

# The Freudian Tradition and Sociographical Context in Selected Works by Péter Hajnóczy

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*This article undertakes a comparative analysis of Péter Hajnóczy's short stories "The Heater" (1975) and "The Blood Donor" (1977), examining them through thematic, stylistic, and narrative lenses. The intention is to explore potential complementarity between these two texts, revealing shared themes. Both narratives unfold as profane depictions of suffering, tracing the stages of the protagonist's disintegration and incorporating elements of the fantastic. "The Heater" can be interpreted as a paraphrase of the Kohlhaas motif, which was of significant importance in post-1945 East-Central European literature. Conversely, "The Blood Donor" centers around a butcher whose body serves as an inexhaustible source of blood. The exploration of madness and insanity within these narratives prompts a psychoanalytic inquiry, raising questions about the extent to which these stories draw upon Freudian case study traditions, or alternatively, how the Freudian case descriptions themselves might be considered works of literature. While the preparatory studies for "The Heater" exist in various forms among the writer's manuscripts, the background of "The Blood Donor" remains relatively unknown.*

Keywords: Hungarian literature / short prose / Hajnóczy, Péter / psychoanalytical interpretation / Kohlhaas syndrome

Péter Hajnóczy (1942–1981) emerges as a central figure in 1970s Hungarian literature, firmly placed within the context of Hungarian literary postmodernism (Kulcsár Szabó 136; Schein and Gintli 656) and recognized as part of the "Generation of Peters" (Gáll 43). Initially, this term referred to several writers, but today it predominantly denotes two authors beside Hajnóczy: Péter Nádas (1942–), and the late Péter Esterházy (1950–2016).

Despite being perceived as a somewhat marginal and unsuccessful figure during his lifetime, Péter Hajnóczy's literary legacy, encompassing three volumes of short stories, a short novel, and a sociography,

has progressively gained recognition as a significant contribution to the era. Scholars often characterize his body of work as the most significant among the smaller literary oeuvres of the time. Hajnóczy's enigmatic figure is surrounded by a literary cult, primarily due to the rich autobiographical elements interwoven within his writings. The critical revaluation of Hajnóczy's works in contemporary scholarship sheds light on the complexities of his narrative explorations and their enduring relevance within the broader socio-literary context.

Hajnóczy's premature death at the age of thirty-nine left no immediate legal successor, and his final wife inherited his manuscript legacy amid a complex and troubled relationship. The unpublished manuscripts, crucial for understanding Hajnóczy's works, were safeguarded by the editor of the initial posthumous collection for decades before being transferred to the University of Szeged in 2010. In that year, these manuscripts were entrusted to Professor Katalin Cserjés at the University of Szeged. Despite that here being studied for years by a university workshop with a fluctuating membership, no official archive has been established from these documents since the 1980s, and they remain absent from public collections.

The subsequent digital processing of these documents, initiated in 2018, involved creating digital facsimiles and organizing manuscript data into a database (Ludmán, "A Hajnóczy-hagyaték"). The production of digital facsimiles constituted a crucial component of my PhD research, which primarily aimed at a comprehensive philological examination of Péter Hajnóczy's oeuvre. Throughout my research, I meticulously processed numerous valuable documents, encompassing letters, manuscripts, typescripts, and personal records, each contributing crucial insights. Generating digital facsimiles wasn't merely a technical task; it represented a pivotal stride toward ensuring easy accessibility to the Hajnóczy documents for fellow researchers and interested individuals.

Thousands of photographs were taken of the documents, and these document units were grouped and provided with metadata (title, date of creation, size, material etc.). Current efforts include assembling a digital archive and bibliography from this corpus, accessible on the digital philology portal of the Hungarian Institute of Literary Studies in a semantic database (Ludmán, "Hajnóczy"; "Bibliography"). Since January 2023 this ongoing work has been under the professional guidance of the institute's digital philology working group. It is considered a significant achievement in Hungarian literary studies, especially given that this author's oeuvre, entirely manuscript-based, predates the digital revolution of the eighties.

It is essential to underscore the importance of this archival perspective, as the existence (or lack thereof) of the digital archive has played a pivotal role in discussions surrounding Hajnóczy's oeuvre. The discovery of numerous unpublished manuscripts and documents has contributed to a reassessment and better understanding of his known works, a fact that informs the present paper.

### **A sociographical exploration with psychiatric themes as the underpinning of fiction**

Péter Hajnóczy's previously discussed sociography, titled *The Isolation Ward* (*Az elkülönítő*),<sup>1</sup> stands out as a seminal work within his oeuvre, providing a profound exploration of the human rights situation in psychiatric institutions during the socialist era (Nagy 104). Published in October 1975 in the journal *Valóság*, the sociography focused on the conditions in an institution located in Szentgotthárd, along the Hungarian-Austrian border. The title, *The Isolation Ward*, signifies the segregation of patients considered particularly problematic within the institution.

Noteworthy insights into the prevailing standards of psychiatry at the time are encapsulated in a letter from Aliz Szépvölgyi, a resident in the institution, to Péter Hajnóczy. She conveyed a disturbing perspective: "My doctor says, 'a nervous patient gets sick when he wants to'." (Nagy 104) Szépvölgyi, a source for Hajnóczy's exploration, had a sensitive nervous system but was not mentally ill; she held a high school diploma and worked in a thread factory in Újpest. At 35, during a difficult period, she voluntarily sought temporary state care, hoping to recover physically and mentally. However, soon after her departure to Szentgotthárd, her Budapest apartment was reassigned by local authorities, preventing her return for four years. Over time, she resided in three mental-social institutions, with the last being Intapuszta, notable for its humane treatment and art therapy programs. At Intapuszta, Szépvölgyi wrote a novel and poems, some of which are preserved among Hajnóczy's unpublished writings (Szépvölgyi 25–195, 288–314). The sociography, titled *The Isolation Ward*, exposed the challenges faced by individuals like Szépvölgyi, who sought temporary refuge in state social homes during difficult periods in their lives.

The publication of *The Isolation Ward* in 1975 caused a significant scandal, leading to a court hearing that the editors ultimately won.

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<sup>1</sup> All English titles and quotes are my own translations.

This incident prompted a self-critical reflection by the state power through mediums like a radio interview with a leader from the state health sector. It is crucial to note that social and psychiatric aspects were intertwined in state care during that period, often exploited for political reasons.



Figure 1. Portrait of Aliz Szépvölgyi.

In 2010, after many decades, Hajnóczy's previously unpublished writings, including paratexts related to the sociography, were made public at the University of Szeged. A 2013 volume titled *Reports Deep Six* (Hajnóczy, *Jelentések*), compiled by legal philosopher Tamás Nagy, presented these documents, including correspondence between Aliz Szépvölgyi and Péter Hajnóczy, trial documents, and fictional sketches inspired by the sociography. Nagy argued that Hajnóczy's entire fictional oeuvre could be derived from sociography dealing with psychiatric topics, emphasizing the textual connection between unpublished paratexts and well-known texts such as "The Heater" (1975), thus introducing new contexts.

Furthermore, Péter Hajnóczy's fascination with mental illnesses and psychiatric care, influenced by his personal struggles with addiction and depression, is evident in his work. Reminiscences (Szerdahelyi 77–87) and personal calendars reveal his association with Dr. Rezső Pertorini, the head of the National Institute of Neurology and Psychiatry, who pioneered modern group therapy methods.

He also authored a monograph on the painter Tivadar Csontváry Kosztka (1853–1919), exploring the possible connection between art and mental illness.



Figure 2. Personal items from Péter Hajnóczy.

While psychiatry and mental illness were central to his sociographic work, textual evidence suggests Hajnóczy's intention to explore this theme across various genres. His attempt to frame the topic in novelistic terms, with working titles like *The Scenery of Suffering* (*A szenvedés díszletei*) or *The Ballad of Netting Beds* (*Hálós ágyak balladája*), underscores his multifaceted approach (Nagy 200). The abstract reference system derived from the paratexts of sociology serves as a discursive space, encouraging interpretations that challenge traditional genre frameworks.

Zoltán Németh, among others, notes that Hajnóczy's prose "confronts the reader with the depressing stages of a disintegrating or identity-seeking personality and self-destruction" (Németh, "Péterek" 7). Aligned with this and considering the philological relationship between "The Heater" and the sociography, this paper proposes an examination of how two short stories, "The Heater," and its counterpart "The Blood Donor" (1977), depict madness, delusions, and neuroses. This analysis

aims to explore the parallels with Freudian case studies and, conversely, the extent to which the case descriptions themselves can be considered works of fiction.

## Texts in pairs

This section provides a concise overview of the plots of two short stories, “The Heater,” and “The Blood Donor,” both authored by Péter Hajnóczy. Published in 1975 and 1977, respectively, these stories exhibit notable thematic and stylistic similarities, establishing them as a literary pair.

“The Heater” revolves around Mihály Kolhász, a heating worker who confronts the bureaucracy of a Hungarian factory after being deprived of his daily protective drink, half a litre of milk. The unpublished manuscripts, found in a common notebook with the socio-graphical works, make reference to a concrete case from 1974 about a worker. This case possibly served as the inspiration for “The Heater.” This story is a reinterpretation of Heinrich von Kleist’s renowned tale, *Michael Kohlhaas*, set in Hungarian socialism. Kolhász’s quest for justice takes him through various official channels, ultimately culminating in a dramatic turn of events. Seeking justice for his missing milk, Kolhász escalates his grievance to various officials: the chief mechanic, the chief engineer, the trade union, and ultimately to higher authorities, including the UN Secretary-General and the Pope. Despite the satirical tone towards the bureaucratic inefficiencies of the era, the story concludes with Kolhász’s return to his family and work. The resolution is marked by a delusional moment in the cold dawn, where he expresses a sense of warmth and a surreal connection with nature: “I warm the air with my body, the swallows notice this warmth, the bushes and the trees, and spring greets us earlier.” (Hajnóczy, “A fűtő” 115–116) Occasionally, he feels his wife is following him.

Notably, a similar narrative originated in the territory of another socialist state (DDR): Christoph Hein’s *Der neuere (glücklichere) Kohlhaas. Bericht über einen Rechtshandel aus den Jahren 1972/73*. The two texts, Hajnóczy’s and Hein’s, are examined in the context of the psychiatric illness known as the Kohlhaas syndrome by Katinka Tóth (Tóth).

“The Blood Donor” introduces an unnamed butcher with a mysterious illness. Initially seeking sedatives and adjusting his lifestyle, he becomes convinced that his ailment is related to his blood after seeing a blood donation poster. This leads him to a surreal experience involving

a prostitute who resembles the girl on the poster. Unbeknownst to his wife, the butcher has a secret liaison with this prostitute, revealing an extramarital affair. The butcher's body is discovered to be an inexhaustible source of blood, leading to village rumours about his health and personal life. Despite the worsening condition, the hospital struggles to manage his excessive blood donation. The story culminates in a "dream within a dream" structure, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. This layered narrative structure ultimately exposes the butcher's tangled web of deception, intertwining the prostitute from his secret life with the girl depicted on the blood donation poster in his delusional state (Hajnóczy, "A véradó" 37).



Figure 3. An advertisement for an old stove.

The thematic coherence between the two stories is notable, marked by shared elements such as bureaucratic satire, surrealism, and the exploration of individual struggles within a societal framework. Both stories adopt a scene-by-scene structure, with "The Heater" featuring subtitles and "The Blood Donor" numbered parts. The language style, resembling investigative reporting, contributes to a sense of precise documentation of events.

Opening sentences from each story exemplify the meticulous detailing: “The thirty-seven-year-old butcher of mountain village Z. on the 19th of November 197... travelled to the ‘city’—as the villagers called the larger locality closest to their village—and signed up to donate blood at the hospital.” (Hajnóczy, “A véradó” 27) Similarly, “Mihály Kolhász, a thirty-one-year-old boiler heating worker who had been an employee of the factory in ... for seven years, on the 9th of September, 197..., at five minutes before ten in the morning, after knocking audibly on the chief engineer’s door, entered the office to receive the half litre milk, the ‘protective drink’” (Hajnóczy, “A fűtő” 90).

While literature discussions have highlighted the stylistic element as a mockery of bureaucratic inefficiencies (Thomka 245; Németh, Hajnóczy 83), it is important to consider that this style serves not merely as a genre imitation but rather as an analytical tool for exploring the protagonists’ conditions. I argue that these stories transcend mere mimicry of crime reports or official investigations. The detailed spatial and temporal settings, and the data-like descriptions of the characters, serve more as an “analysis” of the protagonist’s condition. Both stories, written simultaneously, were initially separated due to censorship concerns. “The Blood Donor” was excluded from the 1975 volume containing “The Heater” because of their combined presence in one volume was deemed too provocative by the censors (Szerdahelyi 34).

In essence, both “The Heater” and “The Blood Donor” showcase Hajnóczy’s skill in blending detailed, realistic settings with surreal and introspective elements. These stories, while appearing straightforward on the surface, delve deep into the psyche of their protagonists, offering a critique of the societal and bureaucratic structures of the time. The meticulous detail in setting and character description not only satirizes the bureaucracy but also serves as a profound analysis of the human condition under such systems.

### Hajnóczy’s “case studies”

In examining Hajnóczy’s short stories, “The Heater” and “The Blood Donor,” distinctions emerge in the outcomes of the protagonists’ delusions within the diegesis. Kolhász’s delusion in “The Heater” leads to a form of reintegration, almost achieving hero status, while the butcher in “The Blood Donor” succumbs to an uncontrollable delusion, resulting in a surreal and tragic narrative. This contrast, particularly highlighted in the motif of unstoppable bleeding, is akin to “emotional inconti-

nence”, a term linked to various disorders affecting emotional regulation. “Emotional incontinence” refers to the inability to control emotional reactions, which stands in stark contrast to the “holding” and “containing” concepts described by Winnicott, emphasizing a lack of emotional stability and containment in the butcher’s character. The connection between the girl on the poster and the prostitute resembles the phenomenon of psychological “displacement” based on Freud.

The conclusion of “The Blood Donor” serves almost as a case study, blurring the lines between dream and reality. This indistinctness creates tension, especially in passages where it’s unclear whether the butcher is dreaming. His delusions reach their zenith in the blood donation scenes, depicted with striking realism. Yet, this can also be interpreted as a self-inflated, narcissistic fantasy. Particularly effective is Chapter Eight, where the central theme of psychosis (a well of blood) is ethically questioned. The butcher’s suggestion that his blood abundance is a cry for love is almost parodic of psychoanalytic explanations, especially when dismissed by the doctor as a mere side effect of blood loss.

While both stories present realistic worlds, “The Blood Donor” interlaces its reality with elements of psychotic consciousness, creating a more complex narrative structure. The non-dream scenes are filtered through the lens of psychosis, maintaining a semblance of reality, whereas dream scenes paradoxically serve as bridges to the fiction’s reality. The utilization of dreams aligns with the explanatory power attributed to dreams in psychoanalysis.

The preliminary meaning of Mihály Kolhász’s delusion in “The Heater” is reflective of the “cause of the symptom”, suggesting that the world is cold. In contrast, the butcher’s delusion in “The Blood Donor,” where he believes he supplies the world with an abundance of blood, signifies a perception of the world as bloodless. These are the truths of the characters, unacknowledged by their societies. Both stories exhibit a regression towards narcissism and frustration in interpersonal relationships that culminates in psychotic fantasies. Their extreme demands for justice border on provocation and hubris. Kolhász represents a parodic figure in his quest for truth, making exaggerated claims rejected by every authority and personal contact. The blood donor’s story is an extreme portrayal of guilt, shame, and communication breakdown. A psychiatric condition, named after Kleist’s original Kohlhaas figure, resonates with these narratives (Stolerman 769–775; Gerevich and Ungvari; Payk and Brüne).

Just as Freud developed psychoanalysis itself in the process of describing cases, Hajnóczy’s “case descriptions” do not convey a mature social

psychological or ideological system of ideas either; rather just “studies”, experiments. They follow a logic like Freudian case studies: (1) background information, (2) description of the environment and state of mind, (3) unravelling individual trauma through dreams, (4) depiction of neurosis, and sometimes (5) later additions and resolutions. This logical structure is evident in the narratives of both short stories, where secondary characters (the wife in both stories, the friends or the doctors or the civil servants etc.) as mediators of reality against the protagonists’ forced imaginations.

Literary discussions have proposed metaphysical readings, deriving from the fantastic or “mythical” elements in the narratives, as suggested by Marcell Németh (Németh, *Hajnóczy* 82). However, it is crucial to note that both stories conclude on a profane, real level, emphasizing the coexistence of mythical and realistic interpretations. The tension between these two levels creates a duality akin to parables, intensifying the reader’s experience. Thus, the texts present two levels of interpretation to the reader: a realistic, psychological one, and an allegorical, metaphysical one. This undecidedness echoes the works of Hoffmann in *The Sandman* (1817) and Lars von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves* (1996), particularly concerning themes of madness.

The layering of meanings in these texts, and the resulting aesthetic experience, represents a unique facet of fiction, distinct from sociographies and psychiatric case studies. Nevertheless, the intersections between psychoanalytic attention and literature are notable. Freud’s own narrative style in case studies, often blending personal stories and patient circumstances, underscores the inherent connection between psychoanalysis and storytelling.

In his case studies, Freud frequently employs storytelling, almost as if aspiring to be a fiction writer, to elucidate his patients’ circumstances. He explicitly acknowledges this methodological approach in *The Story of an Infantile Neurosis* (or *The Wolf Man*, 1918). In describing the case of *Katharina* (1895), he intertwines glimpses of his own (possibly fictive) life circumstances. In *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* (or *Little Hans*, 1909), he adopts a narrative style using the parents’ notes, dialogues, and analyses. Case studies, however, can be considered literary only in the same way as history writing is also a kind of fiction, according to Hayden White.

Additionally, the psychological association system (conscious or unconscious) is closely related to literary, tropological, stylistic, genre, and narrative phenomena. For example, dream compression parallels metaphor, and displacement aligns with metonymy in Lacanian

theory. Psychoanalysis is defined by literary tropes too, primarily through language.

In conclusion, while not positing Hajnóczy as an exceptional connoisseur of psychoanalysis, it is evident that the psychological aspect plays a decisive role in these works, aligning with Trilling's discourse on literature and the psyche (Trilling 32–34). Hajnóczy's exploration of psychological themes through a literary lens offers a unique and insightful perspective into the human psyche. So far, I did not want to prove that Hajnóczy was an exceptional connoisseur of psychoanalysis, but that the psychological aspect is decisive in these works in the sense that Trilling talks about it.

### **Another dimension: Hajnóczy's texts in psychiatric contexts**

In conclusion, Péter Hajnóczy's works extend their relevance beyond the realms of literary analysis, intriguing authors of psychiatric journals who interpret them as literary representations of co-dependency (Marjai 222–231). Moreover, there is a notable instance where Hajnóczy's 1979 novel, *Death Rode out of Persia* (*A halál kilovagolt Perzsiából*), became a therapeutic tool in a drug rehabilitation institute. Drama therapists at the Leo Amici 2002 Addiction Foundation transformed the novel into a therapeutic play, encouraging recovering addicts to articulate their experiences, drawing parallels with the literary texts, and supplementing them. According to the drama therapist, Hajnóczy's narratives resonate most with clients as they feel as if “written by a patient.”<sup>2</sup> This therapeutic use of Hajnóczy's works underscores their potential not only as influential artistic creations but also as practical tools in psychiatric practice.

This dual utility of Hajnóczy's oeuvre adds weight to a psychologizing interpretation of his works. Recognized for their complexity and experimental nature, his poetics receive diverse and exploratory interpretation. This experimental aspect of Hajnóczy's reception mirrors the innovative qualities inherent in his creative process.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the communication of drama therapist Zoltán Pataki.

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## Freudovska tradicija in sociografski kontekst v izbranih delih Pétra Hajnóczyja

Ključne besede: madžarska književnost / kratka proza / Hajnóczy, Péter / psichoanalitična interpretacija / Kohlhaasov sindrom

Članek primerjalno analizira kratki zgodbi Pétra Hajnóczyja »Kurjač« (1975) in »Krvodajalec« (1977), ki ju obravnava skozi tematsko, slogovno in pripovedno prizmo. Namen je raziskati morebitno komplementarnost teh dveh besedil in razkriti skupne teme. Obe pripovedi se odvijeta kot profani prikaz trpljenja, sledita fazam protagonistovega razkroja in vključujeta elemente fantastičnega. Zgodbo »Kurjač« je mogoče razlagati kot parafrazo Kohlhaasovega motiva, ki je postal po letu 1945 zelo pomemben v vzhodno- in srednjeevropski književnosti. Nasprotno pa je v ospredju zgodbe »Krvodajalec« mesar, čigar telo služi kot neizčrpen vir krvi. Prevpraševanje norosti in blaznosti, značilno za obe pripovedi, je iztočnica za psichoanalitično raziskavo, ki odpira vprašanja o tem, v kolikšni meri se te zgodbe naslanjajo na tradicijo freudovskih študij primerov ozziroma kako bi lahko sami freudovski opisi primerov veljali za literarna dela. Medtem ko pripravljalne študije za »Kurjača« obstajajo v različnih oblikah med pisateljevimi rokopisi, ostaja ozadje »Krvodajalca« razmeroma neznano.

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