

“Wake up”

Ethical Dilemmas in Iván Mándy’s World

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Abstract

Iván Mándy is often characterized as an observer of unsolvable situations and hopeless human destinies. This paper attempts to demonstrate that Mándy wrote a series of short stories that conveyed a sharper message. In his more active world, the conflicts between the protagonists resulted in open, dramatic confrontations. Ethical dilemmas surrounded these often aggressive actions and finding an effective solution was urged by the confusing circumstances. Surviving, supporting a family, or keeping a job was at stake in these stories. Mándy primarily focused on young people, who were at the beginning of a long learning process of acquiring the skills to survive in a world where ethics and law contradict each other.

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Crisis

In Iván Mándy’s short story, *Dinnyevőök*, mother, daughter, and son – members of a rather well-to-do family – are sitting in a restaurant’s box (Mándy 1984, 396–402). A blind man begins to beg, and the waiter tries to remove him somewhat forcibly. To hit a blind man?! – a general uproar breaks out, the act astounding even the reader. It is revealed, however, that it only seemed as if the waiter had hit the blind man. It was mere provocation on the beggar’s part, a pre-arranged action, as new and new beggars arrive to destroy the restaurant. They get into fights with the waiters, vandalize the furniture, and would take anything moveable. When we, as readers, in our minds call for the help of the police, we are already on the side of the waiters. And we have always been there.

The protagonist of another short story entitled *Nagyvilági Főcső* is a newly matriculated young boy (Mándy 1984, 293–309). Nagyvilági Főcső – whose name possibly cannot be translated to any other language – behaves provocatively at home, on the streets, on the bus, and in the café: he picks fights with passers-by and even causes small injuries. But where are the police? – asks the reader. Főcső boasts and tells all kinds of lies to his friend. And then, a moustached man comes forward, who has been following the two boys for some time. He does not show a

licence, but begins to question Főcső, and would not let him go. Főcső starts to cry – he is now broken – and is thrown into a police car. He sits on a chair in the jail, held down by two men and his hair shaved: “As if he was scalped!” But still! How could the authorities behave in such a manner? – it was told by poor Főcső that “he only wanted to have a good evening...” (Mándy 1984, 307–308).

Suddenly, we are unable to decide what to think of the outcome of the two short stories. The writer obviously builds on the conventional topos that people are not always who they seem to be. However, in stories – in films and in literature – that follow this pattern, the wrongdoer is traditionally caught, the good gains his rewards, and the reader can acknowledge these developments with a sense of moral satisfaction. Mándy, however, offers a more complex scheme of things, and thus uncertainty remains with the reader for some time to come.

If we try to uncover how Mándy performed this “stunt,” in both cases, it is striking that after a long preparation, the events follow each other very quickly. In addition, the elements that destabilize the readers’ moral standpoint are introduced suddenly, confusing their usual schemes of interpretation – just as in a magic trick. However, these stories are not based on illusions or visions; palpable violence breaks into the protagonists’ lives. A further excellent example of this is the short story entitled *Lélegzetvétel nélkül* (Mándy 1984, 572–582). It is set in 1944 when the Soviet troops almost encircled Budapest. Son and father meet again, and the boy pours all his old grievances on his father. Gyárfás, the father, cannot deny that he is a foul man. He has long ruined the boy’s mother: he took her money, sold her belongings, and “pushed her” on the streets. He did not even attend her funeral. The father also seduced the boy’s girlfriend. He cheated and lied – and this is only the surface. He talks about his old sins cynically and liberally and teaches his son to cheat and pretend. The boy is almost suffocated by his father’s sins. Then, by the end of the short story, it all suddenly comes together: the father is arranging shelter for the persecuted, relays messages, and, by jeopardizing his own life, saves his son from being drafted by the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party.

Moral uncertainty in these short stories obviously cannot be separated from the fact that, considering the stories’ social background, the relationship between law and order itself became problematic. This is paralleled to the turmoil of the inner world of the protagonists, all of them young twenty-something men (or rather, boys). In the milieu of *Dinnyeevők*, the order disintegrates suddenly: the insufficient public security following the Second World War unexpectedly turns into anarchy, or rather, a minor “revolution” occurs, the main aim of which is robbery. But Károly, the boy, is not only confused by the attack of the beggars. In the framework of an unfolding family drama, he has just been confronted with the fact that his mother had probably married his father for the sake of her self-interest, and now the mother wants to persuade her daughter, Károly’s sister, to follow her on this path.

Nagyvilági Főcső pursues rebellious behaviour in the mid-1950s. He is frustrated because he was not admitted to the university, and his father wants him to get accustomed to physical work. However, Főcső was excluded from higher education because of his social standing, and he and his friend perceived daily that the laws in force in this respect (also) contradict basic ethical norms. On the other

hand, Főcső, even if he has committed an offense (which is probable), cannot expect a fair trial.

Learning

If we now turn to the older protagonists in the above-mentioned short stories, we can see that they are all confident and know what they want. Their occasional indecision is only apparent. The waiter already knew how the group of beggars operated. He knows that they do not want “moral compensation,” and by referring to this, they only want to obtain a situational advantage. For them, words have only tactical value – they want to act, they want to pillage.¹ They unscrupulously exploit those young people who would still believe in social justice. Beggars are, in fact, corrupting the ethos of solidarity and thus worsen their chances of reintegration into society.

The moustached detective is also an heir to old and ethically questionable police traditions. His aim is not to prevent crime but to produce a criminal. Though he intervenes at the right moment, his intentions are still unrecognizable, and he makes his opponent feel insecure from within. The detective praises Főcső's pants, especially their style, as well as the boy's haircut. He mixes irony and ridicule in his remarks. Later, his gestures reveal that he wants to savour his desire to rule over another person: he expressly enjoys that he is able to shatter and break young people. His ultimate goal is intimidation.

The most interesting, however, is the father's personality. He takes his moral contradictions for granted: he is simultaneously a petty swindler and a hero who does not only save the life of his child but also others who are persecuted. Ferenc Sántha's novel, *Az ötödik pecsét*, shows us a similarly strong but, in its realization, a somewhat didactic moral conflict (Sántha 1963). At a certain point, Gyurica undertakes improper behaviour, the price of his return home to the children in hiding. The foulness and heroism of Gyárfás appear in mutual presupposition: he is capable of heroic deeds because, in a given situation, he is able to successfully apply the only purposeful but, in themselves, dishonest techniques. His son watches as he is taken by the men of the Arrow Cross Party, but with lies and deceit, he gets himself out of the tight situation. The same tactics, however, were used previously to exploit and push his loved ones into misery. Nothing in the short story indicates that Gyárfás's basic nature changed over time.

Károly, Főcső, and the son of Gyárfás are all ahead of a long learning process. They have to understand that contrary to the “great” ideas whirling in their minds, everything is moved by obscure intentions, as well as diverging individual and group interests. The rules are mostly primitive, and, similarly to barter transactions, it is not guaranteed that these are even kept. They also must learn that every explanation is simply a presupposition; and that *all these together* are uncertain. “Wake up” – says Gyárfás to his son, right before they leave the boy's hiding place (Mándy 1984, 574).

¹ Mándy shared his thoughts on the social revolution quite early since the *Dinyeevők* was first published in the periodical *Kortárs* in November 1947.

The protagonist of the short story, *Tépett füzetlapok*, Zsámboky also receives an important lesson (Mándy 1987, 260–270). We are deep in the 1950s, and a young teacher, who has previously lived in a safe environment, is suddenly faced with an unknown world. There are no teachers in the boarding school, where he is about to take a job, and nobody cares about education. The structure transforms the director, the instructors, and the old and new residents; everybody is humiliated and broken by the world built on sheer interests. Here, everything has a price, and everything that has value can be exchanged for power over another person. Zsámboky's "mentor," his older acquaintance, Gráf Micu is the one who has already been involved in embezzlement at the university, was taken to prison, and was later busted for illegal border violation. Zsámboky flees at the end of his first day: "I leave the house and start running down. I will never return here. I do not want to remember this place" (Mándy 1987, 270). Does he have, however, any financial reserves? Can he stand indigency?

Aggression

In connection with Iván Mándy's prose, it has often been said that it depicts static life situations and hopeless human destinies (Béládi 1965, Hajdu 1970, Kajetán 1957, Konrád 1958, Molnár Gál 1963). However, it is also clear from the above-mentioned short stories that several works can be found in his oeuvre, which carry a dramatic tension within them, and these tensions often culminate in sharp and violent clashes.

Undoubtedly, Károly, Nagyvilági Főcső, and the son of Gyárfás had encountered aggression earlier in their lives, but these young people from the middle class have only recently become aware of the dreariness of aggression. Gyárfás's son was almost paralyzed as he began to look at the world through his father's eyes. Főcső was silenced after the humiliation he suffered at the policemen's hands. In the closing scene of the short story, he spends the afternoon with his parents and their acquaintances, and the parents tell a lie, saying that the boy's hair had to be cut off because of a workplace accident. As Főcső remains silent, we cannot know whether the events broke him or whether he became more radical in his spirit as a result.

Károly was also mesmerized by the close-up experience of violence, but he is able to get over the events with some humour. It is not known whether this stems from his infantilism, whether he finds their flee from the restaurant entertaining, or whether it is already a "masculine" reaction that opposes his mother's horror. The mother already knows that anything can happen in such tense situations, so she instinctively gets her children out of the place where men fight. Still, Károly is not a child anymore. We can assume that the chaos in the restaurant, after the first shock and paralysis, starts to act as an emotional catalyst and forces Károly to learn new patterns of behaviour. (Only one word indicates in the short story that Károly's father has died, and he is raised solely by his mother.) All in all, in these unexpected situations, the previously hidden, not necessarily positive characteristics

of these young people are also revealed. These changes have little impact on the current affairs of the world, but the protagonist of these stories are far not the same as they were at the outset.

Many of Mándy's short stories testify that aggression is an “ordinary” and accepted means of resolving conflicts in the world of the lower strata of society, the so-called lumpenproletariat, and even among the “hawkers and vendors”. “We need a tough man here, as there is a much fighting” – says the pub owner in Mándy's short story, *Vendégek a Palackban* (Mándy 1984, 77). In the pub, instead of the authorities, a bartender named Zoli keeps order. The main conflict within the story is that Zoli falls in love with the lover of a merchant, Dsidás, who returns to the city around the same time. Neither Zoli nor Dsidás sees any other means of resolving their conflict than fighting. Their clash is motivated by emotions, but their fight is not motivated by emotional aggression; rather, they merely consider it a tool in an otherwise unsolvable conflict. Though Mándy probably has not read human behavior analyses, his presentation perfectly captures the differences between emotional and instrumental aggression (Ranschburg 2012, 128, Tóth I. 2016, 207–218). Zoli does not spare the unruly in the pub, and with Dsidás, they also cause serious injuries to each other. Although their violent behaviour is against the law, they maintain their moral integrity. Zoli appears in a social role “accepted” by the micro-community of the pub (A. H. Buss's theory is referred to by Ranschburg 2012, 126–127), and, on the other hand, the norm they accept with Dsidás as valid is as strict, or probably even stricter, as the law. These people live in such environments and choose certain means to cope within them.

Zoli and Dsidás keep the scope of aggression under control. Guszti, the barman, says to Zoli about Dsidás: “Don't be afraid, he won't stab you with a pocketknife” (Mándy 1984, 86). The self-limitation shown by Zoli and Dsidás signals a certain level of maturity (even if it sounds ironic in a situation where adults beat each other until one loses consciousness). In contrast, we can mention the figures from another short story entitled *Egyérintő*: a few obscure instructions and some money as a promise are enough for Kis Opra and Nagy Opra to kill a concurrent receiver (Mándy 1984, 337–350). The Opras are barely aware of what they have done, they cannot even be called humans, and still, their instigator has a speaking name: Rat.

Mándy illuminates the dangers of individual aggression without being didactic. A small quarrel can turn into a human tragedy within moments. In Mándy's world, people in altered states of consciousness are often caught up in the whirlwind of aggression – they cross the boundaries that would be respected among normal circumstances. In the short story *Fagylaltosok*, we see how emotional aggression spreads over a group of otherwise friendly and harmless people. One morning, some drunken bullies at the Ludovika Garden decide to have some fun and seize the entire stock of Blum, an ice cream vendor. Blum is even humiliated because he did not obey immediately. He gathers his friends to take revenge. He is no longer an ice cream vendor; in his mind, he has transformed into Teddy Bill, the western film hero. Reaching Ludovika Garden again, Blum calms down, but his friend, Epfele, provokes fighting with the bullies. From then on, Blum has to fight for his own

life like “a scared animal;” his behaviour shows different elements of defensive aggression (see Hárđi 2000, 44–45). Tragedy happens, but not in the way we would expect. Blum is an inexperienced fighter, an outsider. He wants to defeat his opponent, Müller, but he also wants to change him. Blum is overwhelmed by his emotions; he overcomes Müller and gets into a trance-like state – and, though not intentionally, he kills his opponent.

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In my opinion, the most exciting are those short stories in which the adult “heroes” resort to aggression with premeditated intent but manage to keep their plans secret. Many of them rely on their intellect while others set a trap for their opponents.

A case when a violent outcome is simply not prevented can also be discussed in relation to these. In the short story *Szoba a harmadikon*, a workplace conflict gets out of hand (Mándy 1987, 319–337). A store manager embezzles money, and Pártos, an auditor, is ordered to investigate the matter expertly. But when the embezzler starts threatening him, he remains defenceless. Nevertheless, the circumstances offer Pártos the possibility of a perfect crime. During the night, the embezzler breaks into the empty building, where Pártos has a small room on the third floor. Pártos does not even have to do anything just let things happen. The house is under construction, and Pártos watches silently as the embezzler climbs up the half-finished staircase. The reader is cheering for Pártos. We are excited for the embezzler to die (!) in an accident – he does indeed fall off the staircase, and Pártos escapes. The auditor’s behaviour would be considered sinful in a world where the interests of the community and the individual are in harmony; here, however, the community’s norms have become corrupted, serving individual interests. If we were to prosecute the auditor for failing to provide help, how would we decide as a member of an imaginary jury?

From a moral point of view, an even more acute situation unfolds in the short story entitled *A besúgó*, where circumstances also “offer” a solution (Mándy 1984, 19–38). After the German occupation, an informant living in a house in Budapest begins to report his neighbours at random, without selection. Some men from the house make a tacit pact to kill the informant, an older woman. She is murdered during an air raid amid chaotic circumstances in the basement. The reader is aghast but feels that for the habitants there was no other solution. Though a bit far-fetched, we can link the outcome of Zsámboky’s story to this one: Zsámboky, seeing the many horrors, indeed fled the boarding school, but he later returns because he has to support his elderly mother: he thus assumes a participative role in the machinery of violence.

As far as the readers’ emotional responses are concerned, it seems that we tend to excuse the perpetrators provided that violence ensures the survival of the individual, the family, or any other smaller community. It is an important factor that defensive aggression should not be connected to any other type of crime. Mándy advocates for the primacy of the instinct of survival. This, from the loser’s point of view, is also confirmed by the short story entitled *A fűtő* (Mándy 1984, 227–246). The protagonist is certainly an intellectual who has come down in life, who tries

to find shelter after the war in a school's boiler room, citing official papers that his stay there is legitimate. However, the school's principal attempts to remove him. Therefore, the heater tries to find allies in the students, who prove to be unreliable supporters. He only has strength for an infantile form of resistance. His life becomes unmanageable, and by turning his aggression against his own person, he hangs himself.

In Mándy's oeuvre, every micro-environment – be it a school, a house, or a restaurant – is the model of a bigger complex. In the turbulent times, his adult heroes can only rely on themselves, or perhaps some very close allies. Their moral convictions often conflict with social norms and laws. They are stubborn, and only accept the inner voice of morality as their guide.

Instead of Peace-making

In the period following the turbulent times, we would expect Mándy to depict the youth of the 1960s as a generation “at peace”. But we find quite the opposite. The Vera stories testify that aggression became an infeasible part of everyday life. Teenagers show no emotions towards their parents, look down on them, and they consider it “funny” to make jokes about them. Lovers are not attached to each other, and often with a strange gesture, and often without an explanation, they break up. They are also aggressive towards their peers and beat or have the weaker ones beaten simply out of the wish to show off and boredom; their days are characterised by fear and uncertainty.

The motto of the volume *Mi van Verával?* is as follows: “Are you saying that I am looking at them as an envious old man?” (Mándy 1970, 2)

After having read the book, I do not think any reader would say yes to this question.

Nevertheless, Mándy does not moralise. His puzzles have more than one solution.

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