passive acceptance, but of active encouragement to action and inner transformation.

Zsolt Harsányi’s short story “Karácsony a gályán” [Christmas on the Galley] is a powerful and moving piece of writing, detailing the physical and spiritual suffering of the galley-slaves, yet showing a way out towards mercy. The text is an exciting piece of literature on galley-slavery: it mobilizes and (partly) reinterprets the concepts of martyrdom, mercy and forgiveness. It’s worth dusting off to take its rightful place in the galley-slave literature.