

BÁTKI ANNA

TEACHING AS THE MEANS OF BREAKING FREE

WOMEN'S CHOICE IN THE 19TH CENTURY
THROUGH LAWRENCE'S AND KAFFKA'S NOVELS

A Bíráló Bizottság tagjai:

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*Kaffka Margit in her novels and short stories dealt with the social position of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Hungary. In this period teaching was a solution for the impoverishing gentry women to start an independent life. I wish to compare this phenomenon with the one that can be seen in Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and in *Women in Love*, in which Ursula Brangwen also chose to teach children to fight for a kind of independence in the United Kingdom. Consequently, there are several similar aspects of the career that Ursula and her Hungarian equivalents chose, for instance their social backgrounds, possibilities and other aspects as well.*

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Today it is not surprising if a woman teaches children, on the contrary, it seems to be rather natural. Yet a century ago this was a great step for women in their fight for independence. Margit Kaffka, who was an author at the beginning of the twentieth century, depicted teaching as a means of breaking free in several novels. D. H. Lawrence in his Brangwen-saga portrayed two girls in England who wanted to escape the boredom of their lives by teaching. In this essay, I wish to demonstrate how Kaffka

Margit, a Hungarian and D. H. Lawrence, a British author (both of them teachers) represent women as teachers in their works, the phenomenon that was a significant step in the process of emancipation. I also wish to give an overview of the era, the historical and social background, Kaffka's and Lawrence's heroes, their reasons and inspirations, their education and, finally, their attitudes towards teaching.

Discussing this topic poses the problem of languages, since most of Kaffka Margit's works and the critical reviews about them have not yet been translated to English. Thus, the quotations cited from Kaffka's oeuvre in this essay are my own translations.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

In the change of women's opportunities to have an independent life, one of the most important influencing factors in Hungary was the Compromise of 1867, after which Hungary started a new phase of development. Simultaneously with the union of Buda, Pest and Óbuda, which resulted in the formation of a metropolis in 1873, the Act of Common Education started the slow process of women's emancipation in 1868. One of its main purposes was to improve the startling statistics according to which before the Act merely 25% of Hungarian women were literate (as opposed to 71,5% of men). Literacy was the first step towards emancipation, and towards intellectual professions. "For the first generation of the independent women teaching was almost the only possibility, especially before the admission of women to universities" (Bodnár 17). The admission depended on ministerial permission with which they could only attend the medical or arts faculties of the University of Budapest. This way a small group of women could gain their partial independence and could earn a living, which caused the transformation of traditional women roles.

In other countries, the stage of emancipation seems to have been the same. Dr. Hoffschweilie, a professor at the Middle Tennessee State University states that "By the 1870s, women had found their earliest, least controversial career opportunity in a profession perceived as an extension of traditional domestic roles--as school teachers". This was the result of the series of new possibilities as described in the case of England:

Women were not admitted to university examinations in England until 1867, when the doors of the University of London were thrown

open, and, in 1871, Miss Clough opened a house for women students in Cambridge, which in 1875 became Newnham College. Women were formally admitted to Cambridge in 1881, and somewhat similar privileges were given at Oxford in 1884. (Bancroft).

These concessions were of great significance as in earlier centuries men were querying women's abilities to think and only a few decades before the Declaration of Human Rights honoured intellectuals such as Benjamin Franklin were arguing whether women were at all capable of learning. He evokes his discussion with Collins in his *Autobiography*:

A question was once ... started between Collins and me, of the propriety of educating the female sex in learning, and their abilities for study. He was of opinion that it was improper, and that they were naturally unequal to it. I took the contrary side, perhaps a little for dispute's sake.

SAME ERA – SIMILAR HEROES

The views quoted above had undergone serious changes by the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the results of the changes are illustrated both Kaffka's and Lawrence's novels. Kaffka's *Colours and Years* [Színek és évek] appeared in the *Vasárnapi Újság* at the end of 1911, *Mária's Years* [Mária évei] in the *Nyugat* in 1912. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was first published in September 1915. Kaffka's *Ants' Nest* [Hangyaboly] also appeared in the *Nyugat* in 1917, while the last draft of Lawrence's *Women in Love* was finished in the summer of 1919, and was published in November 1920. From this list of publications, we can see that Kaffka and Lawrence wrote their novels at about the same time, while we can reveal several similarities between these literary pieces themselves.

Kaffka "was determined to formulate women's problems in literary ways" (Fábrí 78) in her works, thus she followed several generations of women to record the slow process of change in women's roles in her main works. *Pórtelky Magda*, protagonist of *Colours and Years*, got married in the late 1860s, and her children are of the same age as *Laszlovszky Mária*, the main character of *Mária's Years*. The artist *Rosztoky Éva* of *The Stations/Stages*, who got divorced in the 1900s could be *Mária's* daughter, and Kaffka's last woman protagonist, *Király Erzsí* of *Ants' Nest*, the quick-witted teacher-training student is the member of the following generation. This way we can see that these protagonists could have been

each other's descendants. Accepting this point is important to see that on the one hand Mária and Magda's daughters start their lives with the same social background and the same opportunities. Their family background is an essential stimulation for the need of independent life as we can see in the novels. On the other hand, the author shows the readers the slowness of women's integration into social adulthood through the change of their place in the society.

Lawrence in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* also presents a line of improvement from the Brangwen ancestors who did manual labour to Ursula and Gudrun who gain a living by their intellectual professions: art and teaching. We can see this similarity even if some of the steps were carried out by Brangwen men, rather than women.

INSPIRATION AND REASONS

The reasons of taking the most accessible job are different in the case of Kaffka's heroines and the Brangwen sisters. In the case of most of Kaffka's female protagonists, their social background is what forces them to teach.

For Pórtelky Magda merely one thing was in sight, which is "the obligatory goal: to get married, get married well" (Colours 35). Nevertheless, after her first husband's death, her life started to fail completely. She got married again, and had three daughters. Only one aim remained for her: she wanted to fight against women's defencelessness, for freedom and independence through her daughters. "[My daughters] are going to be women and wives, as I am. But I don't want their lives to resemble mine at all. I will fight against it. I will sacrifice my life for it" (Colours 161). This was a rather desperate fight as the family's financial position was poor. She humiliated herself, she worked like a slave and she completely sacrificed her life in order to be able to say that "The youngest is eighteen, she is preparing for her matric., she fights, gives lessons and begs for stipendia... But still she can look forward, make plans and rejoice over life" (Colours 36-37).

Laszlovszky Mária was born into a noble, but poor family. All her widow mother could do for her and one of her sisters was to get a scholarship to the Valéria Boarding School. Her mother sent Mária to that school to make Mária the supporter of the family. In the town where she

teaches later someone said about Mária: "That's to be appreciated to have a girl of a noble descent to teach" (Mária 31).

In the case of Ants' Nest Erzsi chose to live and study in the cloister's teacher training part not only because of the future prospect of gaining money, but to silence the gossips of the town. She also was inspired by her secret lover who would find her a job at first as a teacher and later as headmistress in the capital.

The Brangwen women also had other reasons beside financial ones. Ursula's ancestors were admiring the squire and the vicar who led a spiritual life, and the Brangwen women decided to live through their children giving them "this education, this higher form of being" (Rainbow, 6). Ursula's mother, Anna Brangwen "gives up her individual journey to become what feminism would call a 'breeding machine'" (Marsh 219). Thus she chose a similar life as Magda in her second marriage. But her giving up her ambitions was not only the consequence of the lack of possibilities but a conscious decision. Lawrence illustrates her decision with a simile from the Bible:

She had a slight expectant feeling, as of a door half opened. Here she was, safe and still in Cossethay... And from her Pisgah mount... what could she see? A faint, gleaming horizon, a long way off... Must she be moving thither? But why must she start on the journey? She stood so safely on the Pisgah mountain (Rainbow, 163).

Pisgah mount was the hill from which Moses was shown the Promised Land. This simile implies that even though Anna gives up her struggle, she expects that her children will have a different life as The Rainbow is "a perpetual promise and hope for mankind" (Marsh 163).

After finishing secondary school Ursula realises that "without place or meaning" she cannot continue her life. "She must do something" (Rainbow 301). Her ex-schoolmistress suggests that she should teach as an uncertified teacher for one or two years and that should be followed by attending a training college. She thinks "that will give you [Ursula] more scope to choose your own way" (Rainbow, 301). Hence it is not her mother who actively suggests this future as we would have expected from the woman standing on the Pisgah mount. Beside Anna Brangwen, Ursula's father also felt outraged by her audacious step: "[h]is heart was hard and angry" (Rainbow, 307).

Ursula also wants to reach independence from her family with whom she wishes to sever ties. As Ursula posted her letters of application “she felt as if already she was out of the reach of his father and mother” (Rainbow, 304).

To sum up the reasons why these girls started to work as teachers we can find the need for freedom and independence, poverty, boredom and their family’s expectations. Nevertheless, the claim to reach complete emancipation could not have been turned over in their heads as the social constraints remained rather inflexible.

STUDYING BEFORE TEACHING

However, before being able to start a possibly independent life both Kaffka’s and Lawrence’s characters had to attend teacher-training schools. In this part I will give a brief summary of their experiences during their studies.

As I have mentioned earlier, Magda’s daughters had to attend secondary schools and university under rather difficult circumstances. Since their parents could not give them financial assistance, their higher education depended entirely on stipends and private teaching. However, they were not at all discouraged by the complications: they enjoyed that “they are able to await, to plan and to rejoice over the future” (Colours 37).

Laszlovszky Mária’s mother could pull strings for only her two older daughters, who attended the Valéria Boarding School in the capital. This school had an unnaturally spiritual atmosphere, which seriously influenced every girl who lived there. Mária’s elder sister got married and she survived the shock of the clash with reality. However, not all of them were as lucky as her: the deformed attitude of the school towards life seriously contributed to Mária’s life going astray and to end in suicide.

Mária and her classmates studied mainly arts: literature and linguistics and they lived through each novel, poem or drama they read. Neither in Erzsí’s nor in Mária’s world is it possible to learn or teach about gynaecious and androgynous flowers (as in the chapter called “Class-Room” in *Women in Love*) as they mainly learnt about stones and minerals, without the least hint of sexuality. Ursula during her university years felt attracted to the studying of nature: “How she loved to sit on her high stool before the bench, with her pith and her razor and her material,

carefully mounting her slides, carefully bringing her microscope into focus" (Rainbow 364). Her approach was less abstract and it made her able to cope with love, in contrast to Mária who felt disgusted merely by the slightest allusion to the physical aspects of love.

As Lawrence describes Ursula's school years, we can see not only mental but geographical broadening of her horizon. From the isolated home to Ilkeston she found great pleasure in learning, she "seated herself upon the hill of learning", and she "trembled like a postulant when she wrote the Greek alphabet for the first time" (Rainbow 225). As we can see, in contrast to Anna Brangwen, she wished to continue studying, and with the parallel of the aforementioned "Pisgah mount" and "the hill" Lawrence achieves a stronger contrast between the generations.

Yet, disillusionment found her rather soon. Later, when she started to attend university she found that it is the "wondrous, cloistral origin of education" and that the college is "holy ground" (Rainbow 362), the professors are the "priests of knowledge" (Rainbow 363). Comparing science to religion represent the highly esteeming attitude towards science in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, once again a "harsh and ugly disillusion came over her" (Rainbow 366). This was the feeling she encountered when she started teaching almost three years earlier.

From the second year she felt disillusionment again and love became more important than her studies. Unlike Ursula, Mária felt disillusionment only after finishing studying, although she did not find any substitute for it, anything that would fill in her life. In the Valeria Boarding School the girls' whole lives were about literature, and they lived in the world of words. As one of the students said: "The ecstasy of words has covered us again" (Mária 10). After school Mária could not cope with boredom and the bleak prospects of her life, she had nothing to live for any more.

During their school years both Ursula in the Grammar School in Nottingham and Király Erzsi in the cloister met an other sort of love: lesbian love. The attraction between Ursula and Winifred Inger was more physical than the one Erzsi experienced in the cloister. Ursula and Winifred kissed and swam together naked, while in the Ants' Nest the girls and nuns admired their "ideals" from the distance. However, these instances (or hints) of homosexuality also represent the authors' and protagonists' possibility to live and show others alternative ways of living.

Nevertheless, depicting these sultrily erotic scenes, both Lawrence and Kafka met some kind of objection from the audiences. After the publication of the *Ants' Nest*, a review appeared in the *Budapesti Szemle*: "The author has increased the number of her novels with this so called novel. This is not literature but pornography". In 1915 Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was "published, suppressed, prosecuted and banned" (Marsh 200), though not only because of the rendering of lesbian love.

Leaving school and starting work at the elementary school, as both Ursula and Mária had to face the everyday problems, both of them felt that the real world was utterly different from what they had thought earlier. Before her suicide, Mária goes to the capital, leaving the school, the town and her fiancé behind, and she only wishes she could return to the Valéria "Boarding School, the old, dear, warm nest, her realest home, from which she emigrated". She feels that despite the fact that this ideal state of being was ruined in their last days in the Valéria: "Reality has already ripped us apart" (Mária 7) thought one of the girls.

Ursula does not feel quite so 'schoolsick', but she also feels the difference: "She was here in this hard, stark reality— reality. It was queer that she should call this the reality, which she had never known till to-day, and which now so filled her with dread and dislike, that she wished she might go away" (*Rainbow* 314). Consequently, unlike Mária, Ursula would be content only if she could stop teaching, but she would never admit her failure.

TEACHING

Ursula's teaching experiences are described in *The Rainbow* in the chapter called 'The Man's World'. In Ilkeston, the world is rougher, most of the pupils are poor and tough: "She [Ursula] begins work full of sensitivity towards the children in her class, ... [however,] the job turns into a battle for power" (Marsh 143). These desperate power games and the offensive tricks make Ursula describe the school as a prison several times. After a few weeks, she feels the dehumanising effect of work, and she decides that "Never more, and never more would she give herself as individual to her class" (*Rainbow* 333). She cannot give up her job in the St. Philip's school since working two years as uncertified teacher is the only way for her to go to college.

It is not only the students' attitude that disturbs Ursula, but the hostile relationships among the teachers.

Mr Harby, a fellow teacher does not explain any of the rules, customs and practice of the school, but demands an account of her every mistake. In addition, he does that in front of Ursula's class, which completely undermines her hardly-existing authority. Furthermore, the schoolmaster speaks to her "with a fascinating, insulting geniality, purely official and domineering" (Rainbow 315). Shouting and quarrelling are commonplace. These affairs do not ease her situation, that is already challenging as the school is for mainly poor, ill-mannered and uncared-for children.

In the small town, in Mária's girls' school none of these occur. She often meets Apostol and other teachers to get involved in extracurricular activities, thus their relationships are exempt from serious conflicts. Furthermore when she realises that one of her students might appeal to Apostol, her future fiancé, the two women "faced each other understanding everything, as enemies and still in a noble way, respecting the other" (Mária 122). The only thing that is unusual for her, which she feels impolite, is that some students send kisses after her when she walks on the corridor. In Mária's world politeness does play an important role in life, in the girls' school, where Mária teaches, school-leavers only study because of it: "she learnt it indeed, for politeness' sake, she did not want to be a trouble to her parents" (Mária 121).

After university, in *Women in Love*, Ursula worked as a class mistress in Willey Green Grammar School. There she works amongst far better conditions, and that is where (Willey Green Grammar School) she meets her future husband, Birkin the school-inspector. Mária also meets Apostol, the teacher whom she agrees to marry, in her school. Nevertheless, the latter relationship is only an unrequited love, they plan to marry to live up to society's expectations. Birkin and Ursula more or less found their happiness, but Mária and Apostol did not get married since Mária had not felt herself able to marry anyone. Realising this took her closer to suicide.

After the enthusiasm of independence, Mária and Ursula started to feel that teaching was not a good solution for their lives. While they carried on with teaching day after day, they both became indifferent and mechanical. Ursula felt that the "activity ...was like a trance." (Women 49), and Mária "walked round the school half-dreaming" (Mária 50).

As a teacher in the secondary school Ursula often felt monotony and hopelessness: "what else she waited for, besides the beginning and end of the school week ... and ... of the holidays. This was a whole life!" (Women 68) Boredom also appeared in Ursula's life. "Tomorrow was Monday... the beginning of ... another shameful, barren school-week, mere routine and mechanical activity" (Women 224). There is a clear similarity between Ursula's and Mária's description as they both use the word "mechanic" about educating: "...in the boredom of the morning she sat on the platform and she kept saying mechanic phrases pseudo-seriously and absent-mindedly" (Mária 121). From these excerpts it is clear that the significance of their work diminished for them, even if they were well aware of the fact that their autonomy depended on their jobs.

The disappointment with the everyday struggle of teaching makes Ursula find her life "[a] life of barren routine, without inner meaning, without any real significance. How sordid life was, how it was a terrible shame to the soul, to live now! How much cleaner and more dignified to be dead!" (Women 224). This statement is in complete opposition with her attitude before she decided to apply for the post in Ilkeston: the original reason for Ursula to teach was the search for the meaning of her life.

Nevertheless, even in spite of this disillusionment she would never finish her life as Mária did in her despair: "It was not a question of taking one's life - she would never kill herself..." (Women 223). Mária's life was not only burdened with the boredom of work, but the intrigues of the town she lived in and her family's and colleagues' pressure to get married against her will and desires.

NOVELS, AUTHORS AND REALITY

Finally, after the discussion of the novels' world, I wish to draw the readers' attention to the fact that several aspects mentioned above are rather realistic since they are autobiographical. At the beginning of this essay, I have already mentioned that both Kaffka and Lawrence worked as teachers thus they used their own experiences in their novels. Like Erzsi and Magda's daughters, Kaffka also continued teaching after her second (and happier) marriage. Besides writing, teaching was her source of income and unintentional preserver of her independence, as his husband served as a doctor at the front in the First World War.

Lawrence attended Nottingham High School, he taught and studied in Ilkeston similarly to Ursula, and according to Marsh (190) “the conditions in which Lawrence began work as a teacher are described among Ursula’s experiences in *The Rainbow*”.

Kaffka also attended a pupil-teacher training school, namely the cloister of Szatmár like Király Erzsí, and after teaching for a year, she was accepted to the Erzsébet Women’s School (also known as Zirzen). This was the model for the Valéria Boarding-School that Mária attended.

Other autobiographical aspects are that Lawrence’s mother, Lydia had briefly been a schoolteacher before her marriage. Kaffka also used her mother’s story of life in *Colours and Years*. In his article “Indiscretion in Literature” Schöpflin Aladár quotes that once Kaffka said “My mother is angry with me because of the novel”. These facts also support the real features of Kaffka’s and Lawrence’s novels.

CONCLUSION

From the discussed novels, we can learn how teaching influenced women’s life in the long-term in only two cases: Mária and Ursula. As discussed above, Mária killed herself. Ursula’s career ended in an utterly different way: she married Birkin, the school-inspector. After she had agreed to marry him, he insisted that he and “must drop [their] jobs, like a shot” (*Women* 360). And even though she agreed and Birkin took out a marriage licence, “yet Ursula deferred from day to day. She would not fix any definite time—she still wavered. Her month’s notice to leave the Grammar School was in its third week” (*Women* 399). Whether she was not sure enough in her love or she did not want to give up her independence remains undecided.

Marriage, though, was not a solution for escaping boredom, monotony, hopelessness and the lack of diversity as not all of the teachers were in the lucky position of being able to give up their jobs as Birkin and Ursula did. For instance, even if Mária had got married to Apostol, she would not have had the possibility of giving up her job. Furthermore, Magda’s daughters and Király Erzsí possibly continued teaching as they really found teaching a means of breaking free unlike Mária and Ursula. As for Erzsí, the member of the last generation, she wrote in her letter to her lover that: “If and when I will be independent, livelihood-earner and the

law of myself, only then could I be completely responsible for my deeds, my own judge and only authority" (Ants 107). Furthermore, it is suggested but not stated verbatim that her lover, a member of the Parliament is married to an other woman. However, this relationship satisfies her and facilitates the months spent closed in the cloister.

For her and supposedly for many others, teaching was not the goal of life but a constraint or the only means of independence and breaking free. And through this, they could continue their pursuit for happiness, but most importantly, for their own way of happiness: with or without marriage, being dependent or independent.

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