

THE EXPLORATION OF THE SELF WITHIN THE FAMILY CONTEXT IN KARL OVE KNAUSGÅRD'S *MY STRUGGLE*

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ABSTRACT. *The exploration of the self within the family context in Karl Ove Knausgård's My Struggle.* The aim of this paper is to explore the self as it can be found in the novel *My Struggle* by adopting a psychological criticism method. The central conflict in the six-volume novel is based on the tumultuous relationship between the main character Karl Ove and his father. By using theories from psychology and applying them to the text, new dimensions and aspects of the narrative come into light. Instead of focusing solely on the conflict between father and son, this research shows how the main character is constructed in the context of a family. Concepts taken from Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney and *family systems therapy* work together and reveal the journey of the self and the great influence the family has on it.

Keywords: *Karl Ove Knausgård, My Struggle, psychological criticism, FST, humanistic psychology, the self, the father, autofiction.*

REZUMAT. *Explorarea construcției sinelui în contextul familiei în romanul Lupta Mea de Karl Ove Knausgård.* Scopul acestei lucrări este de a explora sinele întâlnit în romanul *Lupta Mea* folosind metodele criticii psihologice. Conflictul central al romanului în șase volume este conturat în jurul relației tumultuoase dintre personajul principal, Karl Ove și tatăl său. Prin folosirea anumitor teorii din psihologie și aplicarea lor pe textul operei studiate, noi dimensiuni și aspecte ale narațiunii ies la iveală. Lucrarea de față nu se concentrează în mod exclusiv pe analiza relației dintre tată și fiu, ci arată cum personajul principal este constituit în contextul unei familii. Conceptele preluate de la Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney și *family systems therapy* funcționează împreună și dezvăluie evoluția sinelui pe parcursul romanului precum și impactul major pe care familia îl are asupra sa.

Cuvinte cheie: *Karl Ove Knausgård, Lupta Mea, critică psihologică, FST, psihologie umanistă, sine, autoficțiune.*

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Short introduction

Published in 2009 in Norway, the novel *My Struggle* and its now internationally known author Karl Ove Knausgård, has rapidly become one of the most discussed and debated pieces of literature of the last decades. This paper aims at analyzing an important aspect of the novel, namely its main thematic tableau, given by the protagonist and narrator Karl Ove and his problematic family relationships. At the same time, one of the goals of this essay is to show that psychological approaches to literature are still valuable and they can enrich the reading of contemporary works. In the particular case of *My Struggle*, theories from psychological criticism can be easily interwoven and used in such a way that they can reveal more about the narrative and its characters than it seems at a first sight. Accordingly, this paper is divided into three parts. First, I briefly present the advantages of following a psychological approach when reading literary works and how the understanding of this type of criticism has changed in the last years. In the second part I draw on the three main theoretical directions that form the framework for the close reading of the novel conducted in the third section. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, together with Karen Horney's main concept of self-realization and the family systems therapy's understanding of family influence will give a solid base for the main analysis.

A (re)turn to psychological criticism

In Knausgård's works, the central place is taken by the human being and the world within. The narrator's preoccupation with and the amount of time that he's spending inside his own mind are a defining dimension of the novel. At the same time, his ambition of describing life exactly as it is mostly connected with his capacity of being as honest with himself as possible, which means that he has to explore the chore of his thoughts and emotions. The complex characters he constructed and the interactions between them, as they are perceived, understood and described by the narrator represent the nucleus of *My Struggle*. In order to grasp and reveal the meaning of this synergy I argue that conducting an eclectic psychological analysis can have satisfactory and explanatory results.

When we talk about psychological criticism or psychological approaches to literature, the denomination can be confusing. In the majority of the books and compendiums that cover the most important theoretical views regarding literature throughout the years, psychological is replaced with psychoanalytic so implicitly such a criticism becomes an application of Freud's, Lacan's or Jung's works. In the fifth edition of *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, one chapter bears the name "Psychological approach: Freud", so the entire account is

actually a brief introduction and explanation of Freudian concepts and their applicability on certain canonical literary pieces². In the very comprehensive dictionaries of literary terms (I consulted the fifth edition of J.A. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*³ for instance) there is no entry for psychological criticism, only for psychoanalytic(al) criticism, focused again mostly on Freud with a brief mention to Lacan and Jung. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*⁴ places a subchapter named "Psychoanalytic Theories" as a part of poststructuralist theories, where except for the classics Freud and Lacan, the authors also dedicate some pages to the research of Julia Kristeva and Deleuze and Guattari.

Nonetheless, in the *Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, the authors note that one of their purposes is "to outline a psychological theory often used as an interpretative tool"⁵, giving in this way room for the possibility of other psychological theories beneficial for literature. They admit that "of all the critical approaches to literature, the psychological has been one of the most controversial, the most abused, and - for many readers - the least appreciated"⁶. The concerns are understandable to a certain extent, since there are many ways in which a psychological approach can hinder the interpretative act and neglect the qualities of a literary text. Since Freud was such a phenomenon and was followed with sympathy and even frenzied after his breakthrough, those who applied his theories on literature were often extreme and exclusive, as if psychoanalysis was the one and only way. But, Guerin et.al acknowledge the advantages of using a psychological approach. Although "it is axiomatic that no single approach can exhaust the manifold interpretive possibilities of a worthwhile literary work: each approach has its own peculiar limitations"⁷, they "hope to introduce the reader to a balanced critical perspective that will enable him or her to appreciate the instructive possibilities of the psychological approach while avoiding the pitfalls of either extremist attitude"⁸.

On the same note, the American professor Joseph Natoli advocates for the fruitful use of psychological theories when investigating fiction. In 1984, he edited a collection of essays entitled *Psychological Perspectives on Literature: Freudian Dissidents and Non-Freudians. A Casebook*. The book is aimed to serve a twofold purpose, as Natoli himself notes: "[...] I feel the need of making a double defense -

² Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Fifth Ed., Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

³ J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Fifth Ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

⁴ Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Fifth Ed., Pearson Longman, 2005.

⁵ Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor eds., *op.cit.*, p.152.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.154.

one to all those antideterminists who yet maintain the sovereignty of the literary text, and one to all those psychoanalysts who doggedly pursue that same text in the footsteps of Freud⁹. He believes that literature and psychology do belong together and that there is a lot to extract from an interdisciplinary collaboration. “[...] I know then that there is a merit in seeing literature and psychology residing on one block, that there is something quite right about placing imaginative portrayals of human consciousness and action, and formal psychology studies of human consciousness and action in a reciprocal relationship”¹⁰.

Even if it might seem impossible to do “serious” psychological criticism that is not connected with the work of Freud, several scholars have dedicated their research to proving that the idea mentioned above is just a misconception. One of them is Bernard J. Paris, an English literature professor whose books and studies brought into my attention the possibility and adequacy of using a Horneyan approach to fiction. Or more recently, John V. Knapp is investigating a new direction that gains more and more popularity in therapy called family system therapy, which reassigns a central role to family in both real people and fictional characters’ life.

Theoretical considerations

In this part of the paper, I will provide an overview of some of the main ideas and concepts from psychological criticism that can successfully be used in the reading of the novel *My Struggle*. Each of them brings something new to this study, while they are connected mainly through their approach of the human essence and the self.

Abraham Maslow was one of the most influential psychologists in the branch of humanistic psychology. He believed in the concept of self-realization, as the most important stage of human development. Maslow was mostly preoccupied with what he called the theory of motivation. In his view, humans are motivated to achieve certain needs, which he called basic needs. He designed a five-stage model of basic needs, with the physiological needs at the bottom (e.g. hunger), self-actualization at the top (achieving one’s full potential) while the safety needs, the love needs, and esteem needs represent the stages in between¹¹.

When talking about the needs for safety, Maslow underlines the major role that parents have in providing a secure space in the life of their children. An individual, being a child or an adult is deeply connected with his early life

⁹ Joseph Natoli, “Introduction”, *Psychological Perspective on Literature: Freudian Dissidents and Non-Freudians. A Casebook*, Edited by Joseph Natoli, Archon, 1984, p.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹¹ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, available at <https://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>, accessed at 20.06.2020.

and the relationship with his closest caregivers, usually the parents and older siblings. He also notes that “the average child in our society generally prefers a safe, orderly, predictable, organized world, which he can count on, and in which unexpected, unmanageable or other dangerous things do not happen, and in which, in any case, he has all-powerful parents who protect and shield him from harm”¹². In *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow analyzes love needs together with the need for belongingness. He notes that the individual “will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group or family”¹³ and for those who don’t find their place, the effects are disastrous. Equally important in the process of healthy development is the fulfillment of esteem needs. These refer to both confirmation and appreciation from the others and from oneself. “Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness”¹⁴. Finally, with all the basic needs satisfied, one still feels like there is something missing, an empty space that must be filled. Maslow calls this the need for self-realization, which is fulfilled when an individual is following his own nature. “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. He must be true to his own nature”¹⁵.

Third force psychology is also built around the concept of the self. Bernard J. Paris is a professor who dedicated a substantial part of his research to the study of third force theory and its influential militant, Karen Horney. He notes that “third force psychologists see healthy human development as a process of self-actualization and unhealthy development as a process of self-alienation”¹⁶. Maslow’s theory of motivation is an example for the process of self-actualization while Horney’s work mostly revolves around self-alienation. In the beginning, third force psychology, mostly known under the broad term humanistic psychology was conceived as an opposition to both behaviorism and psychoanalysis and was focused on the holistic study of the human being as individuals. Among its practitioners’ preoccupations are the exploration of “emphasized existential and interpersonal themes such as meaning, purpose, values, choice, spirituality, self-acceptance, and self-actualization”¹⁷. Or in other

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper & Row, 1954, p. 44

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.46.

¹⁶ Bernard J. Paris, “Third Force Psychology”, *Psychological Perspective on Literature: Freudian Dissidents and Non-Freudians. A Casebook*, edited by Joseph Natoli, Archon, 1984, p.156.

¹⁷ Steven C. Hayes, “Humanistic Psychology and Contextual Behavioral Perspectives”, *Psychotherapy*, 2012, Vol. 49, No. 4, 455-460, DOI: 10.1037/a0027396, p.455.

words, like Paris notes that “what Third Force psychologists have in common is their belief that man is not simply a tension-reducing or a conditioned animal, but that there is present in him a third force”¹⁸. This force is not evil, like Freud believed, but it’s neutral or good and it must not be repressed or ignored. The key to human growth and the possibility of a healthy individual is the following of that inner force, which is considered our true self. Paris advocates for adopting a Horneyan approach when reading literature by arguing that

Horney’s theories explain behavior in terms of its function within the present structure of the psyche rather than in terms of infantile origins. While literature gives little or no information about infancy, it reveals a great deal about the adult. A Horneyan approach does not force us to invent a character's early history but permits us to utilize exactly the kind of information that literature supplies¹⁹.

Like Maslow, Horney believed in a “*real self*” as that central inner force, common to all human beings and yet unique in each, which is the deep source of growth”²⁰. Although the power of reaching that perfect state of balance and satisfaction lies in each and one of us, we cannot get there alone, without any help from the world outside us. Horney notes that „like any other living organism, the human individual needs favorable conditions for his growth [...] he needs an atmosphere of warmth to give him both a feeling of inner security and the inner freedom enabling him to have his own feelings and thoughts and to express himself”²¹. At the same time, he “needs healthy friction with the wishes and wills of others. If he can thus grow *with* others, in love and in friction, he will also grow in accordance with his real self”²². But more often than not, those responsible for guiding the growth of a child are unable to provide the needed environment or to set the grounds for such an enterprise. Due to

a variety of adverse influences, a child may not be permitted to grow according to his individual needs and possibilities. [...] the people in the environment are too wrapped up in their own neuroses to be able to love the child, or even to conceive of him as the particular individual he is; their attitudes toward him are determined by their own neurotic needs

¹⁸ Bernard J. Paris, *loc.cit.*

¹⁹ Bernard J. Paris, *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature*, NYU Press, 1997, xi.

²⁰ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth. The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*, Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, London, p.17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.18.

²² *Ibid.*

and responses. In simple words, they may be dominating, overprotective, intimidating, irritable, overexacting, overindulging, erratic, partial to other siblings, hypocritical, indifferent, etc. It is never a matter of just a single factor, but always the whole constellation that exerts the untoward influence on a child's growth²³.

Because of that, the child develops what Horney calls *basic anxiety*, when he does not achieve the feeling of belonging but on the contrary a deep insecurity. On the basis of that insecurity, a person can react according to different strategies, to move toward, against or away from others. If in a healthy person, these strategies are still present, they take place on a normal level, and they are not exclusive, when the basic anxiety is present, the moves become extreme and exaggerated²⁴. Another consequence of the lack of favorable environment is the concept of *self-idealization*. "Gradually and unconsciously, the imagination sets to work and creates in his mind an *idealized image* of himself. In this process he endows himself with unlimited powers and with exalted faculties; he becomes a hero, a genius, a supreme lover, a saint, a god"²⁵.

A newer form of psychological criticism is promoted preponderantly by professor John V. Knapp and it's put together by using the tools provided by family systems therapy (in literature, the abbreviation FST is often used). The language used for terms belonging to the FST area is borrowed from cybernetic and systems studies, but it can be easily understood by literature scholars and enthusiasts as well. Knapp explains that

from the point of view of family systems psychotherapy (fst), the family system becomes the source of the matrix of identity, rather than only the individual character. Thus, the "causes" of a given problem in growing up (and beyond) is much less the person construct or event, and more the emotional process that links people and events. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts [...] so that to understand a member(s) of a fictional family, one needs to understand the family system - "real" family or step-family²⁶.

In therapy one can observe the tension "between the representations of the individual (biological?) self ('hard reality') and the living system to which that self belongs, the family network ('soft or cultural reality')"²⁷. Also, the families are

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22.

²⁶ John V. Knapp, "Family Systems Psychotherapy, Literary Character, and Literature: An Introduction." *Style*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, pp. 223-254. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/45063758. Accessed on 06.03.2020, p. 225.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

considered a “co-evolutionary ecosystem”²⁸ which means that inside a family each member can influence the evolution of the rest of the group while in a greater context, the environment surrounding it, that is the sociocultural system (such as school, work), represents the coevolutionary ecosystem. Ideally, in a functional family the healthy ties between its members permit and encourage the development of an independent, confident “solid self”²⁹, which is well integrated in the family at the same time. On the other hand “in dysfunctional families, fear and anxiety usually force members to create a *pseudo-self*, so that one’s inner feelings and outer behavior are often *not congruent*.”³⁰

The theory of family system therapy operates with several key concepts. In his very illuminating introductory essay, John V. Knapp puts together a compilation of approaches to or models of FST underlining the similarities between them but also the novelty or a key concept that each of them promotes. However, what I find most suitable for the context of this paper, are some concepts originally expressed by Murray Bowen. Initially, he identified six concepts: *differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multi- generational transmission process, and sibling position*. Later, two new concepts followed: *emotional cutoff* and *societal emotional process*³¹. In the following section, some parts of *My Struggle* will be analyzed using some of Bowen’s ideas, that put together with Horney and Maslow’s theories will give us a different image of the self in the family context of the novel.

The exploration of the self in *My Struggle*

The main character of *My Struggle* narrates his life story throughout the six volumes from childhood to the present of writing. We can easily identify a fragile self, in a constant search of something that would give meaning to his life, without being able to point out what that could be. He cannot find happiness in his family life and he is waiting for something to bring him fulfillment. “And with every passing day, the desire grows for the moment when life will reach the top, for the moment when the sluice gates open and life finally moves on”³².

Starting with the first pages of the first book, we learn that an important character is playing a decisive role in the narrative and in the protagonist’s life, namely his father. His first depiction in the beginning of *My Struggle* is remarkable and shows the terror that he generates in his youngest

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Michael E. Kerr, Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation. An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 1988, p. 13.

³² Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book One*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013, p.30.

son. The character is constructed in such a way that in the eyes of Karl Ove, he remains the same throughout the entire novel. In other words, the way Karl Ove perceives his Dad in the beginning of *Book One* is the same until the very present of writing. Even though the father-son dyad represents the nucleus of the novel, we must be aware of the fact that it cannot be seen as an isolated dimension. It exists in the context of a family drama, thus discussing other significant relations between characters is equally important.

Eivind Tjønneland claims that we don't really find out why Karl Ove's father was so strict with him or why he started drinking so much³³ and it is true. The text doesn't provide any consistent and directly articulated explanation to Kai Åge's behavior, or in fact to Karl Ove's behavior either. By following a psychological criticism, we achieve a better understanding of the relation between father and son and we get answers to questions that otherwise would remain locked in the text.

From the first moment we get to know the Knausgård family, in Karl Ove's childhood, we understand that the characters involved are not coexisting in harmony, that the balance is broken, both for them as a family and on an individual level. Shame, fear or anger, are just a few of the feelings that are present now and will never leave the protagonist until the end. As he grows old, the same patterns repeat themselves under various forms, contributing to the formation of an unhappy and unsatisfied adult, on the edge of sickness. (In *Book Two*, for instance, he mentions his depression "Then a pudgy, clearly depressed Norwegian stands there hailing Bergman as the new man."³⁴). But where does all this dissatisfaction come from? If we were to look objectively at Karl Ove, at different stages of his mature life, it seems that he has everything he has wished for. He was one of the best students at the university, he got married with the woman he loved, he published great books, he had children, a beautiful family, money and so on. But nevertheless, he never managed to reach a satisfactory level of fulfillment. The narrator expresses his unhappiness several times, without really identifying its source. Sometimes he would say things like: "the life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts. What was the problem?"³⁵.

³³ Eivind Tjønneland, *The Knausgård code. A ideology critical essay*, Spartacus, Oslo, 2010. (*Knausgård-koden. Et ideologikritisk essay*) p.110 and p. 112.

³⁴ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book Two. A Man in Love*, Translated from Norwegian by Don Bartlett, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2014, p.15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Karen Horney's theory on neurosis provides some interesting perspectives regarding the obstacles that hinder the full development of a sane person and at times, they seem to describe Karl Ove and his struggles. She claims that we humans strive to reach our real self and only then we can feel complete, in harmony and balance with ourselves and the world around us. But most of us tend to aim for an ideal self, that is in fact impossible to reach, because it is not based on who we really are and what we really can become, but on a series of fake expectations and wishes that were transmitted to us by our society, culture, family or we have created them ourselves. Horney notes that

man, by his very nature and of his own accord, strives toward self-realization, and that his set of values evolves from such striving. Apparently he cannot, for example, develop his full human potentialities unless he is truthful to himself; unless he is active and productive; unless he relates himself to others in the spirit of mutuality. Apparently he cannot grow if he indulges in a dark idolatry of self' (Shelley) and consistently attributes all his own shortcomings to the deficiencies of others. He can grow, in the true sense, only if he assumes responsibility for himself³⁶.

Horney believes that childhood plays an important part in the deviations from the path of finding one's real self. Very often, this process is hindered from an early age. The lack of love and attention, the self-confidence that should be nurtured by the adults surrounding the child can have repercussions. Karen Horney talks about the atmosphere of warmth and love that must surround children, so they can be able to express what they feel and think. Karl Ove recalls how strict his father was with them, how limited their power of decision was. "We were not allowed to cut bread ourselves, nor were we allowed to use the stove"³⁷. Their mother, on the other hand, was more permissive, but instead of annihilating the negative effects from Kai Åge, allowed them to continue as it would just create a fracture in the family. The learned behavior in childhood doesn't change as the years go by. If during the first years of life, Karl Ove was mostly taught by his father that he should not express his feelings and thoughts, that his sensitive part is shameful, once he reaches maturity he keeps the same attitude. "I never say what I really think, what I really mean"³⁸.

Regarding the influence that aggressive parents have on the life of their children, Maslow states that

³⁶ Karen Horney, *op. cit.*, p.15.

³⁷ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book One*, p.17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

the central role of the parents and the normal family setup are indisputable. Quarreling, physical assault, separation, divorce or death within the family may be particularly terrifying. Also parental outbursts of rage or threats of punishment directed to the child, calling him names, speaking to him harshly, shaking him, handling him roughly, or actual [p. 378] physical punishment sometimes elicit such total panic and terror in the child that we must assume more is involved than the physical pain alone³⁹.

Many of the interactions between Karl Ove and his father can be characterized as toxic for the healthy development of the child so that he can reach the final step on his human growth. Not only the physical punishment that Kai Åge used as a method to establish discipline and order in his house represents a problem here, but the lack of love, warmth, understanding, the psychological pressure and unnecessary evil behavior from the father's side are critical.

'Stop doing that', Dad said.
'Okay, but I'm freezing cold!' I said.
He sent me an icy stare.
'Oh, you're fweezing, are you?' he said.
My eyes filled with tears again.
'Stop parroting me,' I said.
'Oh, so I can't pawwot you now?'
'NO!' I yelled.
He stiffened. Dropped the ax and came toward me. Grabbed my ear and twisted it round⁴⁰.

This dialogue taken from *Book Three* reveals a young boy, who has some speaking problems and who is bullied by his own father for something he cannot control. When he tries to react, which doesn't normally happen, his father physically punishes him. This kind of gestures can have consequences in adult life by creating the idea that one has to take the blame even for things and actions that are not in his area of control. And the scene repeats itself towards the end of the volume: "[...] steer into the fricking wind, he would say, *into the wind*, I told you, you idiot! Can't you do anything! Steering's not so easy, I said, and he replied, it's not *steewing*, it's *steering*! RRR. STEERING! I was crying and frozen [...]"⁴¹. Following the same pattern, there is another

³⁹ A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*.

⁴⁰ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book Three: Boyhood*, translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015, p. 137.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.376.

scene when father's reactions are completely illogical and impossible to understand for the young boy. One day, Karl Ove was reading in his room and his father came in and told him to play a card game. Then he just threw all the cards on the floor and made the boy collect them while laughing at him. This doesn't have any explanation. What lesson can be learned from such a behavior? It was not even a punishment because Karl Ove hadn't done anything bad, it was just mean and childish. Furthermore, when the boy reacts, he physically hurts him until he starts crying. "I had thought he really wanted to play cards and was so disappointed he was only messing around and I had to go down on my knees and pick up all the cards while he sat on the bed laughing that I muttered an expletive"⁴². This type of interactions is just messing with the head of Karl Ove, who cannot understand why his father is pretending to be nice and warm and only minutes after laughing at him and in the end hurting him. There is no sign of love and tenderness in Kai Åge's behavior, neither appreciation or emotional support.

But in the context of a family, the father is not the only caregiver or responsible for the children's well-being. The question of motherhood in *My Struggle* is an interesting aspect of the novel. There is not too much material to work with when approaching it. However, the narrator reveals every so often details from his early life that permit us to comment upon the mother's role in her sons' childhood, their upbringing and education. In the narrator's consciousness, his mother, Sissel, has always been a good mother, kind and understanding, a real friend, caring and supportive with her sons. A warm tableau of Sissel is presented in the middle of the third book. The narrator analyzes his parents in comparison, how they were as persons and how they were toward him. He writes: "For if there was someone there, at the bottom of the well that is my childhood, it was her, my mother, Mom"⁴³. Referring to his own childhood as a dark place, limited and restrictive, like a well, he recalls his mother as being there, close to him, helping him to move forward in his not so happy life. He continues: "She saved me because if she hadn't been there I would have grown up alone with Dad, and sooner or later I would have taken my life, one way or another"⁴⁴. The representation of Sissel in the text is problematic, because if we don't look closer, we get the impression that she is flawless. Unarguably, her attitude and behavior regarding her children are much more positive compared to her husband's. She listens, she gives them small tasks meant to support their independence, she doesn't react with anger when they do something wrong and she never punishes them. Nonetheless, if we analyze the

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 259 - 260.

text with psychological lenses, we can pick up several pieces of the puzzle that put together say more than the narrator directly tells us. She is a contradictory character. For a woman in the sixties she was very independent and strong, focused on her career and dividing housework with her husband. But at the same time, she is never described as defending her children, standing up for them in front of her husband. At the same time, her love and affection are never expressed physically and she never uses her time by playing with her sons. In *Book Four*, the narrator uses a conversation with his brother to talk about the lack of physical signs of affection in their family, which brings tears into Karl Ove's eyes ("I started to cry. But it was dark, and not a sound came from me, so he didn't notice")⁴⁵.

In *Book Three*, when describing a pleasant afternoon spent at his grandparents' house, he reveals representative details about his upbringing. His paternal grandmother was very close to her grandsons, even closer than their mother, as we can understand from the following quotes). She takes Karl Ove on her bike to see the football game even if he initially was supposed to stay at home because he was too little to go to the stadium. "It felt good holding her, and cycling with her was fun. Grandma was the only person who touched Yngve and me, the only person who gave us hugs and stroked our arms. She was also the only person who played with us"⁴⁶.

But except for the relaxed atmosphere of a summer afternoon, a more disturbing fact is expressed here, namely that in Karl Ove's family, the paternal grandmother, whom they seldom see, is the only one that shares physical affection with the children and plays with them. This means that they don't receive that kind of attention from their parents, which are the closest caregivers, and the most important people in their lives. Neither Sissel nor Kai Åge are fulfilling their children's needs for love and affection and create a cold and problematic home environment.

But how do all these childhood failures from the parents' side affect the young adult and hinder his human growth? When she talks about the neurotic person, Horney claims that he is in a search for glory, based on his idea of an idealized self, which affects his life on multiple levels. Some characteristics of this search for glory can be identified in the character of Karl Ove as well, both as a teenager and later as an adult.

like any other compulsive drive, the search for glory has the quality of insatiability. It must operate as long as the unknown (to himself) forces

⁴⁵ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book Four*, translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016, p. 150.

⁴⁶ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book Three: Boyhood*, p. 147.

are driving him. There may be a glow of elation over the favorable reception of some work done, over a victory won, over any sign of recognition or admiration—but it does not last. A success may hardly be experienced as such in the first place, or, at the least, must make room for despondency or fear soon after. In any case, the relentless chase after more prestige, more money, more women, more victories and conquests keeps going, with hardly any satisfaction or respite⁴⁷.

In other words, for the person aspiring to an ideal that is not in concordance with his real self, nothing is enough, no matter how many achievements he gathers throughout his life, he is always almost obsessively reaching for more. And it is not a healthy, realistic ambition that is absolutely normal for everyone who wants to improve, to become better, but a consuming, damaging and after all, fake struggle to go against one's own nature.

Karl Ove behaves in many situations like the neurotic Horney describes. Starting with childhood, when he always wants to be the best in class and is extremely disappointed when the professor doesn't read his essays every single time, these characteristics become more and more visible with the passage of time. Probably the best example here would be his attitude regarding his work, his novels. After publishing his first novel, which was very well received he is extremely happy and flattered, proud that he finally fulfilled his lifelong dream. But all these feelings soon fade away and he feels miserable and unhappy until the publishing of his second book. The same scenario repeats itself years later, when he is writing *My Struggle* and he is willing to give up his family just to get it done.

Linda went to her mother's and called me several times a day. She was so angry that she screamed, actually *screamed* on the phone. I just held it away from my ear and kept writing. She said she would leave me. Go, I said. I don't care. I have to write. And it was true. She would have to go if that was what she wanted. She said, I will. You'll never see us again. Fine, I said. [...] She cried, she begged, she pleaded, what I was doing to her was the worst thing anyone could do, leaving her alone. But I didn't care, I wrote night and day⁴⁸.

We have here the confession of a man who leaves his wife and baby alone, abandoning them in order to complete his ambition. In those moments nothing, not even the well-being of his own child is more important than his work. But in other circumstances, the opposite is true as well. In the spring

⁴⁷ Karen Horney, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴⁸ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book Two. A Man in Love*, p. 345.

when he fell in love with Linda, that was his only concern, nothing else mattered. He didn't feel the need to write or to do anything else, he was only interested in his new love story, he fused with his partner. In FST, the concept of fusion is connected with that of differentiation of the self. The differentiation of self is hypothetically the goal of every healthy individual and it takes place when members of a family manage to define themselves as a separate entity inside the matrix. This does not mean that there has to be a rupture or a total denial of the family, just that the fusion between members is not shadowing their uniqueness. However, complete differentiation is also impossible to attain. "The level of stability, cohesiveness, and cooperation in a group is affected by the interplay of individuality and togetherness. [...] The interplay between individuality and togetherness results in emotionally significant relationships existing in a state of balance"⁴⁹. Jenny Brown explains that when there is no differentiation, the fusion is in place and it means that "individual choices are set aside in the service of achieving harmony within the system"⁵⁰. In the case of Karl Ove, a healthy differentiation seems impossible to attain. He either loses himself into the family life, which he eventually starts hating, or dedicates himself completely, almost with madness to writing. The fusion is visible also in the dyad father-son, with the son having low self-differentiation. He is never able to break the fusion with his father, not even after his death. In *Book One* he confesses: "[...] my father had a hold on me that I never succeeded in breaking"⁵¹.

Another essential concept in FST is that of triangles. "Triangling is said to occur when the inevitable anxiety in a dyad is relieved by involving a vulnerable third party who either takes sides or provides a detour for the anxiety"⁵². (Bowen Family 3). Knapp explains that in every family there are subsystems, with the original spouse-spouse dyad and the following parent-child and sibling-sibling. But a dyad cannot keep its balance, because its members are finding themselves in the position of developing a new self as that has to be part of a new construct. So a third part is drawn in, "in order to reduce the tension and establish an equilibrium, even though this is often done at the considerable personal expense of the third party"⁵³. Karl Ove can be seen as the third party in the original family, especially after his older brother Yngve rebels

⁴⁹ Michael E. Kerr, Murray Bowen, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Jenny Brown, *Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice: Illustration and Critique*, available at https://www.thefsi.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Bowen-Family-Systems-Theory-and-Practice_Illustration-and-Critique.pdf, accessed on 15.06.2020.

⁵¹ Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle. Book One*, p.41.

⁵² Jenny Brown, *loc.cit.*

⁵³ John Knapp, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

and moves away. The triangle works in the detriment of the son, who in the end is sent to live alone, before the divorce of the parents. But an important point in Bowen's theory is that the conflicts transcend generations. Thus, "the family projection process describes how children develop symptoms when they get caught up in the previous generation's anxiety about relationships"⁵⁴.

At the same time, another concept connected with the generations entanglement is what he called *multi-generational transmission process*. It "describes how patterns, themes and positions (roles) in a triangle are passed down from generation to generation through the projection from parent to child"⁵⁵. Without getting into too many details about his parents' upbringing, with some occasions the two families are described by the narrator. While he enjoys visiting both parts, when it comes to the dynamics between the two couple of grandparents, Karl Ove observes the cold and distant ambient at the Knausgård family, while the opposite, an atmosphere of joy is present at Sissel's original home. Especially the relationship between Kai Åge and his father is reserved and limited at few superficial encounters. This has been transferred to his own family and to the relation between him and his boys.

When faced with conflict, some people choose to react by breaking away or growing away from the family, a process described by Bowenian as the *emotional cutoff*. In *My Struggle* there are many attempts of emotional cutoff. And in the end, both the parties in the father-son dyad choose this solution. But only in terms of physical distance, because the emotional bond can never be broken, no matter how hard they try. The death of Kai Åge in the end of the first novel could have offered a closure, but the conflict between them remains unresolved for Karl Ove.

Conclusions

This paper showed how psychological criticism can be used in order to enrich the reading of the novel *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgård. Approaching literature from a psychological perspective was for a long time connected with Sigmund Freud and his famous psychoanalysis, and has been avoided by literary scholars in the recent times. However, there are to be found other schools of thought and methods that prove to be useful and enlightening for both the classic and contemporary texts.

I argue that the theories promoted by Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney and the newer Family Systems Therapy open up to a new understanding of the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

narrative and characters in the novel. Following the idea of the self that aims toward realization, fulfillment and communion we observe the struggles of the main character and narrator of the story and how they develop in a familial context. Without a favorable environment for growth, Karl Ove's path in childhood as well as maturity is often disturbed and unbalanced which leads to emotional distress.

Moreover, another conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is the importance of the mother in *My Struggle*. Focusing on the evident conflict between father and son, the role of the mother is often ignored in Knausgård scholarship. This analysis shows that when looking beyond what the narrator directly tells us, Karl Ove's mother has also contributed to the hindrance of a healthy development of the self.

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