

**„BABEŞ–BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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**The Hero's Death and Rebirth in Hungarian Folktales
SUMMARY**

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Keywords: Hungarian folk tale, archetype, phenomenology, fairy tale hero/heroine, the course of life, death, rebirth, providence and divine justice, sin and moral quality, suffering and salvation.

In my doctoral thesis, I focus on the death and rebirth of the hero in Hungarian folk tales, using the methods of symbolic analysis and phenomenology. My research aims to analyze fairy tale texts in folk collections by comparing them, revealing the phenomenology and symbolism manifested at the linguistic level in fairy tale narratives. My goal is to explore the phenomenon of death and rebirth in folk tales through the interpretation and understanding of symbols and phenomenological aspects, highlighting the narrative intentions of the storytellers and the interpretive possibilities that go beyond these intentions.

The belief in immortality, the afterlife, and eternal return resulting from the cyclicity of time are universal concepts related to death and rebirth, found in the conceptions of archaic-minded peoples as well as in theistic religions, in various forms. These are inherited images and possibilities of human imagination, independent of individual memory, which, due to their collective and hereditary nature, allow for the creation of motifs with the same meanings, regardless of time and space. The motif of death and resurrection, as a universal representation, also appears in communal narrative folk genres such as myths, legends, and fairy tales, where the central character is the hero around whom the entire epic action is organized. Although heroes have gradually lost their mythical traits, becoming increasingly human, their function has not changed, continuing to repeat archetypal actions.

When analyzing the archetypal models of heroes who die and are reborn in Hungarian folk tale texts, we must consider that the narrators use and enrich inherited cultural models (myths, legends, faith stories, biblical stories) with specific interpretations, which coexist with and blend in popular consciousness. In epic creations, we can identify recurring elements and characteristics in the process of creating the hero, which can be described in patterns, following, on one hand, the archetypal models of the hero who dies and is reborn, and on the other hand, under the influence of Christianity, the model of the savior and suffering hero.

In the traits of heroes from the Hungarian fairy tale tradition, we find both patterns, which, in the process of creating the hero, offer inherited models as tradition, while under sociocultural influences, they transform and are complemented by the individual interpretations of the narrator, according to their poetic talent and personal intention. These are actualized in the narrated story, in the continuous play between tradition and innovation.

In my research, I considered it important to address the main stages of the hero's life through a comparative analysis of concrete fairy tale narratives and their variants, considering the symbolic images, continuous metaphors, and the mythical and Christian patterns of the hero, which can be captured in the narrative language of the storyteller and in the context of the text. These stages, where birth, death, and rebirth represent significant turning points, are essential both for the hero's destiny and for the narrative interpretation of the text.

Used Sources

The study corpus consists of Hungarian folk tale collections, which include, on the one hand, the repertoire of famous storytellers and, on the other hand, a particular emphasis was placed on Transylvanian folk tale collections during the selection process. In total, my study corpus is based on sixteen folk tale collections. In selecting the collections, I preferred those collective volumes where the principles of individual research are applied. This method was developed by Gyula, Ortutay, who in 1940 published the first model collection titled "*Fedics Mihály mesél*" ("*Fedics Mihály Tells Tales*"), in which he elaborated the principles of individual research.

Of the folk tale collections analyzed in the dissertation, seven volumes contain the repertoire of significant storytellers, with the following titles:

- Gyula, Ortutay: *Fedics Mihály mesél* (1940)
- Linda, Dégh: *Pandur Péter meséi* (1941)
- Sándor, Erdész: *Ámi Lajos meséi* (1968)
- József, Faragó: *Kurcsi Minya havasi mesemondó* (1969)
- Ilona, Dobos: *Gyémántkígyó. Ordódy József és Kovács Károly meséi* (1981)
- Olga, Nagy: *Cifra János meséi* (1991)
- Olga, Nagy and Gabriella, Vöő: *Havasok mesemondója - Jakab István meséi* (2002)

Among the collections used, five volumes present the treasure of folk tales from smaller communities. These collections, which were the subject of my research, are:

- Olga, Nagy: *Széki népmesék* (1976)
- Olga, Nagy: *Zöldmezőszárnya. Marosszentkirályi cigány népmesék* (1978)
- Géza, Nagy and Sándor, Erdész: *Karcsai népmesék* (1985)
- Lajos, Géczi: *Ungi népmesék és mondák* (1989)

- Ágnes, Kovács: *A rókaszemű menyecske. Kovács Ágnes ketesdi népmese gyűjteménye* (2005)

Besides these, the study corpus includes the following collections: Lajos, Kálmány: *Pingált szobák. Borbély Mihály meséi* (1976), in which we can observe the process of tradition transmission within a family, and two volumes by Olga, Nagy, which contain tales about the Transylvanian Roma, preserving a more archaic state: Olga, Nagy: *A nap húga meg a pakulár. Marosmenti, kalotaszegi és mezőségi mesék* (1973) and *A szegény ember táltos tehene. Mérai népmesék* (1976). In addition to the 20th-century collections, I also included a tale from the first collection by János, Kriza: *Vadrózsák* (2002), which dates back to the 19th century.

During the research, I simultaneously conducted a selection and data collection work by reviewing the mentioned folk tale collections. I focused on fairy tales of the fantastic type within the folk tale genre, as they capture the type of hero who dies and revives. Thus, for text analysis, I selected tales belonging to the types in the international fairy tale catalogue AaTh 300-749. After this genre delimitation, I selected those tales, in which the motifs of death and rebirth appear, and entered them into a database, on the basis of which main direction of my research took shape in it.

According to the database, I selected the stories about death and rebirth that frequently appeared in fairy tales and the recurring roles that appeared as helpers and antagonists in the hero/heroine's path.

Methodological Considerations and Structure of the Dissertation

In my research, I focused on a text-based comparative study to capture the archetypes and phenomenological aspects at the level of fairy tale language. Through this approach, I attempted to interpret the stories of death and rebirth. By comparing texts and identifying parallels and contrasts among the variants within each type, not only did the differences or similarities between storytellers become evident, but also the cultural context behind the stories, as well as the communal and Christian values and perspectives that influence both the storytellers and the recipients of the tales.

In the dissertation, I approached the theme of death and rebirth from the perspective of the biography and destiny of the fairy tale hero, as I believe that storytellers interpret death and rebirth for themselves and others through narratives that recount the heroes' lives. This is achieved by enriching the inherited tradition with their own interpretations, contextualizing and updating the story for themselves and their community. The community of storytellers,

their worldview, the storyteller's intention, the type and individuality of the storyteller are essential factors that significantly determine the representation.

After the theoretical introduction of the work, I focused on the stories about the death and rebirth of heroes in fairy tales, based on the relationship systems between the characters in the stories. This approach is justified by the phenomenon of death: since we cannot experience our own death, we are able to perceive, understand, and interpret it only through the death of others. Similarly, the perception of the heroes' deaths in fairy tales is realized through the perception of other characters, and the story of rebirth can only occur through external help. The storyteller also filters the entire inherited fairy tale tradition through their own perception, as a participant and transmitter, influenced by the experiences in their environment or what they hear in church sermons.

I focused on the themes that frequently reoccurred in the analyzed fairy tales in connection with the death and rebirth of the hero. Based on these, I tried to structure the dissertation thematically, interpreting the life, death, and rebirth of the hero from birth to the stages of development, as well as the relationship systems between the self and others created in the texts.

Since human life cannot be separated from its Creator, it being in His hands from birth to death, in the second chapter, I started by focusing on the divine beings in fairy tales and their role in shaping the hero's destiny and rebirth. I concentrated on two characters: the old man with a white beard and Jesus Christ, who are not only favored characters in legends but also in fantastic fairy tales, as demonstrated by the numerous tales I analyzed.

In the next chapter, closely related to the first subject, I examined divine providence and divine judgment in fairy tales, which revealed the image of a protective and punitive God present in the storytellers' consciousness, along with the associated traits. These became interpretable in the encounter and relationship between the hero and the transcendent being. The belief in God, a life based on morality, adherence to or violation of divine commandments, teachings, and prohibitions, divine grace and forgiveness of sins, as well as divine justice manifesting through punishment and judgment, play an important role in the narrative structure of fairy tales and were, thus, the subject of my research.

Through reading and comparing the fairy tales, it became evident that among the interpersonal relationships within the family, the mother plays an essential role in the birth, development, death, and rebirth of the hero. Thus, in the fourth chapter, I traced the hero's life from the perspective of the mother's archetype. This revealed both the mother's role as a giver of life and a bringer of death. The relationship with the mother is strongly defined by the close

connection and the forced separation, which separates the existence of childhood from that of adulthood. The process of separation always begins with leaving home, which in some cases is a voluntary adventure, while in others it can be interpreted as a strong compulsion, indispensable for the hero's maturation.

The fifth chapter focused on the exploration of the hero's quest for self-identity, based on the variants of the "*Twins or Blood Brothers*" story type (AaTh 303). In the relationship between brothers, I analyzed the connection between "I" and "you," "mine" and "yours," and the helper role of the twin brother, who accompanies the other brother on the journey and replaces him in difficult situations, saving him from death. The final chapter emphasizes the redemptive power of love, through which the hero or his destined partner can escape the symbolic state of death: the curse of demonic possession, hiding in the skin of an animal, through mutual love, acceptance, repentance, sacrifice, and salvation.

The chapters of the dissertation cover the entire life of the hero, from birth to the fulfillment of his destiny, and his interpersonal relationships, from the supreme being, the Creator, to the biological mother, adoptive or stepmother, to self-interpretation, and the destined partner. These themes can be addressed both individually and collectively, as they are interconnected at numerous points.

In the life stories narrated in fairy tales, the hero must sooner or later face a loss, a failure, a lack of hope, a threat of death, which forces him to reflect on his life so far, his identity, and to find a solution to his hopeless situation, his fragmented or conflicting state. Divine providence or help from any other mythical being can never be considered accidental or lucky, but always a deserved reward due to the hero's faith, moral qualities, will, or character. Through rebirth, the hero is able to rise to a higher level, find his identity, and fulfill the difficult task that appears in his path, or the promise made to someone else, to achieve his destiny, which he has assumed or felt as his own from birth or during the journey.

The thesis was essentially a comparative, text-centred study that examined the situation of heroes experiencing death and rebirth in fairy tales, revealing the associated archetypes and phenomenological approaches. The research results and conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. The hero's development and final victory are achieved through the possession of transcendental knowledge and the following of divine guidance, during which the hero undergoes a long and often painful learning process. In this process, inevitably, through his mistakes and sins, he goes through cycles of death and rebirth, thereby reaching purification

and acquiring transcendental abilities, which ultimately enable him to defeat evil and attain happiness.

2. In the fairy tales I examined, the divine choice and calling of the hero represent the establishment of an alliance between God and man, ensuring divine protection and help. They appeal to divine judgment, reflecting the Christian conception that ultimate justice is in God's hands. Storytellers highlight sins and moral qualities through fairy tales, as well as divine and community laws. The collaboration between the divine and the earthly realm is realized through the hero, who, with the help of divine power, restores earthly order and attains the kingdom, thus proving that the power of earthly rulers originates from divine law.

3. The duality of the maternal archetype present in the fairy tale texts - the life-giving, protective mother and the evil, cruel stepmother - is crucial for the hero's development and destiny. Maternal love and protection, as well as the suffering and trials caused by the stepmother, contribute to the hero's strength and independence. For the hero to fulfill his destiny and attain the happiness and rewards of adult life, he must separate from his mother or definitively confront the stepmother. The motif of death and rebirth symbolizes the emotional, spiritual, and moral development through which the hero can confidently and determinedly enter adult life and fulfill his destiny.

4. Doubles, as unconscious parts of the hero, play an essential role in helping the hero recognize and accept his inner self. The journey offers the hero the opportunity to test his courage, knowledge, and inner strength. The hero must die and be reborn multiple times until he achieves harmony with himself, a feat he can accomplish only with the help of his double. The final victory and the defeat of the evil forces become possible through the union of the two characters, as expressed in the fairy tale's conclusion: the hero takes the royal throne, while his double, whether remaining by his side or retreating, is always available to be invoked again if needed. This unity ensures the hero's ultimate fulfillment and happiness.

5. Liberation from a cursed state and a sinful life requires courage and perseverance from the hero, who must be prepared to make sacrifices. For salvation to be possible, faith in God, following divine guidance, and using Christian formulas are essential. The concealment under an animal skin, symbolizing a state of death, can be overcome through repentance and waiting for the savior, as well as by accepting differences and demonstrating love. These narratives emphasize that salvation from sin and the attainment of happiness are achievable through courage, faith, self-sacrifice, and the unconditional acceptance of the other, culminating in mutual love and the assumption of responsibilities between the hero and their destined partner.

6. The motif of death and resurrection is a universal image that frequently appears in folk stories, including fairy tales, as demonstrated by the analyzed narratives. From the stories about the heroes' death and rebirth, it becomes clear that, in addition to the Hellenistic mythological scheme, the figure of the suffering savior hero, similar to Christ, also appears among Christian storytellers. Storytellers create the hero's birth, life, and death narrative based on these schemes. These schemes are not vastly different from each other, with many researchers noting numerous similarities between the lives of mythological heroes and Christian heroes. In fairy tales where storytellers follow the mythological scheme, heroes perform acts of liberation. They defeat dragons and thus rescue kidnapped princesses or restore water to the kingdom. They free enchanted forests from darkness, being considered bringers of light, and save kingdoms or people turned to stone and demons. In fairy tales where the Christ-like hero model predominates, the figure of the suffering savior hero appears, who, even if they do not redeem all of humanity from sin and death, through their sacrificial death or deeds, can save smaller communities or individuals from sin and death.

7. The existence and purpose of the hero's life in many narratives gain meaning when he becomes the divine chosen one. By following a divine path, through the perfection obtained from the experiences on the road, and by successfully completing the task, the hero contributes to his own happiness and that of others, being part of the divine plan. The correct interpretation of the divine message, advice, prohibition, and teaching is partly assisted by God Himself and partly by the hero's faith and trust in God. Heroes in difficult situations connect with the Creator through prayer, a request for divine judgment, or personal contact, to which God responds, according to the worldview of fairy tales, through divine providence, guidance and advice, or righteous judgment, constantly demonstrating His power.

8. The rebirth of heroes in the analyzed narratives is most often a rebirth in the sense of Jungian renovation, where the hero's personality does not fundamentally change but rather strengthens, heals, and improves. In this sense, death and rebirth prepare the hero for a new stage, marking a higher level in his life: his will strengthens, his perseverance increases, he overcomes fear, and recognizes the opportunities before him. There are examples of reincarnation, where the hero continues his life in a new body, transitioning from one body to another whenever he dies, but in the end, he always adopts a human form in the final part of the fairy tale. The hero remembers previous states of existence and in a single life embodies several bodies. Resurrection in flesh and blood can be considered an archetypal repetition of divine creation in fairy tales, when a helping character (often God or Christ, sometimes an individual sent by God or the hero's destined partner) shapes the body from small particles and

gives it life or sprinkles it with living and dead water to bring it to life. The motif of being endowed with a soul is also present, being infused into the deceased hero by a helping entity (a mother endowed with multiple souls, a divine mother, or another transcendent being), considered a repetition of the divine act.

9. In storytellers' conceptions of death and rebirth, as well as the afterlife, motives preserved from the archaic, mythical worldview intermingle with Christian elements, folk beliefs, superstitions, and elements of reality. Storytellers phenomenologically emphasize the destruction and perishability of the body through death (which is so odorous in a story from Mera that even God can smell it in the heavenly spheres), an aspect represented in the examined narrative material through dismemberment, decapitation, and the loss of blood (in popular belief, blood is considered the carrier of vital force and soul), and through the transformation of the body into dust and ashes. The departure and return of the soul to the body are mentioned in fairy tales in the form of breath, vapor, or bird, associated with the idea of ascension. Death is compared to a deep sleep and associated with unconsciousness; fairy tale heroes are unaware of their own death, learning about it from others' when they are brought back to life. The restoration of the body is most often achieved with the help of water and healing herbs (the herb of life and death), obtained from snakes or frogs, which through their traits represent cyclicity. The symbol of forming the body from ashes and dust, as a repetition of divine creation, is realized by a divine being or the destined partner. Symbols of breathing life into the lifeless body and salvation through blood or sacrificial death also appear, following a more Christian model. The expulsion of demons from the body, which retains superstitious beliefs, appears in narratives about curses and liberation from curses. Among the conceptions of the afterlife, we find heaven and hell, arranged vertically, but also the realm beyond the water, as a space of death, arranged horizontally. Storytellers populate this space with corresponding supernatural beings: dragons, witches, and devils are associated with the lower world, while transcendental beings are associated with the upper world. In the analyzed fairy tales, the mother of dragons usually lives in the realm beyond the water, or the hero must go beyond the water to find his lost wife, with whom he can live happily ever after.

10. In the stories about death and rebirth from the analyzed narratives, the essential questions are related to death and life, sin and sacrifice, promise and responsibility, law and divine justice, sacrifice and salvation, to which the storytellers try to provide answers through fairy tales for themselves and their audience. As narrators, they present the acceptance of future possibilities as a solution to the state of imbalance or suffering of the heroes, as a choice of destiny, which can be fulfilled through persistent actions, control over the senses, correct

decisions, self-knowledge, and thus recognizing and correcting mistakes and establishing a harmonious relationship with the world. The hero cannot avoid the responsibility of decision and action, which imposes expectations in his relationships with others, in responding to requests, in the ability to give and receive. Thus, the messages conveyed by fairy tales suggest that for heroes, accepting destiny and advancing towards a positive future are achievable through self-identity, making the right decisions, and establishing harmonious relationships.

11. The hero's rebirth is conditioned by the aspiration towards moral perfection and a harmonious relationship with the created world: with God, with people, and with the natural environment. Storytellers link the death and resurrection of the hero, the evolution of his destiny, to certain fundamental social norms and moral conditions. The fall (death) of the hero can be interpreted as a punishment for breaking a divine command, as punishment for a known or unknown crime committed against the community, as a trap of evil (such as the revenge of a false hero, a witch, or the mother of the dragon), as death due to breaking an oath of loyalty, as atonement or sacrifice for one's own sins or for the sins of others, or as a threshold in the process of development. Fairy tales proclaim the necessity of purification from sins and the creation of relationships based on forgiveness and love. Storytellers emphasize belief in divine providence and justice as the supreme law of human life. These laws, based on moral and communal principles, which fall into the categories of sin and virtue, are in line with the value system, moral and ethical norms of the storyteller and the local community, and divine law. Through their narratives, storytellers provide models, teach, and educate, imprinting in the listeners' memory the moral norms and rules of community living. In the analyzed narratives, the hero who dies and resurrects is at the centre of the action, always following a trajectory of development, whether he possesses heroic traits or is more human, full of fears, inner conflicts, and mistakes, or is in the position of a sacrifice, who must be redeemed or liberated. The hero, who at the beginning of the tale is in a state of pre-consciousness, becomes capable during the narrative to understand and follow divine advice and teachings, to assume independence by separating from the mother, and to form a loving relationship with the destined partner through the sacrifice and responsibility assumed for himself and for others.

12. Narratives about death are varied in the fairy tales I have examined: decapitation, dismemberment, petrification, transformation into dust, dissolution, drowning, or being thrown into a well are frequent symbols. Symbolic states of death are also common: possession, curses, mutilation, blindness, confinement in a chest, crossing the boundary between worlds to the realm beyond the water, descending into the underworld, or climbing to the top of a tree to the sky, as well as visiting heaven or hell. The hero's journey is full of

struggles and failures, which he could not overcome if his character did not change during the narrative and if he did not learn from mistakes, while also forming appropriate relationships with the other characters. The relationship with helpful and harmful beings always depends on correct communication, which involves understanding and correctly interpreting requests, and the ability to differentiate between true and false words, and the positive or negative responses of the hero.

13. Traditional fairy tales still proclaim today, for the modern reader, the victory over death and the possibility of rebirth, conveyed by storytellers through the life stories of the heroes I have analyzed. Narratives about heroes who are reborn from death can be considered models and messages left to posterity, suggesting solutions for desperate, hopeless situations, confusion, sinful existence, and the loss of integrity. For me, they promote conscious living, responsible decision-making, atonement for sins, and divine and fraternal love. Through understanding them, we can discover our own path and mission and become authentic and fulfilled. These narratives can be read as stories about human suffering and the search for one's path in life. From a disrupted life, symbolized in fairy tales by states of death, we can gain a new life by recreating the lost unity with God, people, and nature. We are capable of our own salvation and that of others through acceptance, love, adherence to divine and human laws, which can bring not only earthly happiness but, according to the storytellers' vision, which is undeniably based on Christian faith, also the blessing of eternal life for the mortal man.

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