

KATINKA TÓTH

**Redefining the Relationship between Literature and Morality  
through the Rehabilitation of the Concept of Poetic Justice**

Summary of Doctoral Thesis

Supervisors:

BALÁZS FEKETE

Professor

Head of Department

ZOLTÁN FLECK

Professor

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Eötvös Loránd University

Doctoral School of Law

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## I. Summary of the Research Task

My research in the field of "law and literature" focused on the connection between literature and morality. I examined the relationship between these two spheres by applying the concept of "poetic justice" (*poetische Gerechtigkeit*) a topic that has been the subject of debates in recent years in Hungary and other countries.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that the reader-centered rehabilitation of poetic justice enables the reinterpretation of the relationship between literature and morality in the 21st century. Using my approach of poetic justice based on cognitive-poetic and reception-aesthetic foundations, I aimed to outline the moral relevance of works in which the "classical" interpretation of the concept of poetic justice, i. e. the good receives its reward and the bad receives its deserved punishment, cannot be identified. By applying my model of poetic justice, my goal was to capture the moral impact of literary works in terms of the conditions for achieving justice. Furthermore, I wanted to prove that this approach allows us to grasp the moral context of literature.

The goal of my research was to delineate the main directions of the current discourse on interpreting poetic justice, highlight the justification for and the consequences of adopting a new perspective, develop and explore the applicability and functioning of my own approach in the context of specific literary works. At a higher level of abstraction I aimed to point out the relationship between literature, morality, and law, which I hoped would be beneficial to both jurisprudence and literary studies, and would promote a constructive dialogue between these disciplines proving that my approach is capable of correcting formalist and reductionist legal thinking.

The relationship between literature and morality can be examined in various works of fiction. My research focused on the post-1945 Hungarian intertexts of Heinrich von Kleist's short story "Michael Kohlhaas," and also considered certain German works that could be compared to the Hungarian adaptations. I examined the components and functioning of my

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<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of my work in 2018, the primary focus was on the lively international debate, particularly the re-emergence of "poetische Gerechtigkeit" in the field of cognitive literary studies, primarily evident in German-language publications after 2010. Throughout the research process, several publications discussing the cognitive poetics interpretation of poetic justice emerged, associated with the Cognitive Poetics Research Group at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Szeged. Additionally, a special issue titled "Költői igazságosság" (Poetic Justice) of the *Helikon* Journal was published: HORVÁTH Márta – SZABÓ Judit (ed.): „Költői igazságosság” *Helikon* 2021/3. <https://epa.oszk.hu/03500/03580/00023/pdf/> [last accessed: April 17, 2023]. Furthermore, a Hungarian translation of Martha C. Nussbaum's monograph "Poetic Justice" was published in 2021: Martha C. NUSSBAUM: *Költői igazságszolgáltatás* [translated by: PÁPAY György] (Budapest: MMA Kiadó 2021).

poetic justice model based on the similarities and differences found in these adaptations of Kleist's work. Additionally, as a further benefit of the "law and literature" aspect, the results of my investigation presented the reception of the Kohlhaas theme in Hungary, exploring the limits of resistance against an abusive sovereign.

## II. Research Method

### II. 1. Methodology

First, it was necessary to define the term "poetic justice." My aim was not to provide an encyclopaedic presentation of various interpretations but rather to outline the developmental trajectory of the concept and identify the factors that facilitated its evolution.

To delineate this development, it was essential to navigate through the "semantic density" surrounding poetic justice. This involved an in-depth examination of the definition of "poetic justice" in general and literary dictionaries, lexicons, and handbooks, as well as works focusing on the interpretation of the term. In addition to clarifying the foundations of literary theory, I also explored specific connections within legal-historical, psychological, and moral-philosophical domains for the purpose of having a deeper comprehension of the various approaches. I continuously endeavoured to follow the thesis and to avoid errors arising from "interdisciplinary loss of focus."

As a result of the aforementioned review, the trajectory of the development of the concept of poetic justice emerged, enabling me to identify challenges arising from the "classical" interpretation and evaluate previous attempts at rehabilitation. Based on the insights gained, I formulated my model of poetic justice rooted in cognitive poetics and reception aesthetics.

Subsequently, I examined the applicability of my model through the lens of literary works, focusing on the relationship between literature and morality. In my research, I applied Jauss's reception aesthetics, where the meaning may be grasped in the communication between a particular literary work and its audience.<sup>2</sup> According to this approach, the historically and culturally determined horizon of expectations invoked for a reader from preceding works will be aroused by a new text and the original horizon will be, to a greater or

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Robert JAUSS: „A költői szöveg az olvasás horizontváltásában” [translated by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] 329. in: Hans Robert JAUSS: *Recepcióelmélet – esztétikai tapasztalat – irodalmi hermeneutika* [selected and edited by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó 1997) 320–372.

lesser extent, transformed or only replicated.<sup>3</sup> When reviewing individual works, I deemed it particularly relevant to identify the elements of poetic justice as a special interpretive mechanism, as well as the moral "horizon of change" it generates, as it is in the latter aspect that the moral relevance of the literary work may be grasped.

From a comparative perspective, I interpreted Michael Kohlhaas as a literary theme (*Stoff*) that flows from one work to another through intertextual pathways.<sup>4</sup> Drawing from Riffaterre's approach, I defined intertextuality as a phenomenon wherein, guided by specific textual cues, the reader perceives connections between a specific work and other preceding or succeeding works, thereby revealing the reception tradition that is of relevant significance in the interpretation of the works.<sup>5</sup>

By comparing "Michael Kohlhaas" and certain intertexts and juxtaposing adaptations, I had the opportunity to test and study my reader-centered model including the components of poetic justice and the moral implications. I sought to exploit the potential inherent in the comparative approach to structure the conclusions drawn from individual works, and develop new aspects.

## II.2. Structure of the Thesis

Based on the research objectives and my methodological considerations, I structured my thesis as follows.

In Chapter I, I outlined the motivations, aims, and individual steps of my research. In Chapter II, I presented the results of the semantic investigation on the term of poetic justice, followed by an exploration of the main approaches of the interpretation. I highlighted the reasons behind the crisis of the "classical" doctrine and the significant attempts at rehabilitation. Additionally, I introduced my own model of poetic justice. In Chapter III, I addressed the methodological challenges arising from the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. I summarized the basics of reception aesthetics, sketched my interpretation of intertextuality, and outlined the potential in the comparative approach.

In Chapter IV, I studied the process of poetic justice according to the following.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Robert JAUSS: „Irodalomtörténet mint az irodalomtudomány provokációja” [translated by BERNÁTH Csilla] 53. in: Hans Robert JAUSS: *Recepcióelmélet – esztétikai tapasztalat – irodalmi hermeneutika* [selected and edited by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó 1997) 36–84.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth FRENZEL: „Kohlhaas, Michael” in: Elisabeth FRENZEL: *Stoffe der Weltliteratur. Ein Lexikon dichtungsgeschichtlicher Längsschnitte* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag 1970) 415–416.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Michael RIFFATERRE: „Az intertextus nyoma” [translated by: SEPSI Enikő] *Helikon* 1996/1–2. 67–81.

First, I examined the applicability of the poetic justice model and its moral implications based on Kleist's short story, providing guidance for the interpretation of the Kohlhaas intertexts. (Section IV.1)

Second, I focused on two adaptations written in the context of the "socialist legality" of the 1970s, Péter Hajnóczy's "A fűtő" ["The Stoker"] and Christoph Hein's "Az új (szerencsésebb) Kohlhaas. Beszámoló egy pereskedésről az 1972-73-as esztendőből" ["The New (Luckier) Kohlhaas. A Report on a Lawsuit from the Years 1972-73"]. I focused on the socio-historical and legal context of the works at the time of their birth and their role in the poetic justice mechanism. (Section IV.2)

Numerous dramatic adaptations and stage versions have been created from Kleist's work. These intertexts are particularly suitable for illuminating the narratological characteristics shaping the process of poetic justice and examining the moral relevance of the communication structure between the work and the reader. In my investigation, I utilized András Sütő's work titled "Egy Lócsiszar Virágvasárnapja," ["The Palm Sunday of a Horse Dealer"] István Tasnádi's "Közellenség," [„Public Enemy”] Máté Hegymegi – Gábor Sára's "Kohlhaas" adaptation, and – as a peculiar parallel narrative to the latter – Ferdinand von Schirach's drama "Terror". (Section IV.3)

Finally, I investigated the poetic justice mechanism and its moral implications on contemporary novels that favour indeterminacies and radically reject ready-made answers. For this purpose, I attempted to interpret the moral relevance of literature following the postmodern turn, focusing on the question of linguistic determination based on László Márton's work titled "Jacob Wunschwitz Igaz Története," ["Jacob Wunschwitz's True Story"] László Darvasi's "Magyar Sellő" [„Hungarian Mermaid”], and Elisabeth Plessen's novel "Kohlhaas" – the latter serving as the German counterpart to Márton's novel. (Section IV.4)

In Chapter V, I summarized the conclusions of my research. I reviewed and evaluated the history of the concept of poetic justice, shedding light on the reasons for the paradigm shift and the potential for reader-oriented rehabilitation. I pointed out the extent to which my model was applicable in light of the examined works of fiction, and determined how the relationship between literature and morality can be delineated using the poetic justice mechanism. I also explained why I consider these questions are important from the perspective of legal decisions.

### III. Summary of Research Results and Utilization Opportunities

#### III.1. Development of the Interpretation of Poetic Justice

The hypothesis that the term "poetic justice" has distinct and overlapping meanings in both everyday and academic language was confirmed by the review of general and literary dictionaries, lexicons, and handbooks. The semantic investigation revealed a fundamental difference in its interpretation depending on whether the term was used in everyday or literary language. In the former, the term is primarily used for moral-based evaluations of real sequences of events, while in the latter the term is interpreted in light of works of fiction.

The subsequent investigations were based on the literary interpretation. The development of the concept of poetic justice can be traced through the following milestones.

##### III.1.1. The "Classical" Doctrine

The traces of the principle of restoring the disrupted world order, where the good is rewarded, and the bad is punished, were already present in antiquity. The "poetical justice" doctrine was created in the 17th century and is unanimously attributed to a work of Thomas Rymer, published in 1677.<sup>6</sup> The essence of the author's normative and didactic approach to poetic justice is that a literary work should depict an exemplary world that is better than reality, wherein the virtuous hero is appropriately rewarded and the character committing a crime is punished accordingly.

This principle flourished in classical poetics, but then, due mainly to secularization, the emergence of the romantic poet ideal, and the demand for realistic representation, it began to decline from the end of the 18th century.<sup>7</sup> The symptoms of this crisis are still noticeable. Today, the term "poetic justice" plays the role of a "literary-critical cudgel," and most scholars consider it outdated, associating it mainly with popular literature, and/or simply dismiss it as

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas RYMER: „Tragedies of the Last Age...” in: Curt A. ZIMANSKY (ed.): *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1956) 32.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang ZACH: *Poetic justice. Theorie und Geschichte einer literarischen Doktrin. Begriff – Idee – Komödienkonzeption* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1986) 381–442.; 395–411.; 412–421. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110941654>

irrelevant.<sup>8</sup> Despite objections and numerous attempts at re-evaluation, the current scholarly discourse on the concept of poetic justice still remains dominated by Rymer's concept.

### III.1.2. Modern Attempts at Reinterpretation

The trajectory of the concept's development highlights that the general problem underlying the crisis of the "classical" doctrine is the issue of the moral relevance of literature. This is also the reason why the reinterpretation of the concept of poetic justice took place in the late 20th-century ethical criticism displaying intense interest in the moral implications of literary works and in cognitive literary studies that utilized the findings of research conducted in the area of moral psychology in the 21st century.

#### III.1.2.1. Martha C. Nussbaum's Concept

One of the main objectives of the humanistic direction of ethical criticism that emerged in the 1980s was to re-evaluate the moral implications of literature after the postmodern "nihilism." In this intellectual context, the question of poetic justice resurfaced in scholarly investigations, particularly through Martha C. Nussbaum's monograph "Poetic Justice."<sup>9</sup>

To understand Nussbaum's concept, we need to know that in jurisprudence, towards the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new approach emerged that emphasized the role of emotions in judicial decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, not only is the exclusion of emotions unnecessary in a judicial act, but, on the contrary, disregarding carefully filtered affective factors leads to less well-founded legal decisions. Nussbaum's "Poetic Justice" examined this issue within the context of the "law and emotions" approach uniquely from a "law and literary" perspective. According to the author, the ideal judicial process is "poetic justice," where the appropriate role for a judge is that of Adam Smith's "impartial spectator"<sup>11</sup> and where "literary imagination" developed by normative morally charged literary works plays the central role in the decision-making process.

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<sup>8</sup> Günther A. HÖFLER: „A költői igazságosság mint az irodalmi elváráshorizont alkotórésze” 444. [translated by SZABÓ Judit] 444. *Helikon* 2021/3. 442–455.; ZACH: *ibid.* 4., 440–442., Susanne KAUL: *Poetik der Gerechtigkeit. Shakespeare–Kleist* 22. (München: Fink 2008) <https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846746660>

<sup>9</sup> Martha C. NUSSBAUM: *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press 1995)

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn ABRAMS – Hila KEREN: „Who's Afraid of Law and the Emotions?” *Minnesota Law Review* 2010/6. 1997–2004.

<sup>11</sup> Adam SMITH: „Az erkölcsi érzelmek elmélete” [translated by: FEHÉR Ferenc] 423–450. in: MÁRKUS György (ed.): *Brit moralisták a XVIII. században* (Budapest: Gondolat 1977) 423–553.

Nussbaum focused not on the poetic justice doctrine itself, but on the normative role of literature in the "public rationality". She aimed to humanize the processes of judgment, legislation, and political-legal decision-making. The primary aim of her approach, therefore, was not the rehabilitation of the "classical" doctrine: *Poetic Justice* should be interpreted specifically in light of ethical criticism outlined and the jurisprudential context.

### III.1.2.2. The Reader-Centered Cognitive Poetics Approach

In the early years of the 21st century, cognitive literary studies started to explore the question of poetic justice. Cognitive approaches are based on the notion that the meaning of a work can only be determined by understanding the workings of the human mind and psyche. Consequently, these approaches investigate the psychological mechanisms through which readers comprehend a given text.

Cognitive poetics reinterpreted the concept of poetic justice from a reader-centered perspective, primarily relying on conclusions drawn from evolutionary psychology. This represents a shift in perspective as the cognitive approach does not focus on the author or the work itself, but rather on the horizon of interpretation, defining poetic justice as the reader's expectation for justice and a mechanism for fulfilling the reader's desire.<sup>12</sup> According to the reader-centered view, the reader's desire for justice is instinctively driven by the reawakening of the sense of justice when the principle of justice is violated, and is motivated by the so-called moral emotions that guide the reader. Moreover, Eibl goes so far as to claim that the sense of justice generates the interpretive process, meaning that the resolution of possible ambivalences and the interpretation of indeterminacies in the text are fundamentally guided by the desire for justice.<sup>13</sup>

The evolutionary-based cognitive approach to poetic justice may be accused of reductionism and one-sidedness. However, a significant advantage of the reader-oriented interpretation is that it enables the interpretation of the moral impact of those works in which the doctrine of "good is rewarded, evil is punished" cannot be identified, thus providing an adequate response to the main problem of the "classical" doctrine.

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<sup>12</sup> For a Hungarian-language overview of cognitive approaches, see HORVÁTH – SZABÓ: *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> KARL EIBL: „Az értelmet generáló költői igazságosság” [translated by Christiana GULES – SZABÓ Judit] *Helikon* 2021/3. 416–441.



### III.2. My Approach to Poetic Justice

During the review of the concept's development, various issues related to the "classical" Rymerian principle, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of previous reinterpretation attempts, became apparent. I formulated my interpretation of poetic justice by utilizing these experiences.

My model is based on the reader-centered cognitive poetics approach, which regards poetic justice as an interpretive mechanism directed towards the realization of justice. However, the cognitive perspective focusing on universal, evolutionary psychological processes fails adequately to consider the historical, cultural, and linguistic determinants of the interpretive process. These are, however, fundamental factors in the interpretive processes of Jauss's reception theory. Therefore, I revised the cognitive concept according to certain of his considerations.

Concerning the scope of the interpretation of poetic justice, I started from the premise that any narrative work raising a moral problem approachable from the aspect of justice is suitable for triggering the reader's moral judgment mechanism. My model interprets poetic justice as the interplay of the following components. First, the reader's moral judgment is formed by elements such as the character's actions, traits, motivations, and the justification for their deeds ("moral elements"). The interpretation of these elements allows for seeing poetic justice as the reader's interpretive process. Second, in connection with the evaluation of the "moral elements," following Jauss's approach, it is also necessary to review the questions related to the realization of justice to which the work provided an answer at the time of its creation.<sup>14</sup> Third, in the reader-centered approach, meaning is determined through the dialogue between the text and the reader; therefore, it is essential to examine the communication structure between the reader, as the subject of poetic justice, and the text. Within this scope, it is relevant to study both the relationship between the narrative situation and the moral judgment mechanism and the role of language in the poetic justice model.

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Robert JAUSS: „A költői szöveg az olvasás horizontváltásában” [translated by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] 328–329. in: Hans Robert JAUSS: *Recepcióelmélet – esztétikai tapasztalat – irodalmi hermeneutika* [selected and edited by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó 1997) 320–372.

### III.3. Examination of the Functioning of my Model Through the Kohlhaas Intertexts

I examined the applicability of my poetic justice model and the role of individual components in the process of moral judgment using "Michael Kohlhaas" and its modern intertexts. The subchapters of the thesis follow the logical trajectory defined by the poetic justice model. Accordingly, for each selected work, I had to (i) interpret the "moral elements," (ii) reconstruct the historical context of these components, and (iii) examine the moral relevance of the communication structure between the reader and the text, focusing on the narrative situation and the role of linguistic determinism. Within each subchapter, I dedicated special attention to specific elements of the model. I discussed the historical context of poetic justice based on Hajnóczy's and Hein's short stories, the moral consequences derived from the narrative situation in the works of Sütő, Tasnádi, Gábor-Hegymegi, and Schirach, and the role of the linguistic component in Márton's, Plessen's, and Darvasi's novels.

#### III.3.1. Interpretation of the "Moral Elements"

In each intertext, the reader's task when focusing on the "Kohlhaas dilemma" during the process of poetic justice is to attempt to reconstruct a linear, causally connected sequence of events from the "moral elements" recognized in the text. This involves evaluating the main character's personality, motivations, and determining the legal basis of the judgment.

In Kleist's short story, there were no clearly outlined "moral elements." Doubts arose concerning the sequence of events forming the basis of the judgment, Kohlhaas's personality proved highly contradictory, and the motivations behind his actions were complex. Additionally, there were several possible outcomes as far as the legal basis was concerned. I observed that the text presented only potential arguments for the reader's moral decision-making, suggested alternative solutions, posed paradoxes, and provoked or unsettled the interpreter. As a result, an exceptionally intense interpretive effort is required from the reader.

It was worth examining the modern works from the perspective of how they reinterpret the "moral elements" of the original story. The intertexts born in the context of socialism in the 1970s in Hungary and East Germany (Péter Hajnóczy's "A fűtő" and Christoph Hein's "Az új (szerencsésebb) Kohlhaas"), similarly to "Michael Kohlhaas," did not provide a satisfactory, clear solution to the moral issues raised through the individual destinies. Fundamental reference points for the reader's moral decision were the surreal

struggle for rights determined by the System,<sup>15</sup> the sketchy characters of Kolhász Mihály and Hubert K., the motivation to protect justice or at least individual freedoms and human dignity, as well as the possibility and obligation for individual resistance to the System's norms. I could conclude that the System deformed all of these "moral elements" applying its own rules in an absurd, grotesque, and ironic manner.

Unlike the aforementioned short stories and Márton's and Darvasi's intertexts, the dramatic adaptations, András Sütő's "Egy lócsizár vasárnapja," István Tasnádi's "Közellenség," and Hegymegi Máté-Gábor Sára's "Kohlhaas" were primarily built upon the "moral elements" of the original work. The changes could be traced back to the process of dramatization. In a drama, the predominantly dialogue-based immediacy, the "here and now" experience, and the absence of a narrator may present interpretational challenges for the moral decision-maker because the "moral elements" depicted in the dialogues are generally harder to grasp than the plot in an epic work.<sup>16</sup> To counterbalance this, the texts employed unique solutions. The change in the communication between the literal work and the reader in all three intertexts resulted in the omission of numerous details, the simplification of the characters, and a more easily comprehensible sequence of events, making cause-effect relationships more transparent. However, it should be noted that one cannot speak of the univocality of the "moral elements" in these cases either.

The novels "Jacob Wunschwitz igaz története" by László Márton, "Kohlhaas" by Elisabeth Plessen, and "Magyar sellő" by László Darvasi further underlined the fact that it was only possible to reconstruct variants of the protagonist's story and to approximate the essence of the Kohlhaas transformation with the assistance of overlapping narratives or the interpretation of symbols. Jacob Wunschwitz and Hans Kohlhaas proved to be uncertain anti-heroes drifting without specific plans, their rebellion being more of an internal struggle with self-tormenting thoughts and doubts. Jonas, the alter ego of Darvasi's Kohlhaas, was perceived as a less uncertain and self-tormenting character but rather a fairy-tale figure that in his mythical-grotesque struggle is driven not by a sense of injustice but by a desire for survival. As a moral decision-maker, the reader in all three cases had to face the fact that an objective reconstruction of the "moral elements" was impossible due to linguistic determinism and the overlapping narratives. Consequently, in terms of poetic justice, the emphasis shifted towards the recognition of such impossibility.

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<sup>15</sup> Understood here primarily are the linguistic tools used to evoke the backdrop of socialism and this System can apply to any other system that oppresses individuals, alienates them, and represents an absurd legal framework.

<sup>16</sup> BÉCSY Tamás: *A dráma lételméletéről* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó 1984) 129.

### III.3.2. The Historical Component of Poetic Justice: the Significance of "Reference"

While developing my poetic justice model, I placed great emphasis on the reader's horizon of expectations existing at the time the work was created. "This approach sheds light on the hermeneutic difference between the earlier and current interpretations of a specific piece; it brings awareness to the reception history of the work, encompassing both perspectives."<sup>17</sup>

Especially the intertexts born in the 1970s, such as the works by Hajnóczy and Hein, and Sütő's drama, offered an opportunity to examine the moral relevance of the historical context. In connection with the two short stories, I pointed out that the System, i.e. the "reference," in its peculiar way, left its mark on all the "moral elements." It twisted the characters, the basis of the decision, the motivations behind the protagonists' struggles, and the Kohlhaasian struggle in an absurd-grotesque manner, and the same applies to Sütő's drama. Thus, when making a judgment about Kolhász Mihály, Hubert K., and the main character in Sütő's work in terms of the conditions for or obstacles to the realization of justice, the reader primarily expresses an opinion about the System itself, and the possible relationship between it and the individual. Based on the discussed works, I confirmed my hypothesis that the reconstruction of the historical component, the "reference," is indispensable in interpreting certain elements of poetic justice.

However, the role of reference should not be overestimated. In the case of both "A fűtő" and "Egy lócsiszár virágvasárnapja," I underlined that the exclusive focus on the historical context, capable of providing answers only to the questions formulated by a specific community in a particular historical period, leads to the consequence that the work becomes trapped in its context, and the reception history cannot progress further. Consequently, the literary text cannot transform the reader's moral horizon of expectations through the process of poetic justice and thereby influence their individual and societal behaviour. Therefore, the contemporary reader must make hermeneutic efforts to liberate the work from its context.

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Robert JAUSS: „Irodalomtörténet mint az irodalomtudomány provokációja” [translated by BERNÁTH Csilla] 60. in: Hans Robert JAUSS: *Recepcióelmélet – esztétikai tapasztalat – irodalmi hermeneutika* [selected and edited by KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó 1997) 36–84.

### III.3.3. The Moral Relevance of the Communication between the Reader and the Text

#### III.3.3.1. The Significance of the Narrative Situation in the Process of Poetic Justice

According to research carried out in moral psychology, the moral judgment process is complex. Therefore, in the examination of poetic justice, I paid attention to both cognitive and emotional components of the process.

Regarding cognitive impact, in Kleist's work and in the novels of Darvasi, Márton, and Plessen, the use of Ricoeur's "unreliable narrator,"<sup>18</sup> narrative intrusions, reported speech, frequent paradoxes, omissions, side-by-side placed narratives, non-linear storytelling, metaphors and symbols all reinforce the judgment of the rational and deliberate reader.<sup>19</sup> In Hajnóczy's and Hein's intertexts, the narrator speaks to the reader in the System's language used in court protocols. In these adaptations, detectable narrative techniques, dry, distant, and emotionless reporting, as well as ironic-grotesque portrayal or surreal-paranoid images in "A fűtő" preclude empathic identification with the protagonists. As a result of these alienation techniques, the reader is compelled to step back from the story and reconsider the interpretation of the foundational elements of moral judgment, make decisions about the interpretive alternatives offered by the text, seek causal relationships, construct linear chronology, grapple with paradoxes concerning the moral evaluation of the characters, and fill in empty spaces and places of indeterminacy.

The communication structure in the texts also influences the emotional factors of poetic justice. Particularly, Kleist's, Márton's, Plessen's, and Darvasi's narrators allow glimpses into the emotions, inner struggles, and motivations of the characters. In this regard, empirical psychological studies have shown that "the more detailed is the acting hero's portrayal, the more likely it is to evoke sympathy from the reader, and at the same time, the reader's moral judgment becomes more positive."<sup>20</sup>

By studying the stage adaptations of "Michael Kohlhaas", I explored the moral consequences stemming from the position of the reader as a decision-maker. The dramas reviewed provide examples of various models for a decision-maker where, in terms of the distance between the literary work and its audience, a unique trajectory was created. (1) Sütő's

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<sup>18</sup> Paul RICOEUR: „A szöveg és az olvasó világa” [translated by JENYÉ Éva] 320. in: Paul RICOEUR.: *Válogatott irodalomelméleti tanulmányok* [selected and edited by SZEGEDY-MASZÁK Mihály] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó 1999) 310–352.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. HORVÁTH Márta: *A történetmondás eredete* (Budapest: Typotex Kiadó 2020) 116.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 112. 210. j. cf. Bernard WEINER: *Social Motivation, Justice, and the Moral Emotions. An Attributional Approach* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2006) 39. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410615749>

drama presents the profound dilemma of moral choice in the form of debates, almost didactically organizing the arguments and counterarguments for the moral decision-maker. (2) "Közellenség" no longer views its reader as a complete outsider. It repeatedly addresses the reader, disrupts their experience of the story, calls for rational deliberation, or provokes them. The drama gradually forces the audience from its role as a moral decision-maker into the role of the victim through the perspective of a victim. (3) In "Kohlhaas," the distance between the reader and the literary work is further reduced. The audience members become actual participants in the play, serving as jurors who must take a stance on the defendant's guilt. This drama also provokes the audience by convincing them that they have real influence over the outcome of events, but ultimately the judgment is made without considering their opinion. (4) Ferdinand von Schirach's drama "Terror" can be seen as the culmination of the trajectory because it practically erases the boundary between poetic and real justice. The drama by setting up the "theatre as a meeting"<sup>21</sup> effectively assigns rights and responsibilities to the audience as members of the jury, solely responsible for passing judgment on the fate of the protagonist.

Having studied the cognitive and emotional impacts on the reader and the changes in the decision-maker's role, I determined that each of the texts strongly penetrates the interpreter's moral horizon of expectations through the mechanism of poetic justice. The trajectory emerging from the examination of the dramas also revealed that the changes in the direction and intensity of the moral horizon of expectations, such as sensitizing the reader to moral issues, involving them in the given problem, arousing their sense of responsibility, and activating them, are greatly dependent on the communication between the text and the recipient.

### III.3.3.2. The Role of Language in the Mechanism of Poetic Justice

During the process of poetic justice, the reader is required to reconstruct the elements of the moral judgment. Language serves as the medium of literary texts, raising the question of how language as an expressive tool is capable of capturing the "moral elements."

The problem related to the linguistic expressibility of the "one true story" was already evident in Kleist's early 19th-century text; the narrator noticeably lost faith in the reliability of

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<sup>21</sup> Florian MALZACHER: *Gesellschaftsspiele. Politisches Theater heute* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag 2020) 113–143.

his own experiences and in the linguistic expressibility of those experiences.<sup>22</sup> Among the intertexts, especially in the novels of Márton, Plessen, and Darvasi, the confrontation with linguistic fallibility played a relevant role. Based on the examination of these works, I concluded that while "Jacob Wunschwitz igaz története" and Plessen's work emphasize the relativity of overlapping narratives arising from Hayden White's theory of narrative history, "Magyar sellő" conveys the inaccessibility of the metanarrative through metaphors, mythical images, aggressive words, or grotesque tricks. In Hajnóczy's and Hein's short stories, the legal language of socialism could be interpreted as a specific intertext,<sup>23</sup> as if the System spoke through the narrator, using empty phrases, linguistic stereotypes, and reported speech. In this case as well, it is evident that the linguistic expressive tools are not only unsuitable for conveying the "true story," but that reliance only on the literal meaning of a word leads the moral decision-maker astray.

The premise of my reader-centered model is that the reader sits in the judge's seat and, during the process of poetic justice, determines the cause-effect relationship by taking into account the relevant events and characters, determines the legal basis, and makes a judgment. However, this model can only be applied with the constraint that the reader must consider the limitations arising from linguistic fallibility during the process of the aforementioned reconstruction. Among these are, for example, the layering of narratives and discourses and the fact that meaning, in certain cases, becomes more or less clear not through words, but through other means, such as symbols or grotesque images. Consequently, recognizing the limitations arising from linguistic determinism has proven to be a prerequisite for poetic justice.

### III.3.4. Thematological Contribution

Tracking the line of the trajectory of reception, it became evident that the Kohlhaas theme experienced a renaissance in Hungary and the German-speaking areas during the decade following the post-rebellious 1960s. Among the discussed works, those of Hajnóczy, Hein, Sütő, and Plessen were all written in this period. A common feature of these intertexts is that they exemplify the possibility and/or the obligation to fight for the truth. The protagonists fight the existing system in their unique ways, and social criticism is highly prominent in this

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. MÁRTON László: „A leírhatatlan pillantás. Heinrich von Kleist prózájáról” 135. in MÁRTON László: *Az áhítatos embergép* (Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó 1999) 133–146.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. NAGY Tamás: *Egy arkangyal viszontagságai* (Budapest: Gondolat 2018) 94–95.

works. Moreover, the paraphrases of Hein and Hajnóczy are similar in many respects. The parallels are striking whether one considers the plot, the subject of the fight for truth, the motivations, the legal basis of the protagonists' struggle, the language, or the narratological solutions in the texts.

I found similar features studying the dramatic adaptations. In Sütő's work, given the historical conditions in Transylvania in the period of the 1970's, it became clear why social discourse produced a special genre, a historical drama that demands individual moral decisions and classifies the arguments easing these judgements. Furthermore, when considering the two other Kohlhaas adaptations (1999 and 2015), I also noticed that both provocatively denied the reader the role of a real civil decision-maker. According to Jauss, such narrative solutions also shed light on the characteristic features of the horizon of expectations of a given generation.

While comparing the novels, it became particularly apparent that both László Márton in 1997 and Elisabeth Plessen, a West German author, in 1979 saw similar possibilities for reinterpreting the Kohlhaas theme. In both adaptations, the process of writing a novel is outlined, and the narrators share their doubts and recognitions regarding the reconstruction of the "true story" with their readers. I traced these parallels back to the fact that observations regarding the linguistic representation of historical reality, especially White's theory of narrative history, influenced the scholarly discourse at the time of the works' birth.

From the alignment between the intertexts, several conclusions emerged concerning the correlation between literature and morality. First, the interest in the Kohlhaas theme was particularly intensive during those periods when individual resistance against state infringements was an important topic in the social discourse. Second, the shared "reference" not only influenced the themes of the works created in that specific period but also impacted their poetics, language, narrative techniques, and genres. Thus, the reader-centered approach to poetic justice allowed not only the recognition of the moral contributions of the literary works but also the observation of how the phenomena of the moral sphere during the period of their creation left their mark on the characteristics of the texts.

The emerging Hungarian Kohlhaas reception can, therefore, be interpreted not only as a thematological contribution to the central line of thought of my thesis but also as an opposite approach to the interaction between literature and morality. In other words, from one direction, the moral context leaves its imprint on the literary work, while, from the other direction, the artistic creation influences individual and social action through the shaping of the moral horizon of expectations.



### III. 4. Utilization Possibilities of Research Results

In my work, I aimed to ensure that my research findings could be beneficially utilized both in the field of jurisprudence and literary studies.

Regarding the legal aspect, despite the fact that, in the current scholarly discourse, there is little doubt that certain problems can be attributed to the formalist legal thinking, so far, there have been only modest yet forward-looking attempts to change. One of the reform attempts involves the integration of interdisciplinary approaches into jurisprudence. My research provided a possible example of this, focusing on how literature can shape decision-making mechanisms carrying ethical elements, and consequently, legal decisions within the constraints set by the law.

Based on my conviction and personal teaching experience, I believe that interpreting poetic justice as a process of the reader's moral decision-making is capable of shedding light on the inseparability of the literary, moral, and legal spheres and, thus, on the limitations of reductionist, formalist legal thinking for lawyers and law students. Consequently, my model of poetic justice can effectively be employed in the education of law, whether through "law and literature" courses or integration into the curriculum of specific legal subjects.

I hope that the results of my interdisciplinary research can also be utilized by literary scholars. During the research, I realized that, in contemporary literary studies, the issue of the moral implications of literary works is of marginal significance compared to aesthetic approaches. However, within this marginal segment, "there is a noticeable increase in expressions asserting that literature has experienced or is currently undergoing an ethical turn, and that after the era of »postmodern nihilism,« literature is returning - or should return - to the culture of relevance."<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, following the turn of the millennium, in parallel with the rapid development of moral and cognitive psychology, interdisciplinary approaches focusing on the moral implications of literary works have gained ground within literary studies, particularly encompassing cognitive poetics. These trends place little emphasis on the boundaries of traditional disciplines and, to some extent, converge with jurisprudence. An apt illustration of this is the question of poetic justice, which found its way into literary studies through Nussbaum's monograph, primarily addressing scholars from jurisprudence, political science, and economics.

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<sup>24</sup> KOVÁCS Edit: „Fikcionalitás, narrativitás, etika” 176. in: SZABÓ Erzsébet – VECSEY Zoltán (ed.): *A irodalmi fikció megértésének elméletei* (Szeged: Germán Filológiai Intézet 2019) 175–202.

Taking into account these trends, I trust that my research focusing on the concept of poetic justice and delving into the moral implications of literature can contribute to expanding the horizon of contemporary literary studies. Furthermore, the analysis of the Kohlhaas reception in the post-1945 Hungarian context and its comparison with German intertexts are expected to benefit the Kleist studies and moral-focused comparative investigations.

#### IV. List of Publications Related to the Research Topic:

NAGY, Tamás – FEKETE, Balázs – ZÓDI, Zsolt (2020): „»Átmenni a másik térfélre«. Tamás a Tilos Rádióban” [commentaries: TÓTH, Katinka] in: FEKETE, Balázs – MOLNÁR, András (ed.): *Iustitia emlékezik. Tanulmányok a „jog és irodalom” köréből* (Budapest: Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont Jogtudományi Intézet) 11–27. <https://jog.tk.hu/uploads/files/NagyTamas.pdf> [last accessed: 17. 04. 2023]

TÓTH, Katinka (2020): „A szocialista törvényesség »aranymérlegén«. Költői igazságszolgáltatás az 1970-es évek német és magyar nyelvű Kohlhaas-parafrazisaiban” in: FEKETE, Balázs – MOLNÁR, András (ed.): *Iustitia emlékezik. Tanulmányok a „jog és irodalom” köréből* (Budapest: Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont Jogtudományi Intézet 2020) 247–272. <https://jog.tk.hu/iustitia-emlekezik-tanulmanyok-a-jog-es-irodalom-korebol> [last accessed: 11. 11. 2022]

TÓTH, Katinka (2021): „And you? The Interaction Between Theatre and Society in the Contemporary Democratic Discourse” in: MAYR, Stefan – ORATOR, Andreas (ed.): *Populism, Popular Sovereignty, and Public Reason* (Berlin: Peter Lang) 53–70.

TÓTH, Katinka (2021): „Költői igazságszolgáltatás Dürrenmatt bűnügyi regényeiben” *Jogi tanulmányok* 270–284. <https://www.ajk.elte.hu/media/40/98/60646312f01ad8eddd2a42efabe5abf0a2d8e99011b5ea544b5bbedd70a8/jogitanulmanyok2021.pdf#page=270> [last accessed: 04. 05. 2023]

TÓTH, Katinka (2022): „Martha C. Nussbaum: Költői igazságszolgáltatás (translated by: Pápay György)” *Állam- és Jogtudomány* 4. sz. 112–122. [https://jog.tk.hu/uploads/files/2022\\_4\\_Toht.pdf](https://jog.tk.hu/uploads/files/2022_4_Toht.pdf) [last accessed: 27. 04. 2023] <https://doi.org/10.51783/ajt.2022.4.09>

TÓTH, Katinka (2022): „A színház mint társadalmi fórum, három kortárs dráma tükrében” *Jogelméleti Szemle* 1. sz. 204–214. [http://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2022\\_1.pdf](http://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2022_1.pdf) [last accessed: 03. 02. 2023] <https://doi.org/10.59558/jesz.2022.1.204>

TÓTH, Katinka (2022): „Egy új paradigma hajnalán? A »költői igazságszolgáltatás« értelmezésének problémái” *Jogelméleti Szemle* 2. sz. 73–85.  
[https://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2022\\_2.pdf](https://jesz.ajk.elte.hu/2022_2.pdf) [last accessed: 27. 04. 2023]  
<https://doi.org/10.59558/jesz.2022.2.73>

TÓTH, Katinka (2023): „»Önmaga lesz ügyének törvénye és bírója«: A Kohlhaas-szindróma Hajnóczy Péter és Christoph Hein parafrázisaiban” in: HOVÁNYI, Márton – CSERJÉS, Katalin – VARGA, Réka (ed.): *A téboly menyasszonya: (Elme)betegség és terápia Hajnóczy Péter életművében. Elzárhatatlan párbeszédben. Interdiszciplináris Hajnóczy-tanulmányok* (Budapest: ELTE, MűGond Hermeneutikai Kör) 117–130.