



Among Cultural Models. The Metaphors of Journey, Strangers and Inhabitants in Sándor Hunyady's Oeuvre

Krisztina KOVÁCS

University of Szeged
Department of Modern Hungarian Literature
karanovo@gmail.com

Abstract. The aim of the paper is to present Sándor Hunyady's American-themed writings. He was a popular author of the periodical *Nyugat*, his novels and short stories are chiefly about the idea of the city and the countryside. The analysis deals with the categories of the experience of strangeness in the writer's American short stories. In his interpretation the United States is a comprehensive cultural model, which is similar to the Central European area. On the one hand, Sándor Hunyady's American writings draw the American town, society and culture, and, on the other hand, they present the genuine and authentic Central European atmosphere. Sándor Hunyady shows a high degree of interest in urban culture and places, so the analysis touches on the borderline situation between real and unreal, visible and invisible lines.

Keywords: Sándor Hunyady, space structure, strangers and inhabitants

The aim of the paper is to present Sándor Hunyady's (1890–1942) American-themed writings. The Hungarian author was a popular dramatist of the periodical *Nyugat*, and is nowadays acknowledged as an excellent short story writer. Hunyady was born in Cluj, where his mother, Margit Hunyady was a famous actress, coming from an ancient noble family. His father was Sándor Bródy, the well-known writer and journalist deriving from a Jewish family. Hunyady was his illegitimate child, and their relationship was very changeable and sensitive. It seems that this exciting situation resulted in a very complicated sociocultural identity. The experiences of

strangeness and the mixtures of cultural identity significantly contributed to the author's literary performance (Vécsei 1973, 7-15).

The idea of the city and the countryside played a very important role in the writings of the authors of the periodical *Nyugat*. Most of them came from the countryside, and because of it, permanent travel was in the focus of their life. So, the journey was the most dominant and characteristic motif in Hunyady's oeuvre as well. Cluj, Hunyady's birthplace was a special area, a mixed multicultural milieu. Hunyady, just like his father, represented in his works the differences and similarities between the special Central European city and countryside.

Hunyady travelled to the United States in 1940, he spent there a few months (Vécsei 1973, 177). Although this journey was a short episode in his life, the adventure inspired several short stories. The story of the American journey was published in several editions after the author's death. The only complete edition is *The Queen of the Ship*, which appeared in 2002, where we can find every American short story, feuilleton, as well as the novella having the same title as the book. The most important subjects include the diversity of the travel, the narrative structure of the modern lifestyles and environments, as well as the writer's vision of the modern metropolis. The spirit of modernism is in the focus of these short stories; these texts imagine and recreate the modern urban environment. The bases of this narrative model are the artefacts of the cities: passages, doorsteps, doors and streets.

From a theoretical perspective the question raises what the most important objects in the different city discourses are. Lewis Mumford mentions that the important bases of this urban structure are streets and highways. In his reflection architecture is a visual art and philosophy, and the modern metropolis seems like an artistic nature, organised by the rules of the modern Power (Mumford 1964). The world in Hunyady's short stories is highly metaphorical and artistic. In his writings the American towns and streets are often presented like a ship. The streets and the buildings are similar to the rooms and parts of the ship, the lines and partitions of these spaces are liquid.

Essentially, Hunyady's American writings figure a special Hungarian world, not a typical American one. These authentic Hungarian subjects are similar to Hunyady's other novels, short stories and feuilletons created in Hungary. The faces and identities of the American metropolis are similar, for example, to a Transylvanian and Hungarian area.

Hunyady's American-themed texts include a few culture-historical and theoretical toposes. The volume shows the traditional model of the Other and the Stranger, their image is like an exotic object. In a short story by Hunyady, entitled *Toward America* [*Amerika felé*], the classical colonialist situation is sketched. The story takes place on an emigrant ship, which is a special area, a temporary and transitory "earth." The emigrant ocean liner is a metaphor of strangeness, the perfect "non-place," where the Eastern European and Balkan types of people live

together. Hunyady writes about them: "The folk of the ship came from East Europe and the Balkans" (Hunyady 2002, 15). Hunyady's short story, *The Purgatory* [*A purgatórium*] takes place on Ellis Island, on the symbolic and invisible border of the United States of America. This borderline situation is an eternal and constant emigrant-topos, which is important in Hunyady's emigrant adventure and experience. Ellis Island, the American cultic area was a popular theme in literature and cinema. The excellent movie *The Emigrant* (Charlie Chaplin, 1917), a few scenes of the novel *Manhattan Transfer* (John Dos Passos, 1925), and the well-known mafia-epic *The Godfather II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) also take place in this special territory. In Hunyady's short story, *The Purgatory*, the married couple travels among the prison island spaces and partitions. This real and imaginary island is an animalistic world with lots of ancient rites.

A lot of stories from this collection are about the modern metropolis, which is mentioned as a "strange sea" or a "nostalgic native island." A few texts (*Violet's Odour and First-Class Gangsters* [*Ibolyaillat és prima gengszterek*], *Americans in a Little Hungarian Pub* [*Amerikaiak a kis magyar kocsmában*], and *Little Hungarian Things* [*Apró magyar dolgok*]) present the real Hungarian world in a really utopian, imaginary and strange context.

The story entitled *Negro Mary* [*Néger Mariska*] is about a black woman who lives in a Hungarian community in the United States. She is in an unusual situation, because she can speak Hungarian perfectly, but she cannot speak English. This didactic and simple story might not be the most excellent piece of the writer's oeuvre, however, it shows a sensitive picture of the Hungarian emigrant society (Hunyady 2002, 32-43).

The text entitled *A Beautiful Sunday in New York* [*Gyönyörű vasárnap New Yorkban*] shows the picture of the modern and contradictory town. The author is in the flaneur's position, he describes the nature of the mobile and liquid crowd, and he lists the bright and dark sides of urban life (Hunyady 2002, 44-45). The most important experience of the modern global city is this flaneur's position. According to Hartmut Böhme, this position is the dominant subject in modern urban theory. The most important symbol of the special modern and postmodern space is the street, the liquid and flexible communal scene (Böhme 2002, 59). The characters of Hunyady's oeuvre move and live in this sphere.

The examined collection contains the novella entitled *The Queen of the Ship*. Isabella Haxton, a rich and famous woman plays the main role in the story. She is a modern conqueror; her aim is to conquer the "land" of the ship. She would like to control the ship's spaces and the passengers. Isabella constructs her personality like a professional pretender, a perfect actress, who moves among orders and accessories of the colonial discourse. She thinks about herself as being a performer in the colonial world, so the novella can be read in terms of the considerations of colonial theory. In one respect Isabella's first words indicate the *conquistador's*

position; on the other hand, her body seems like an undomesticated land, the perfect *terra incognita* (Hunyady 2002, 109). The narrator of the novel names Isabella as “tiger,” “panther,” “carnivore plant,” and the ship as a monster and a playground of this character (Hunyady 2002, 163, 166, 182).

In his essay entitled *The Bridge and the Door*, Georg Simmel writes about the liminal space, which is at once real and metaphysical (Simmel 2007, 33). This visible and invisible borderline situation stays in the focus of the novella *The Queen of the Ship*. The partitions, the dominant artefacts that Simmel speaks about, in this case decks, swing doors, drawbridges, doorsteps and doors, are the popular scenes, where the protagonist meets various cultural experiences.

The novel’s personas move and live in the place of the Panopticon. Michel Foucault used Jeremy Bentham’s design of Panopticon as the archmetaphor of modern power (Foucault 1990, 267-311). In Panopticon, the inmates were tied to the place and barred from all movement, confined within thick, dense and closely guarded walls and fixed to their beds and cells. They could not move because they were under watch (Bauman 2000, 9). This structure manifests itself in Hunyady’s novel, where the modern conquistador, Isabella Haxton measures the different cultural behaviours with this method. While observing others, the characters of the text experience each other’s foreignness. The sight is the basis of power, so losing the sight means losing power. The narrator reflects on the theory and the structure of colonialism very impressively in “the restaurant scene.” The wall of the restaurant is covered with paintings, and one of them shows the conquest of America: “On the wall there was a huge fresco, which represented the conquest of America. The painting exhibited the conquerors’ vanity and the inhabitants’ humility” (Hunyady 2002, 131).

According to Michel Foucault, the ship is a swimming piece of the space, a *place without place* (Foucault 2000, 148). In Hunyady’s novel the strategy of the protagonist represents the complete Power. In this powerful place Isabella becomes a real geographer, who can use a map for orientation and reign. The protagonist can read not just the real map, but she can also follow a mental and imaginary map in her mind. She becomes a cartographer, who measures the land, and who lives constantly between liminoid places. The ship is an ideal incarnation of the “non-place,” which is indicated by the occurring utopian and mysterious signs. The text is pervaded by impressive, mystic, dark and foggy descriptions. The night, the darkness, the sunrise and the sunset are the remarkable signs of utopian literature.

The end of the story, the disaster of the liner fits this mysterious narrative. The narrator lists the colours of darkness, the shades of blue, black, purple and yellow. The story is based on a real adventure taking place in a very unusual moment of the author’s personal life. After his American journey Hunyady travelled across the Atlantic Ocean in 1940, and the road of the liner was complicated, because the ship had suffered a lot of injuries in a sea battle. So, the last scene of the novel, the

picture of the sinking ship is based on a few real life moments, but this artistic dream-scene is founded on a lot of vision. The last scene, Isabella's vision is a typical motif in this narrative. She dreams of a mining accident and the tumbling down of the Chrysler-building. Isabella's downfall is the ideal destiny of the colonizer, who must stay forever in the exploited and occupied land (Hunyady 2002, 161). She will be isolated and lonely, she will lose her own places, the ship's spaces, and her own people, the ship's passengers and finally her power, and the sinking ship will be her coffin.

In Kornélia Faragó's opinion the travel, the motion and the change are special Central European life-metaphors and life-experiences (Faragó 2005, 35). This authentic and domestic situation, so well-known to Hunyady, is present in the short novel's world. The narrator shows the novel's ship, the *Gloworm* like a melting pot, or a typical Hungarian or Central European town. The narrator shows the ocean liner as an "average Hungarian village." "There are a lot of people on the liners, such as in medium-sized villages (...) The passengers meet here like on the market on Sunday afternoons" (Hunyady 2002, 141). Noticeably, the novel is not a typical American story; the ship is similar to a place in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

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