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Doktori Disszertáció Tézisek

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**Truncated Families, Dysfunctional Relationships, Defective
Communication**
An Intersubjective Approach to Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

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1. Research Goals

Flannery O'Connor's fiction features abundant depiction of complex family relationships, unresolved family conflicts, and personal life crises. Truncated families and their ineffective functioning often bring about important turns in the plots, and in many cases the dysfunctionalities are related to defective communication between the family members. This dissertation focuses on how unsuccessful communication and conflict resolution affects family relationships in O'Connor's short stories. In the research I investigate whether the conflicts are caused entirely by the lack of effective communication or whether there are other interpersonal issues that need to be taken into account in analyzing the role of communication in O'Connor's representations of family dynamics.

In the research I focus on three different types of family relationships: mother and daughter, mother and son, male parental figure and child or grandchild. In the dissertation I analyze short stories that are widely presented in the American literary canon and I also work on pieces of writing that are not very well-known even in academic circles. The short stories included in the dissertation are: "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," "A Circle in the Fire," "Everything that Rises Must Converge," "The Comforts of Home," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Geranium," "Judgement Day," "The Artificial Nigger," "A Late Encounter with the Enemy."

2. Research Methodology

The dissertation utilizes intersubjectivity theory to conceptualize psychological relationships and communicative situations. Intersubjectivity and its several interpretations are used in many disciplines in the poststructuralist discourse to determine psychological relations and interpersonal communication between people. I show that it can be used effectively to understand literature as well. Furthermore, intersubjectivity theory can serve not only as a tool for additional understanding but more broadly as a critical approach to literature as well. The analysis of O'Connor's short stories pays special attention to the idea of embodiment, lifeworld, and their different interpretations. While analyzing and criticizing O'Connor's works, I draw on the original idea of lifeworld, as coined by Husserl and used by Habermas as well. The concept of lifeworld helps us understand a character's past and identity in terms of his or her cognitive horizon. Vast majority of O'Connor's fiction take place in the South, presenting characters with strong and complex Southern identities. Her characters' identities are presented in direct correlation with their Southern background, making for a fruitful analysis via the lifeworld concept. By utilizing intersubjectivity and the social theory of lifeworld, I argue for new interpretations of O'Connor's writings that emphasize dysfunctional family communication and regional identity.

3. Summary of the Results

In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” the theoretical attention is mainly on Donald Davidson’s work. By his definition, by not being able to express her thoughts in the form of speaking or writing, Lucynell Jr. is not a thinking creature.

Accepting Davidson’s triangle principle, there is one specific conversation between Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet which illustrates that there can be situations in which speakers occupying the first or the second apex of Davidson’s triangle are able to communicate using language. Nevertheless, it turns out that they are not interpreters of each other, since they did not make it clear in the beginning what the third apex of the triangle is. With the third apex of the triangle radically compromised, it is no wonder that communication between Mrs. Crater and Mr. Shiftlet is defective.

Contrary to a popular academic interpretation, Mrs. Crater’s intellectual abilities are not that poor. This is proved by the Austinian perlocutionary act that she uses to persuade Mr. Shiftlet to marry her daughter.

In “Good Country People,” Hulga’s intellectually engendered embodiment is in the focus of analysis. The process of embodiment was fulfilled when Hulga was in an intellectual environment. Hulga was most fulfilled when she was pursuing her PhD far away from home, proving that, in her case, embodiment is less connected to the Southern environment than to academia.

Hulga’s renaming of herself after losing her leg can also be seen as a result of her own embodiment: she recreates her identity by giving herself an unusual name. Answering the question “Who are you?” is, in Butler’s interpretation, of key importance in the process of

creating the self and embodiment because this way subjects can humanize other subjects. In this short story, Joy is the one who humanizes herself by changing her first name to Hulga.

Hulga's embodiment is a complex issue, defined by her academic identity, her disability, and her familial impulses with Pointer. However, Hulga's embodiment remains truncated, just like her family life. The conditions that forced her back to her childhood home made it nearly impossible to keep company that would be suitable for her intellectual needs. Defined by a lack of understanding for each other's lifeworlds, her relationship with her mother is strained. And her actions and emotions regarding Pointer toggle between the contradictory sentiments of motherliness towards him and protections from him. These flaws in her embodiment play an important part in the rest of the story.

Just like "Good Country People," "A Circle in the Fire" does not contain a single successful communicative situation between mother and daughter. When they do talk, they always finish their conversation in a quarrel or disagreement. This is clearly due to the fact that the lifeworlds of these two female characters are not shared. We can see that these are not communicative situations as defined by either Habermas or Husserl discussed in this dissertation. Without actual communication taking place between characters, no real relationships can develop between Sally Virginia and Mrs. Cope.

Through Mrs. Cope's character, the analysis shows how the cultural world is experienced through the physical world, in the sense described by Merleau-Ponty. He believes that the physical world consists of the settlements around us and all the objects that we can perceive. However, the cultural world also exists and it does not usually concentrate on physical features. The cultural world is determined by the society in which the person lives and plays the person's part. I argue that in "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Cope is only able to

experience the cultural world through the physical world; there is no way for her to escape it. In case of Mrs. Cope, the emphasis is strongly on the presence in the physical world. Her character and personality are strongly determined by the fact that she needs to conduct work that is usually associated with men and masculinity, making her connection to the physical world extremely strong, yet, at the same time her relationship with the cultural world, determined by the society, is less strong. In Merleau-Ponty's understanding, the physical world consists of the settlement around the self, the air, and also the objects all around the given person. However, the cultural world is much more ambiguous, he argues, as it allows different understandings and interpretations. Yet, for Mrs. Cope, the cultural world is experienced *through* the physical world and not the other way around.

Hulga of "Good Country People" and Sally Virginia of "A Circle in the Fire" would share each other's lifeworld, as it is described by both Husserl and Habermas, if they were characters of the same short story. At the same time, they do not share the lifeworlds of other characters in their stories, particularly their mothers.

Turning the attention to single mothers and only sons, the analysis shows that the idea of lifeworld, as proposed by Husserl and Habermas, can be fascinatingly applied in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." Although Julian is aware of the differences between the lifeworld of his mother and his own, his mother does not seem to be aware of it. While Julian is the child of the modern society, his mother seems to have remained in the old South, tied to traditional values and customs, including support of racial segregation. At the same time, while O'Connor acknowledges that the mother character lives in a fantasy world, Julian also lives in his own fantasy world as a self-styled intellectual. These two places do not overlap, however. While Julian's fantasy world overlaps the society that he lives in, the

mother's fantasy world stays in a far bygone era. While much scholarly attention has been paid to the issue of race in this story, Julian's mother puts just as much emphasis on her Southern heritage as her race itself, even if these two cannot be completely separated from each other. The main strain of her identity and her lifeworld, as she sees it, is Southern.

The most dramatic difference between the imaginary world of Julian's mother and the real world she is surrounded by are the norms of class and racial deference. Julian's rejection of the South was a fictional world dependent on his mother's Old South; his constant daydreaming of ways to ridicule his mother's outdated views likewise depended on her. Once she was gone, his imaginary world had to go, as well. Julian's reaction towards the possible loss of his mother can be understood as an act of trying to comprehend the world in which he will need to live without her.

While pointing out the differences between characters' lifeworlds in "The Comforts of Home," the issue of embodiment is put into focus in a new way in the short story. While in many of O'Connor's stories it is usually the protagonist whose embodiment bears significance, in "The Comforts of Home" it is the petty criminal, Star Drake (legally Sarah Ham), who comes to live with Thomas and his mother, who embodies herself through renaming, thus embodying herself in the Butlerian sense.

For Thomas there is no boundary between public and private regarding home in the sense used by Wardaugh. Home for him represents not only intimacy and security but also work; thus, home for him is somewhat public as well, even before the arrival of the intruder. But it remains intensely personal, especially in his favored rooms. That is why in "The Comforts of Home" the intersubjective home is violated; that is more the source of the conflict than the issue of lifeworld.

In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” the grandmother constantly and consistently presents herself through social interactions that are somehow related to her Southern heritage. The grandmother’s lifeworld is separate from the society that she lives in. I also argue that Butler’s claim regarding the relationship between the question “Who are you?” and embodiment is not a requirement for the act of humanization, furthermore, in this short story, recognizing the other does not necessarily mean knowing that person, in this case The Misfit. Even though there is no intersubjective communication between family members, the grandmother exhibits intersubjectivity while talking to a character outside of the family.

According to the idea of the lifeworld, in both the interpretation of Husserl and Habermas, we can clearly see that the grandmother figure lives in a lifeworld developed in a completely different era than all the other characters’ lifeworlds. In Husserl’s point of view, the lifeworld is the horizon, the beginning and the end for all kinds of action an individual might perform. The grandmother performs all her actions based on her idea of the lifeworld stuck in an earlier era of Southern history and society. She constantly refers to the past with sweet nostalgia, trying to bring her current family into her lifeworld, but it is too far removed from reality for them to enter. Her lifeworld makes her the misfit in her family and her society.

The last analytical chapter of the dissertation focuses on male father figures and their children or grandchildren. In the close reading of “The Geranium” and “Judgment Day,” the dissertation shows that communication between characters goes off track because of the difference in the lifeworlds of the characters. The city where the stories take place presents the problem of intersubjective home and the struggle for home in these narratives. Applying Lévinas’s idea of the home to O’Connor’s stories, the analysis shows that in “The Geranium” and in “Judgment Day,” New York is definitively not home for the main characters, despite

the presence of family. In these two stories there are no intersubjectively shared lifeworlds between the Southern characters in the North and others; communication with other characters is completely defective. Successful communicative actions only occur in the stories when Southern characters are presented in the past through flashbacks.

In “The Artificial Nigger,” first, I argue that Nelson’s embodiment and identity has much to do with the physical resemblance that he shares with his grandfather. The analysis also points out the importance of intersubjective home in the short story, which comes into focus when the two characters leave their rural home to visit Atlanta for the day. Nelson’s developing identity is central to the story; the development of his identity and process of embodiment illustrate his coming of age in the story. Finally, the story exhibits how “meeting the other” in the sense described by Merleau-Ponty offers a new approach to examine race in “The Artificial Nigger.”

The last story to analyze in the dissertation is “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.” The interpretation presented in the dissertation shows that General Sash is important to Sally because of the values he represents, not because of a personal family bond. Sally Poker Sash thus objectifies her grandfather and fails to humanize him in the Butlerian sense. I support this statement regarding objectification by showing that other interpreters of this story present the General as a monument, not as an acting subject. I conclude that the grandfather is not presented as a thinking creature, by Davidson’s definition.

4. New Textual Interpretations

In my textual analyses, I draw the following conclusions.

In the short stories that are analyzed in the dissertation it is nearly impossible to find family relationships where family members share each other's lifeworlds, whether we take the Husserlian or the Habermasian definition of the term. This is a basis why communications between family members become quite often defective. Intersubjective communicative actions are rare, or in certain pieces of writing even non-existing between characters.

In most of the stories discussed, there is a generational difference between parent and child. This generational difference is often presented in line with the wide gap between the "Old South" and the "New South," triggering many conflicts between characters.

Leaving the South or the home of a given character always results in trepidation in the lifeworld of the character. Not only is the sense of intersubjective home strongly connected to the Southern environment, but the Southern characters of the story try to reach intersubjectivity with other people only if they are also from the South.

Embodiment can be traced in different forms, of which renaming oneself appears more often. Renaming is used as the most powerful tool of embodiment in these stories.

Characters often rely on the perlocutionary force of their speech acts in order to persuade other characters into actions that they otherwise might not perform. These speech acts do not always bring about the intended results. Just like in the case intersubjective communicative situations, speech acts can fail, as we could see through several examples.

While O'Connor's fiction is usually interpreted as either Southern or Catholic, with my work concentrating on family relationships I have attempted to demonstrate that there are far

more interpretations to her works than the two which gave her the much deserved place in the American literary canon.

5. Publications and Conference Papers on the Topic of the Dissertation

(1) Scholarly Articles in Academic Publications

"Cities of Flannery O'Connor's 'Judgement Day.'" *TOPOS Journal of Space and Humanities* 2 (2013): 111-116. Print.

"Defective Communication in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own.'" *Tavaszi Szél 2013 Konferenciakötet*. Ed. Keresztes Gábor. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2013. 317-320. Print.

"Single Mothers with Only Daughters in Flannery O'Connor's Short Stories." *Tavaszi Szél 2012 Konferenciakötet*. Ed. Fülöp Péter. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2012. 271-275. Print.

(2) Conference Papers Delivered

"'No Place For a Sane Man' – Flannery O'Connor's Characters in New York,"
The South in the North Conference,
Boston University, Boston, MA, USA, March 2016

"Dysfunctional Families and Defective Communication in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction,"
William and Mary Graduate Student Symposium,
College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, USA, March 2016.

"Crossing Boundaries of the South in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction,"
Crossing Boundaries – Migration, Amalgamation, and Transgression in American Literature,
History, and Culture Conference,
Pázmány Péter Egyetem, Budapest, Hungary, May 2014.

"An Intersubjective Approach to Flannery O'Connor's 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own,'"
Tavaszi Szél 2013 Konferencia,
Nyugat-Magyarországi Egyetem, Sopron, Hungary, June 2013.

"Tanner Returned – Cities of Flannery O'Connor's 'Judgement Day,'"
Topos – Reading the City Conference,
Pannon Egyetem, Veszprém, Hungary, October 2012.

"Truncated Families in Flannery O'Connor's Short Stories,"
Tavaszi Szél 2012 Konferencia,
Győri Egyetem, Győr, Hungary, May 2012.