

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY

CLUJ-NAPOCA

FACULTY OF LETTERS

PhD THESIS

**THE FATHER FIGURE IN KARL OVE KNAUSGÅRD’S *MY STRUGGLE*
-ABSTRACT-**

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CLUJ-NAPOCA
2022

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Keywords: Karl Ove Knausgård, father figure, family, My Struggle, contemporary literature, psychological criticism, autofiction, family systems therapy, affective narratology.

This thesis investigates the father figure in the novel *My Struggle*, by Karl Ove Knausgård. The hypothesis that initiated my research project is that the image of the father in *My Struggle* is complex and multidimensional, and that this type of image has consequences on both the structural and thematic level of the text. In other words, I analyze how the father figure is articulated throughout the novel, how it infiltrates the text, shapes the narrative, and plays a major role in character development.

Starting with the main objective of deciphering the particularities of the father as they are encountered in *My Struggle*, this thesis has several other goals. Firstly, since Knausgård is seen as the representative of a new trend in contemporary literature, the aim is to investigate the mechanisms that lay behind the prose writing of the last decades. More specifically, this relates to genre limitations that writers nowadays try to challenge in their projects. The difficulty of establishing one particular genre that suits *My Struggle* is an interesting topic, even more so since I see it deeply linked with the father theme. When choosing to write about personal experiences, orbiting around his own familial relations, Knausgård does it under the form of a hybrid fiction/non-fiction prose. Secondly, my thesis aims at a revival of psychological criticism, by showing that a fresh reinterpretation of old theories is a valid instrument in analyzing literary works. Old concepts like the Oedipus complex or puer aeternus provide meaning in the close reading of the novel, while the focus on father and family relations is pushed forward with the help of newer theories borrowed from psychology. Along the same line, when analyzing family dynamics in contemporary literature, a side goal reveals itself en route. This thesis shows the challenges that parents and children collectively must face throughout different stages of life and how they are represented in literary works.

The books by Knausgård seem to speak not only for a particular culture or generation, but also toward a more universal value. Events, relations, patterns, systems, and actions that occur inside a family have the power to influence human life to a profound level. Thirdly, deriving from the family discussion, the focus on emotion and affect is becoming more important in both real life and literature. While in the healthy development of humans, the emotional connections and learning to identify, understand, and control them plays a fundamental role in the present days, in literature they can be used on a narratological level. *My Struggle*, especially but not exclusively *Book One*, is rich in emotionally loaded scenes, and the text is receptive to the theoretical concepts proposed by affective narratology. Finally, Knausgård's novel and the father figure can be used as an exemplification of the challenges fatherhood in the twenty-first century has to face and how it is perceived by young men that have to adapt to a new set of rules and norms.

In this thesis, the main method of analysis is the traditional close reading of the novel. The principal course of action is starting from the general and moving forward to the particular and concrete. In the first chapters, a general thematic is displayed, which is meant to familiarize the reader with the father figure in literature and how it has evolved throughout the years, the main theoretical instruments chosen for the thesis, and aspects related to Karl Ove Knausgård's authorship and the novel *My Struggle*. Moving on to the more practical part of the thesis, a textual analysis will be performed, starting with the fourth chapter, with the intention of testing the initial premises and the theoretical preliminaries.

Accordingly, the present thesis is structured in seven chapters, each of them contributing in a specific manner to the construction of a cohesive argument which I believe that can illuminate our understanding of *My Struggle* and reveal how the father figure has a central function in the novel.

The first chapter is intended to offer a theoretical background for the more practical close reading of the novel. The theoretical preliminaries suggest an eclectic approach that combine psychological criticism with narratology in the quest of decoding the construction of the father figure in *My Struggle*. In the beginning, the section is focused on psychological perspectives that are related to family relations and how they influence the healthy developments of humans. Here, the concept of the self is also touched upon. Theorists like Karen Horney, Abraham

Maslow, and Erich Fromm have worked on how the self is defined in relation with the world, both within and without. A newer direction of studies regarding family dynamics (family systems therapy) is also discussed here. Another section of the chapter is dedicated to affective narratology, a form of post-classical narratology, that focuses on the use of emotions in literature and how emotional structures can develop stories.

The second chapter is dedicated to the father motif in literature. It starts by illustrating how the father figure has represented a central interest for writers since the first centuries of written literature. The father representations reflect the society in which the works were written, so the development and changes in how the paternal figure is rendered in the books mirror the real life. But the father cannot be understood outside of the family context. Thus, the family motif is also displayed here. At the same time, this chapter gets closer to Norwegian literature and investigates how family and father themes have been used in Norwegian works, including a comparative analysis of three contemporary authors and their novels.

The third chapter is a transition from theory to the text-focused analysis that will follow. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first part is meant to introduce the writer Karl Ove Knausgård to the Romanian public and it reveals several aspects of his authorship. Moving forward, an account of the works he has written until present days is provided. By doing so, I summarize the books which represent the main corpus of this thesis and I point out how themes, especially the father motif, transcend the borders of a singular novel. A second section of this chapter deals with the novel *My Struggle*. It brings up matters related to the reception of the novel that emphasize its particularities and the novelty brought forward by Knausgård in the literary scene. At the same time, inspired by the theoretical efforts made by several scholars to frame the work, I investigate the possibilities of placing *My Struggle* in a certain category, and I point out the connection that exists between form and theme in the Norwegian work.

The fourth chapter sets in motion the close reading of the novel, constructed around the father figure. The image that is predominant here is that of the tyrannical father. The narrator's father is introduced in *Book One* as a terrible figure that complicates and traumatizes the life of a young Karl Ove. The analysis investigates how the behavior of the father and the relation dynamics existing inside the family have consequences on the life of the main character. The mother, the father, and the previous generations dynamics all influence the healthy development

of the protagonist. The early years in the life of Karl Ove were dominated by fear and shame dictated by the uttering of irrational authority, in the sense of Fromm, from Kai Åge's side. At the same time, the failure of the mother in becoming a more responsible character in the upbringing of her children correlates with the dynamics of the Knausgård family and leave the needs of Karl Ove unfulfilled.

The fifth chapter is constructed around two parallel processes that are rooted in the representation of the father as an absent figure. The transition from tyrannical to absent is rather sudden, and it influences the development of the story as well as the protagonist. The father gains a new independence and distances himself from his son who experiences his teenage years together with a form of abandonment. The detachment from family will have fatal consequences for the father who is pictured as an eternal child who goes through a regression process that will result in his death. At the same time, the protagonist will search for role models in father substitutes, and his journey resembles the coming-of-age experiences from a bildungsroman.

The sixth chapter applies the model of affective narratology to *My Struggle*. This means that a second part of *Book One* and other sequences from the rest of the series are analyzed according to emotions and affect. This part of the thesis shows how emotional experiences and outbursts make the narrative move forward. The attention is directed towards how the novel can be structured according to the protagonist's goals, how particular scenarios and plots are developed throughout the narrative, and the fundamental role played by emotional space and emotional trigger figures.

The final chapter approaches the father figure from a different perspective. It is the shortest chapter and is intended as an invitation to further research. It also shows how the father motif in *My Struggle* is such a complex dimension, that is, that the more we look into it, the more varying directions of analysis come forward. In this part, the father role is taken by Karl Ove. The father living through him, as well as the new model of the stay-at-home father, create challenges for the protagonist who is divided between the wish of being a good parent and his own writing ambitions.

All in all, this research showed how the thematic universe in the novel *My Struggle* is mainly dominated by father representations that are deeply interconnected with familial relations in

which complex emotions are attentively combined with language expressions in order to create a unique piece of writing. In a larger context, this research pointed out the difficult and conflicting relations that exist inside a family and how they negatively influence the life of children. *My Struggle* is not only the portrayal of the failures of a family, but it is representative for the world we live in and the challenges we have to face in our own psychological universe and in relation with others.