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3 **The rights of trees: on a Hungarian short story**
4 **from 1900**

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8 **Abstract** This paper analyses a short story written in 1900 by Kálmán Mikszáth
9 (1847–1910), a major Hungarian author. The plot narrates the genesis and the
10 consequences of a strange last will, which bequeaths a substantial amount of money
11 to two trees. The plot is partly funny, partly uncanny, and evolves rather slowly, in
12 accordance with the long and rather inactive life cycles of trees. It is not so much the
13 plot, however, that is interesting, but rather the ethical discourse of the personae in
14 how to deal with the trees. Due to the exceptional legal situation, various people
15 start regarding the trees as persons and have difficulties in making decisions about
16 them. While it would be an overstatement to say that Mikszáth wrote a prototext of
17 environmental justice, he definitely challenged some ideas of his times and asked
18 important questions about possible ethical approaches to nature. Legal issues are
19 ubiquitous in world literature, but the world of law is usually limited to human
20 affairs. As soon as trees are treated as legal subjects, they seem to become persons.
21 Usually the development is the reverse in legal reasoning: if one is a person, one has
22 rights. Therefore the short story is a sort of thought-experiment: what if we regard
23 the non-human world as having rights? And the result is a paradigm shift we can
24 nowadays make use of, accepting that justice is not or should not be limited to just
25 the human sphere.

26
27 **Keywords** Environmental rights · Short story analysis · Kálmán Mikszáth · Stories
28 about trees

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31 In “Two Trees,” the first poem of his collection of poetry entitled *Rain*, Don
 32 Paterson (2009) tells a story of an orange tree and a lemon tree grafted together then
 33 separated. In the second stanza, a negative description tells what the trees do not do
 34 to mourn their separation, because “They were trees, and trees don’t weep or ache
 35 or shout. / And trees are all this poem is about.” The very act of denying that the
 36 poem has another topic than trees makes a reader think about such possibilities,
 37 which may make the poem a fable or a parable, or at least an extended metaphor of
 38 relationships and separations. As if the narrator ironically said: “And don’t think
 39 that I was speaking about my terrible break up.” However, a critic trained in
 40 ecocriticism can hardly resist the temptation to read the closure literally, which
 41 makes the poem a meta-poetic discourse on the impossibility of giving voice to
 42 creatures that literally have no voice to speak for their rights. Even a poem
 43 exclusively on trees tells about what humans do for the trees, and what trees do not
 44 do, in a very anthropomorphic language. And even the declaration that the poem is
 45 about trees makes it a poem about human beings. But a poem about why I cannot
 46 write a poem about trees is already a poem about trees, isn’t it?

47 This vicious circle may characterise the short story I am about to analyse here, too. No
 48 reader can be really sure if it is about human characters or trees. However, the experience
 49 of ecocriticism makes us tend to focus on the issues of the non-human actants in a
 50 retrospective reinterpretation of the text. Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910), the author, is
 51 nowadays regarded as having an in-between position, since around 1900 he partly
 52 continued nineteenth-century narrative methods, but partly initiated modernism. When in
 53 1910 the whole country celebrated the 40th anniversary of his debut as a writer, all the
 54 conservative literary circles made their tributes, while representatives of the (at that time
 55 more or less new born) modernist movement emphasised that he was a great author whose
 56 greatness the conservatives would never understand. Since we usually can find ideas and
 57 attitudes in Mikszáth’s writing that became very important in western literature only later,
 58 sometimes much later, it seems interesting to scrutinize his ethical attitude towards nature,
 59 even if we can never dare to call him a nature-writer. On the one hand, he usually leaves
 60 ethical judgement suspended at the end. Relativism can describe both his epistemological
 61 attitude, but also his ethical standpoint, which however does not imply an “anything goes”
 62 approach, but a wise distance suggesting that one should not waste the energy of extreme
 63 indignation on more or less tolerable issues.¹ On the other, he wrote a handful of short
 64 stories on animals (mostly domesticated ones in a human environment), but only once did
 65 he go so far as to write about trees. That short story, called “The Compossessor Trees” or
 66 “The Land-Owner Trees,” was published in 1900 in a literary magazine and in 1901 in a
 67 short story collection as the opening piece (Mikszáth 1900, 1901).

68 What kind of short story can have a plot that starts in 1736 and ends in the 1860s?
 69 A modern short story is supposed to have a condensed plot, representing only one
 70 single event from the life of the protagonist, which should be the turning point of his
 71 or her fate.² 130 years seem a bit too much for that. The first and easiest answer

1FL01 ¹ On such issues see my book, Hajdu (2012).

2FL01 ² This is a simplified summary of the huge academic discourse on the genre ‘short story’. Instead of
 2FL02 quoting many papers or one with an exact formulation I like, I refer to a pioneering and a summarizing
 2FL03 work, respectively: O’Connor (1953) and Pratt (1981).

72 could be that it is not a modern short story, but an old fashioned tale with slow and
73 uneconomical narration. The second answer is that the 130 years' time span is only
74 the consequence of its tripartite time structure with its backstory, main story and
75 epilogue. The whole work occupies 31 pages in the first book edition.³ The pre-story
76 is narrated in six pages: Pál Lányi plants the two trees; about 40 years later, Queen
77 Maria Theresa visits them, and Pál Lányi dies leaving a will that bequeaths a
78 substantial amount of money for the trees to be taken care of. The main story starts
79 another 40 years later, and takes 23 pages. Károly Lányi, a young gentleman, badly
80 needs the money of the trees for his marriage plans. After one of the trees dies
81 naturally, he eventually makes up his mind to cut down the other. However, when
82 he is leaving the forest a branch of a tree knocks his eye out. In the two-page-long
83 epilogue the previously omniscient narrator turns suddenly personal and tells us
84 how he, as a young boy, met the old Károly Lányi as a relatively poor man, probably
85 in the 1860s. And even in the main story there is a fourteen-page-long narration of a
86 single night that has a decisive effect on the protagonist Károly Lányi's life. Even if
87 the series of circumstances that made that single event possible may seem a bit long,
88 the work can fit the definition of the modern short story, since the epilogue only
89 proves that the main event was indeed decisive.

90 There is, however, a third possible answer, namely that a short story in which the
91 protagonists are trees must work with a bigger time-span, since it cannot make use
92 of the condensing techniques of stories on humans. Explaining the first two ideas
93 about the possible ways to cope with the peculiarities of this short story, I regarded
94 it as self-evident—in accordance with the entire corpus of short story theory and
95 analysis—that a short story must tell us something about human life. But let us test
96 this presupposition. Not only the title displays the trees as protagonists, but the
97 narrator also declares something like that at the very beginning: “Our story is about
98 two enormously grown up lime trees” (130). I have to admit that it is only a small
99 proportion of the text in which the trees do tree things, like when they grow, become
100 green in springtime and drop their leaves in fall, when they rustle, or bloom. There
101 are some sentences that narrate how they do tree things, mostly very poetic
102 sentences, but the narrative does not focus on their lives as trees, rather on their
103 position in human society. We cannot speak of their interactions with humans, since
104 the trees are mostly very passive (which is hardly a surprise). What makes a story
105 here is the changes of human relationships with, and human evaluations of the trees.
106 The main question, however, is their life, or rather their right to life.

107 The question arises whether the ethical question about the rights of two particular
108 trees can be generalized as being about environmental justice or the rights of nature.
109 The question is obviously provoked by our twenty-first-century perspective, but
110 there are some hints of the legitimacy of a generalizing approach in the short story
111 too. Not about the rights of trees in general: nobody in the represented world thinks
112 that cutting down any tree is problematic. “What is a tree?” asks Károly Lányi's
113 mother rhetorically (136), implying that a tree is nothing of any significance. Károly
114 tries to calm down, telling himself that trees “are not living creatures.” (138)

3FL01 ³ The proportions of the story can be best shown in the first book edition (Mikszáth 1901). Later I will
3FL02 refer to the critical edition (Mikszáth 1915) in my own translation, putting the page numbers in brackets.



115 However, the narratorial discourse seems to undermine the anthropocentric attitude
 116 when it puts humans on the same level as other beings: “About forty years passed
 117 over this old globe of mud, where there is so much grass, so many trees, so many
 118 men, and so many bugs.” (132) When the human protagonist tries to cut down a tree
 119 he feels shame because the stars are looking at him (141), which either means that
 120 for the ethical evaluation of an action all the beings of the universe, even the stars
 121 and therefore everything, should be taken into account, or that there is a higher,
 122 transcendental viewpoint from which killing a tree is a sin.

123 What makes these two protagonist trees so special? Cutting down trees was an
 124 everyday occurrence in the period when Mikszáth wrote this short story, even if the
 125 speed of the current deforestation was unimaginable. Some trees are protected by
 126 law nowadays, either because they are rare species and as such they are parts of the
 127 natural heritage, or because they are standing either in an urban environment or in a
 128 national park. Such protection did not exist that time. Károly Lányi kills a tree, and
 129 then thinks that all the trees in the world want to take revenge on him, but it does not
 130 occur to him that they might also seek revenge for the tree of which the coach was
 131 made that he is using to go there, or the handle of the axe he used to commit the
 132 deed. But these two particular trees are regarded as individuals by more and more
 133 people in the represented world. The first and for a long time the only person to do
 134 so is Pál Lányi, who had planted them, and in his old age started to think that this
 135 was the only really valuable achievement of his life. He is the first to treat the trees
 136 (but only these two trees) as persons: “He usually talked with them as if with some
 137 intelligent beings.” (130) And he leaves a sum of money for them, giving them a
 138 legal existence and a place in human society. Before that, however, there is another
 139 important turn of events when Queen Maria Theresa gives the trees proper names.
 140 To be precise, the Queen only asks her chancellor Kaunitz to carve her initials in the
 141 trees, but the local community interprets this as a kind of baptism: “This was the
 142 way the tree with “M” became Maria, and the other one with “T” Theresa.” (131)
 143 Whoever has a name is already almost a person. One spring, when Theresa is late
 144 spreading her leaves, the guardian tells her: “What the hell, Tess? Are you crazy,
 145 Tess? Don’t mess around, Tess! Hurry up, Tess!” (135) He also speaks to the trees
 146 and calls them by their names.

147 The fact that both trees are given female names may solicit associations with
 148 ancient Greek mythology where trees have a female principle, and every tree has a
 149 hamadryad, a forest nymph that is born and will die with it (or rather her). The
 150 individual status and the female essence of the trees are expressed together when
 151 some wandering students sigh: “It would be so great to marry one of them!” (133)
 152 But the final step of their social acceptance, I think, happens when the young Károly
 153 Lányi paints a picture of the two lime trees, which was “hung in the big dining room
 154 among the *other* family portraits.” (134)⁴ With this gesture, the Lányis declare the
 155 trees to be members of the family: they are not the favourite trees of a late uncle any
 156 more, but rich relatives, whose heritage one can look forward to. When Theresa dies
 157 of desiccation, the declaration of the local court also refers to them as persons: “The
 158 surviving tree inherits the goods of the deceased.” (135) Not only is the vocabulary

4FL01 ⁴ Italics mine.

159 definitely human, but it is also important that the surviving tree has unconditional
160 capacity to inherit. The tree once became an heir due to a sentimental old man's
161 caprice and the approval of an old queen who was personally involved, but it is
162 declared now that this was not a one-off event, since Maria can inherit again and
163 again. The local court does not offer any explanation (or the narrator does not share
164 it), but it is rather obvious that the trees are generally accepted as family members,
165 and are the closest relatives of each other in the family network, to avoid the
166 expression "family tree" here. From the creation of the eccentric will, more and
167 more people come to regard the trees as persons, until Károly Lányi's mother
168 declares that they do not have full rights. She suggests a very simple solution to her
169 sons financial problems: he should cut down the tree to get the inheritance, which
170 would be neither a crime nor unethical; as she puts it, it is "nothing terrible."
171 Carrying out the plan, however, is not simple. Károly Lányi must act secretly by
172 night, because public opinion in the local community would probably be critical of
173 the act. His helper, Toportyán, thinks that they will be in trouble if they are caught
174 by shepherds woken by the sound of the falling tree. The Lányi clan supposes that
175 the locals would react violently in retaliation. But can be there any legal
176 consequences? Normally we do not have the right to cut down a tree that belongs to
177 someone else. And a tree always belongs to an owner, more exactly, to the owner of
178 the land it is standing on. A tree is part of a property. In the fictitious world of this
179 short story, however, the trees themselves own the land they are standing on,
180 therefore there is no human owner whose rights would be violated when they are cut
181 down.

182 We can suppose that technically Pál Lányi must have created a foundation the
183 only purpose of which is to take care of the trees, therefore they would not really
184 become legal entities, inheritors, or land owners.⁵ Such a simple legal affair would
185 not need royal confirmation. However, in the story the will, regarded as blatantly
186 eccentric, is not valid until the Queen personally endorses it. The legal formulation,
187 the actual solution of fulfilling the testator's intention does not seem to have any
188 importance: both the text of the will quoted in the short story and the human
189 community take the lime trees themselves to be the heirs. According to the will the
190 trees are not part of the meadow, but they own it, just as the title of the story calls
191 them possessors. Therefore there is no owner, no human agent whose rights would
192 be harmed by the act of cutting down that tree.

193 The will commissions a committee to appoint a guardian for the trees. This
194 person, however, is sometimes referred to in the short story as tutor. The difference
195 is that adults have guardians, minors have tutors. A contemporary lexicon described
196 the kinds of adult persons that can (or should) be under guardianship as follows:

5FL01 ⁵ Vilmos Kráhl, who wrote a complete book on the legal themes in Mikszáth's writing, summarises the
5FL02 situation as follows: "Testator Pál Lányi leaves 85 acres of land and 4000 thalers for a fund, the purpose
5FL03 of which is to take care of two memorial trees and to cover the costs of the legal apparatus necessary for
5FL04 that. The fund does not have any ideological purpose, and the testament does not contain any other
5FL05 legacy." Although the word "fund" cannot be found in the short story, Kráhl takes it for granted that this
5FL06 technique was applied. (Kráhl 1941, 116)



- 197 1. when someone is unable to handle his or her fortune due to their physical or
 198 mental deficiencies,
 199 2. the profligate,
 200 3. those who have been absent in unknown locations for at least one year,
 201 4. those sentenced to prison or jail.⁶
 202

203 Since eighty-year-old trees can hardly be minors, we should suppose that they
 204 have guardians because of their physical deficiencies, even if it might be politically
 205 incorrect to call a deficiency that a tree cannot move or speak. It may seem that
 206 being under guardianship mean restrictions of someone's rights, and this is
 207 obviously true in the case of profligate persons: they are not allowed to do with their
 208 fortune what they want. Indeed this institution serves to guarantee the advocacy of
 209 those people who for some reason are unable to represent themselves. If the trees are
 210 under guardianship, it means that they are not persons of full ability of action, but
 211 this does not deny their rights. They need someone to handle their money, but they
 212 have the right of possession and the right to inherit. The third basic right
 213 contemporary law guaranteed for those under guardianship is that of marriage. It is
 214 possible that the trees also have that right.⁷

215 Mrs. Lányi, however, points out sharply that even if those trees have been
 216 provided with the legal ability to inherit as persons, the laws that protect human life
 217 will not be applied to them. Cutting down the tree is certainly not murder. However,
 218 the text creates some doubts or ambiguities around this certainty. Only in a simile,
 219 but Mrs. Lányi herself speaks of "killing the testator" and the unnatural death of the
 220 lime tree. (136) When Károly Lányi makes up his mind, he thinks: "I will kill the
 221 tree." (137) Toportyán tries to encourage him, saying he should not behave as if
 222 they were going "to commit an outrageous crime," "to commit murder." (140)
 223 Toportyán explicitly denies that what they are doing is murder, but the narrator
 224 when they are already using their saw says of the tree: "It did not know anything
 225 about being murdered." (*Ibid.*) Metaphors, explicit denials and a narratorial
 226 declaration contribute to the plausible constitution of a possible ethical position,
 227 according to which cutting down a tree is murder.

228 Or should we speak about environmental destruction? This was obviously not a
 229 concern in 1900, although it concerns people less even today than it should.
 230 However, the concept can influence the interpretation of a reader today. But
 231 destroying the environment is not something that usually has legal consequences. To
 232 mention only one example, the Baia Mare cyanide spill wiped out the complete fish
 233 population of a 965 km long river, but through the creative liquidation of the mining
 234 company responsible, its owners managed to get away without paying a cent in
 235 compensation or fines. Environmental destruction can be regarded as rather an
 236 ethical than a legal issue from the viewpoint of readers today.

6FL01 ⁶ Pallas 1893–1897, "Gondnokság."

7FL01 ⁷ As we saw, some students express the wish to marry one of them, but the story does not really consider
 7FL02 this possibility. We know that they have the right to inherit because a situation in the plot raises this
 7FL03 problem. We do not know what the guardian would have decided if a youth from a good family, prompted
 7FL04 by sincere emotions, seriously proposed to one of the trees.

237 Another ethical issue is the intention of the testator. In the case of literary texts
 238 we have long stopped talking about the intention of the author, but it is a vivid
 239 practice with legal texts. Like every text, a legal text needs interpretation. A text
 240 exists through reading, interpretation and application, and the application of a
 241 generally formulized law to a concrete case cannot be self-explanatory. In the
 242 hermeneutics of legal texts the intention of the author must be actualized. The
 243 legislator wanted a reaction to a category of cases; it is open to debate whether the
 244 given case belongs to that category, and if so, how one should practically decide, but
 245 all this has the function of fulfilling the legislator's intention. It is even more true
 246 about a final will. The testator's intention can be taken into consideration as far as it
 247 can be understood from the text of the will (and if it does not contradict the general
 248 regulations). Pál Lányi's intention is quite clear: he ordered the legacy because he
 249 wanted his lime trees to live safely as long as possible. When Károly Lányi cuts
 250 down the tree, he does the exact opposite of the testator's intention and he knows it.
 251 We should also note that the guardian's actions do not harmonise with the will's
 252 intentions either. The testator suggested that a permanent guard should be hired to
 253 protect the trees. If there had been such a guard, Károly could not have cut down the
 254 surviving tree. Some fine hints in the text imply that the fund is not handled
 255 trustfully.⁸ The main goal of the foundation, the protection of the trees is not
 256 fulfilled.

257 Nobody seems to care about the testator's intention, until Károly comes to
 258 believe he is intervening personally. Pál Lányi's grave is under the lime trees, and it
 259 caves in under Károly's foot, leading him to believe this is a manifestation of
 260 transcendental disapproval. At this point even his intrepid helper, Toportyán sees fit
 261 to deliver a speech to convince the deceased testator that his real intention will be
 262 fulfilled. According to Toportyán the testator wanted to take care both of his
 263 brother's family and the trees, but rather of the family, since he left much more to
 264 them. In the present situation, however, "one of them must perish," and it is quite
 265 acceptable that it should be the tree (142). However, to perish means two quite
 266 different things for the man and the tree. For the tree, to stop living; for the youth,
 267 some diminishment of his social status. Károly Lányi ultimately fails to realise his
 268 planned wedding, therefore the closure of the short story shows us the misfortune
 269 that could have happened to him. He becomes a county scribe in threadbare
 270 clothing. At the end he does not belong among the wealthy anymore and has lost the
 271 family house and the estate. He lives in modest circumstances, but not in deep
 272 poverty. It is possible that he was hired for a clerical job due to his family
 273 connections,⁹ but he is said to have "beautiful handwriting" (145), therefore it is
 274 also possible that he can make a living because of his personal achievement. The
 275 diminished prestige and the fact that he failed to "save the name and the house of
 276 the Lányis" (136) must be painful, but that is all "perishing" means for him.

8FL01 ⁸ "The two lime trees were quietly enjoying their income—at least the fraction the guardian gave them"
 8FL02 (132–133). It is the district administrator's responsibility to appoint the guardian, and the fact that he
 8FL03 appoints his own brother-in-law suggests some corrupt machination (134).

9FL01 ⁹ After 1867 the middle gentry, unable to keep up with the competition of the capitalist economy,
 9FL02 monopolised the state administration in Hungary.



277 However, the supposed intervention of the deceased great uncle is only the first
 278 of a series of hints that there is a wider context than human society to interpret
 279 Károly's deed, and there are other beings who may have an opinion about it. The
 280 moon looks down "as if to say 'I see you'." (142) But first and foremost it is the
 281 other trees that Károly regards as hostile, judgemental, vengeful entities. And when
 282 the branch of a tree hits his eye during his escape, it can easily be interpreted as the
 283 vengeance of the trees.

284 The inheritance from the tree, however, would not have stabilised his financial
 285 situation permanently. He was planning to marry a wealthy bourgeois girl—the
 286 usual career strategy of good-looking but financially uncertain young gentry in
 287 literature—but he needed the money to be able to court her properly. Losing his eye
 288 ruins his chances for a good marriage. There is a rational explanation for the
 289 accident: they were going too fast with their coach, the branch caught in the shaft of
 290 the cart, so it hit "his face with incredible force." (144) Right in his face, right in his
 291 eye. A fatal coincidence? He does not think so. Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*: "in
 292 that way incidents will cause more amazement than if they happened mechanically
 293 and accidentally, since the most amazing accidental occurrences are those which
 294 seem to have been providential, for instance when the statue of Mitys at Argos
 295 killed the man who caused Mitys's death by falling on him at a festival. Such events
 296 do not seem to be mere accidents. So such plots as these must necessarily be the
 297 best." (Aristotle 1927, 1452a6–10) The modes of representation are, of course,
 298 different. We may say that the statue represents the model metaphorically, while a
 299 tree another tree or the whole species metonymically or as synecdoche. But it is easy
 300 to see the same kind of (magical?) thinking here, from the perspective of Aristotle
 301 and Károly Lányi, namely that "such events do not seem to be mere accidents."

302 This may recall Tzvetan Todorov's description of the fantastic: the protagonist is
 303 unable to communicate his supernatural experience, since all the phenomena that
 304 anybody can experience have a rational explanation, and there is no proof that what
 305 only he experiences also exists outside his psyche. He cannot easily convince
 306 himself that his own experience is real (Todorov 1975).¹⁰ Mikszáth's short story is
 307 not fantastic, because it is not focalised from the protagonist's viewpoint
 308 exclusively, but it still has the potential of the fantastic, because Károly Lányi's
 309 interpretation of the events, derided and rejected by everybody else, does not lack
 310 meaningful coherence. The world in which he has to live after losing an eye is
 311 absurd and horrific. He thinks that all trees are his personal enemies and he does not
 312 dare to go near them, which makes his life difficult even in an urban environment.¹¹
 313 This unexpected threat from harmless creatures may remind us of the revolt of
 314 birds.¹² Due to his strange ideas he is the butt of inexhaustible ridicule for the town
 315 kids, who summarise the obvious explanation in the final sentence of the short story

10FL01 ¹⁰ A definition-like formulation: "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows
 10FL02 only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event." (Todorov 1975, 25)

11FL01 ¹¹ His personal horror story, even if it is ridiculed by many other actants of the story, can evoke the
 11FL02 notions of botanophobia and ecophobia too. See for example Wald (2013) and Estok (2016), respectively.

12FL01 ¹² For the literary predecessors and sources of Hitchcock's *The Birds* see Mogg (2009).

316 as follows: “Because he is crazy.” (146) This suggests that the second, fantastic,
317 story has only a psychological reality.

318 Károly Lányi also seems to have a tainted heredity. The narrator speaks about the
319 “sick love” of Pál Lányi towards his lime trees (131).¹³ György Lányi was
320 “obsessed” with the *family tree*.¹⁴ (133) It is interesting that not only do the trees
321 become family members, but the family also becomes a tree, at least in György
322 Lányi’s obsession. Of his son the narrator says: “Mr. Joseph Lányi had a ‘tainted
323 heredity’ as doctors usually put it.” He is manic about lawsuits (133) After cutting
324 down the tree, “the light of madness” glimmers in Károly’s eyes (143), and
325 Toportyán fears “he has lost his mind” (*ibid.*). During his sickness the doctors think
326 that “he will hardly become normal again.” (145) However, the short story is much
327 more complex than a simple report of the strange relationship the more or less crazy
328 members of an eccentric family develop towards two trees. It is true, though, that
329 normal, human society does explain their behaviour this way.

330 Károly Lányi was a bit strange even before the night in the woods made him sick
331 and mutilated. He is introduced to the reader as follows:

332 He had pale, spleeny face; no young girl can resist that. In addition he had a
333 slim, fragile figure. In general he was a very interesting youth; sensitive,
334 moony, “half a painter”, as they called him. His big eyes were shining with
335 some peculiar, other-worldly light. (14–15)

336 He is called “half a painter” not only because he could paint a little, but also
337 because society regarded him as a kind of artist, or rather an almost-artist. He is
338 attractive, but not due to vital masculine energy, but to his vulnerability and other-
339 worldly nature. Spleen, paleness, fragility, sadness make him attractive to young
340 girls—maybe only to very young ones. Two interpretative paths fork here.

341 The first possibility is that Károly Lányi’s weak, vulnerable constitution cannot
342 bear the night in the woods, therefore he becomes sick and mad. He assigns
343 importance to phenomena he should not, because his eccentric fantasy does not
344 allow him to experience reality as it is. Human society seems to interpret his story
345 this way; such ideas and viewpoints appear in the utterances of his mother, his
346 servant Toportyán, and especially the merciless town kids. This interpretation is
347 never completely explained and coherent, nor does it dominate the world of the
348 short story. The narrator does not endorse it.

349 The second possibility is that his sensibility allows Károly to experience things
350 hidden to the eyes of average people. This would be similar to the tradition of the
351 *Künstlerroman* in the 19th and 20th centuries. As half an artist he does not have the
352 fate of an artist, although his experience is in a way artistic. He is the only one who
353 understands the total ethical dimension of the tree’s destruction, from a universal or

13FL01 ¹³ Todorov thought that the main function of fantastic literature was to create an opportunity for coded
13FL02 discourse about topics modern literature already has the liberty to speak explicitly. What stories of
13FL03 vampires and the living dead really are about is necrophilia. The expression “sick love” was probably
13FL04 much less associated with sexual perversions in 1900 than today. However, we should remember that
13FL05 there are people in the story who wish to marry the trees. Dendrophilia can be a leitmotif of the short
13FL06 story, and we can see a development from dendrophilia to dendrophobia in the discourse.

14FL01 ¹⁴ In italics in the original too.



354 pantheistic viewpoint. When he spends the night alone in the woods, he experiences
 355 the universal sublime and the numinosity of nature. The first sentence describing the
 356 forest says: “It was a pleasant May evening; the forest exhaled balm; thousands and
 357 thousands of living creatures were vibrating in it.” (137) The forest, however, is not
 358 only pleasant and balmy with its vibrations: “Silence came, the solemn silence of
 359 the forest. Now and then a cool breeze blew among the trees; a billion branches
 360 rustled together, strangely, mysteriously. A horrible cold ran down his spine.” (138)
 361 The adjectives solemn–mysterious–horrible imply the sublime and numinous
 362 character of nature, and the numinous is also terrible and frightening.¹⁵ Károly
 363 thinks that the mighty world of vegetal nature is hostile towards him, and he finds
 364 reassuring even the thought that he is afraid of some robbers. But the forest has
 365 something to answer to that thought:

366 An easy wind passed over the trees now, making the mass of foliage buzz and
 367 move like a camp. From this dull buzz as if an admirable, reasonable voice
 368 shot out:

369 “It is not the robbers you fear, Lányi, Lányi, Lányi!”

370 And a thousand trees nodded assent with their heads.

371 Woe! He really felt that it was not the robbers he feared, he rather wished one
 372 would come and shout at him so that a human voice would break the uncanny,
 373 frightening whisper of the forest.

374 Nothing is more horrible than this.

375 It is a very old tradition that a man alone in nature may experience the
 376 transcendental and hear voices in the woods. In the Roman religion, Faunus was the
 377 god of voices to be heard in nature.¹⁶ Károly will see his figure a little bit later
 378 (actually several of them, because his Hellenised version was identified with satyrs,
 379 therefore there could be more than one of him). Since what he sees in the woods is
 380 very similar to the general human experience of the transcendental, the short story
 381 offers the possibility to interpret the narrative in this way: the highly sensitive
 382 almost-artist understands the real mechanisms of sublime nature, thus only he can
 383 feel the universal ethical burden of his sin against the vegetal world. In this
 384 interpretation he is a tragic hero who has obeyed the pressure of human society, and
 385 applied his behaviour to a lower value system, only to experience a double
 386 punishment: on the one hand, he has to understand what his deed really means, on
 387 the other hand, with his eye he loses any opportunity of financial success. As an old
 388 man he becomes utterly misanthropic, due to his relationship to other non-human
 389 beings, his dogs. The boys of the town’s secondary school love to throw stones at
 390 them, and he has frequent quarrels with them to protect his dogs (the boys can
 391 always take refuge under the trees). His love towards his dogs is not interpreted in
 392 the story in any way; it is only said that he hates the children because of his dogs.
 393 However, we can suppose that a person who understands his behaviour as ethically
 394 judged in a universal context, in which all the living and non-living, human and

15FL01 ¹⁵ Otto (1917, 5–7).

16FL01 ¹⁶ “Man schrieb ihm die mannigfachen, oft unheimlichen Stimmen und Naturlaute zu.” (Roscher 1886–
 16FL02 1890, vol. 1, c. 1456).

395 non-human entities matter, develops an antagonistic relation to humanity because he
396 experiences a generally hostile attitude towards non-humans, which includes his
397 own act against a tree that he deeply regrets.

398 The short story as a whole, however, is not tragic. The tragic quality is only one
399 of the options it offers. The narrator is extremely low-key in interpretative
400 utterances. He only sketches a few psychic or other developments, leaving the task
401 of a coherent interpretation to the reader, although he implies contradictory
402 narratives that mutually exclude each other. From the viewpoint of cultural history,
403 one of these is closer to Romanticism, the other to modernism. The Romantic one is
404 the story of the almost-artist, who is alone able to see the marvellous in the world,
405 trembling in the moonlit night when a grave caves in, riding through a forest full of
406 monsters. The story is Romantic not only because of these features, but also because
407 experiencing the marvellous in a dreary, normal world is the key problem of
408 Romanticism (Pikulik 1979, 322–340). According to another narrative, Károly
409 Lányi is a sickly, infantile youth, and it is his own weakness that makes him lose his
410 mental balance. This story may be called modernist because it offers a purely
411 psychological explanation and sees the events basically happen inside the human
412 mind. Some of the monsters Károly Lányi sees in the woods are really infantile, like
413 his own schoolteacher, a stall-keeper and a hangman he saw as a boy (143). This
414 childish nature of his night visions, deeply anchored in his personal memories,
415 nevertheless provokes psychoanalytic interpretation.

416 It is already the result of Kálmán Mikszáth's characteristic narrative technique
417 that the two stories seem equally valid, and the narrator takes a position equally
418 alienated from both. In fact, both appear in an ironic or even parodistic way. Some
419 of Lányi's nightmares, like the giant goat running on one leg, the bear sticking out
420 its tongue, or the old teacher threatening with a cane, seem to parody both Romantic
421 revelation and psychoanalysis.¹⁷ Moreover, the short story seems to have an ironic
422 relationship to narration too. In the epilogue the narrator suddenly becomes
423 homodiegetic and starts speaking of how he as a schoolboy saw Károly Lányi as an
424 old scribe, undermining his authority and the reliability of his own narrative voice.
425 Up to this point the narrator has seemed heterodiegetic and omniscient. He has
426 related a dialogue that happened in the imperial chambers of Vienna between Maria
427 Theresa and Kaunitz, and also the silent thoughts of the protagonist while alone in
428 the middle of the forest. When this narratorial voice is attached to a "real" person,
429 all the previously transmitted knowledge, legitimised only by the narrator's
430 position, loses its absolute epistemic status.

17FL01 ¹⁷ It goes without saying that it would be slightly anachronistic to suppose the intention of parodying
17FL02 psychoanalysis on behalf of the author in 1900, the very year when Freud's *Traumdeutung* was first
17FL03 published (even if the story was written in December, and Freud's book was actually published on 4th
17FL04 November, 1899, more than a year earlier). Nevertheless, the text can provoke such a reading after Freud.
17FL05 And we should not forget that the literature in Freud's time and geographical region offered many
17FL06 interpretations of human behaviour that Freud himself found similar to his approach. The most
17FL07 notable case is that of Arthur Schnitzler. Mikszáth's short story may parody a way of thinking that in the
17FL08 same year resulted in the founding text of psychoanalysis.



431 Whichever narrative readers choose (and especially if they make both interact),
 432 the rights of the trees pose the central ethical question. The century-long story is
 433 not very exciting from the viewpoint of the lime trees, since acquiring fame and
 434 wealth, or attracting love and envy are obviously not their concern. The narrative
 435 tends to emphasise their disinterest and calmness. Even this may be regarded as
 436 anthropomorphism, but the emphasis is placed on their lack of human reaction on
 437 their behalf, on the fact that they are not involved in the interactions, loaded with
 438 various interests and emotions, around them. A typical sentence about the lack of
 439 any change reads: “Meanwhile nothing changed in the life of the lime trees.”
 440 (134) And another one about tree things: “Both lime trees were still alive,
 441 moreover they had grown bigger.” (132) Living and growing, that is what trees
 442 do, whatever human fuss is going on around them. My third quotation will be a
 443 bit more complicated: “Both lime trees quietly enjoyed their income.” (132–133)
 444 What is a quiet enjoyment like? I suppose it must be a rather passive,
 445 contemplative joy, something based on finding harmony with the world. Is it what
 446 the narrator thinks of tree life? Maybe. However, “enjoying income” is a legal
 447 term, in which pleasure does not play a role. I can enjoy an income even without
 448 having any delight in it. In this interpretation the sentence is not anthropomor-
 449 phism, but a precise description of a legal situation—except for the implication of
 450 quietness.

451 And from this viewpoint, from that of the rights of the trees, the short story is
 452 quite provocative. Through a plot in which two trees acquire or are regarded to have
 453 acquired rights, which the society of the time granted only to humans, the short story
 454 experiments with environmental rights. Can living creatures that are not humans
 455 seriously have rights, or is this nonsense? Can a man be taken seriously who places
 456 on himself a moral judgement for cutting down a tree from the universal and
 457 sublime viewpoint of nature? If two trees can be regarded as persons with individual
 458 right, why not all trees? And these questions from this story from 1900 are quite
 459 familiar for ecocritics, who find it surprisingly hard to convince people that
 460 everyday acts, regarded as completely insignificant in human society, have immense
 461 ethical importance from a global environmental viewpoint.

462 A couple of years ago a book on the future of ecocriticism took a 1930 event as a
 463 starting symbol for environmental protection, when Kemal Atatürk refused
 464 permission to cut some branches off a plane tree that was damaging a mansion,
 465 therefore the mansion was moved. In the picture printed in that book we can see that
 466 an enormous quantity of wood was used to build the rails on which the mansion
 467 could “walk” (Oppermann et al. 2011, vi). Many other trees died to save branches
 468 of one particular tree that was regarded precious for particular reasons by human
 469 society. Similarly, Mikszáth told a story of two particular trees, but a story that also
 470 provokes generalisation. Under special circumstances human society grants some
 471 rights to two lime trees. The human protagonist applies a universal viewpoint and
 472 thinks a tree has the right to live. The story provokes the question if every tree
 473 should be granted certain rights.

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